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Don't Kill the Messenger: Perceived Credibility of Far-Right Former Extremists and Police Officers in P/CVE Communication

Daniel Koehler[a], Gordon Clubb[b], Jocelyn J. Bélanger[c], Michael H. Becker[d] and Michael J. Williams[e]

[a]German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS), Graal Müritz, Germany; [b]POLIS, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [c]New York University - Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), Abu Dhabi, UAE; [d]Department of Justice, Law, and Criminology, School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington DC, USA; [e]The Science of P/CVE, USA

ABSTRACT

Former extremists and terrorists ('formers') are seen as key messengers and mentors in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Their assumed effectiveness rests on their unique, intrinsic source credibility due to their biography. Having 'walked the walk' and 'talked the talk', it is widely assumed that such individuals are ideal to present counter messages. Formers are typically viewed as more credible and effective messengers in contrast to other messengers, in particular the police, when targeting 'hard-to-reach' audiences. This study presents findings from an experimental survey that tested whether far-right former extremists and police officers are perceived as credible sources in P/CVE communications among the general population and among a far-right milieu. Challenging wide-held assumptions in the P/CVE field, the present study found that far-right former extremists are perceived as neither credible nor lacking credibility among the general population, nor are they perceived as credible among a far-right milieu. Further, police officers were found to have the highest credibility in P/CVE communication. The paper outlines policy options for engaging with former extremists in P/CVE: detailing ways to embed former extremists with messengers who have institutional expertise.

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Former extremists and terrorists ('formers') are often seen to be highly credible and effective messengers, facilitators, and case managers in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. Scholars who have studied the P/CVE field acknowledge this potential of formers.[1] Specifically, this effectiveness is assumed to be the result of expertise and credibility.[2] Formers supposedly possess higher levels of milieu specific knowledge, personal experience and expertise in detecting and countering extremist radicalization, as well as a strong intrinsic credibility when preventing entry into or persuading to exit from extremist milieus.[3] As a result, a long tradition of formers' involvement in P/CVE work exists in the assumption formers are more credible than alternative messengers.

However, these assumptions are so far not supported by strong empirical evidence and multiple basic unclarified issues remain, such as even the question of what constitutes a

CONTACT Daniel Koehler daniel.koehler@girds.org German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS), Graal Müritz, Germany

"former". There is "no commonly defined time period of being free of extremism that prior extremists must fulfill in order to be considered formers. Nor is it possible to prove conclusively whether individuals leaving an extremist group and ceasing physical and mental violent behavior (disengagement) have also changed their ideology (deradicalization)."[4] Hence, for the purpose of this study, we use a basic definition of formers being individuals who have been active members of violent extremist milieus at one time in their life but are considered to have left by their social environment or by their own account. We are fully aware of the significant problems this definition entails.

Likewise, the literature measuring the effectiveness and impact of formers' involvement in P/CVE is scarce and the role of specific features attributed to them in this work (e.g. intrinsic credibility, milieu specific knowledge, relevant expertise) has not been scrutinized so far, resulting in increasingly critical perspectives from experts.[5] In their landmark, 2021, systematic literature review, Morrison et al. found that "no study has yet provided a clear-cut impact evaluation of the effectiveness of formers."[6] The few empirical studies which test the effectiveness of formers do not separate the former extremist role from other variables such as individual qualities, the message or the medium[7] or they do not test the effect of interventions on audiences.[8]

This article makes a significant contribution to the academic literature and practical role of formers in P/CVE by presenting results from an experimental survey focused on the comparative credibility of formers and police officers in P/CVE communication relative to alternative messengers. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing literature regarding perceptions of credibility by multiple actors in primary (i.e. alternative or counter messaging campaigns), as well as secondary and tertiary[9] P/CVE programing (i.e. counseling programs targeting persons holding radical or extremist views) focusing specifically on the far-right milieu as a target of such interventions. Herein, the term 'far-right milieu' is used as an umbrella term for right-wing radical and extremist positions, following Pirro, who suggests the term encompasses "all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview—predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria—yet varying allegiances to democracy".[10] To wit, the present study is the first study of its kind in the P/CVE research field, testing the above constructs.

Survey of the Literature

Formers

The assumed intrinsic or source credibility of formers is viewed as a core factor determining their effectiveness in primary to tertiary P/CVE, in particular the strength of their persuasiveness or authenticity. Defined as believability of the messenger and conveyed information,[11] credibility has been mentioned in the literature as a potentially significant factor for the positive impact of formers in P/CVE.[12] If formers (or members of the target community and ideological leaders of the extremist environment) are perceived as a "trusted expert or authority figure," they are deemed to hold significant leverage (i.e. credibility) against the persuasiveness of terrorist narratives.[13] Despite the fact that credibility cannot be created or measured in advance but is finally determined by the audience of the intervention,[14] Belanger and Szmania found "limited but promising outcomes" when using formers: for example, in one-on-one online interventions

or deradicalization mentoring.[15] In online P/CVE counter or alternative narrative campaigns using formers, a 2018 study concludes that "[i]n the absence of other available assessment methods, the perspective of formers is likely better than nothing."[16]

The same might be true for involvement in mentoring defectors as part of secondary and tertiary P/CVE initiatives (so called deradicalization or exit programs), as those formers who have completely broken with and disavowed their past could be seen as traitors and opportunists by the potential mentees. While those who are only disengaged with some links to the prior involvement in extremism still visible could enjoy some form of "narrative fidelity", this also comes with a potential risk for recidivism and damage to the program's legitimacy.[17] Formers' assumed credibility in exit work might be manifested in acting as role models and "living proof"[18]that leaving extremism is possible; however, to manifest this, credibility could require professional support and training.[19]

Only two studies (from Germany and Denmark) have so far empirically explored the potential credibility of formers in primary P/CVE interventions, such as in workshops and presentations in schools with the goal to foster resilience, raise awareness or strengthening various anti-extremist attitudes (e.g. rejection of violence, ambiguity tolerance, support for democratic forms of government).[20] The German study employed a randomized control trial design to measure impact of a workshop series held by a former right-wing extremist in German schools with a sample of 564 students from 50 school classes.[21] Similarly, the Danish study used a sample with 1,931 Danish youths and employed a survey experiment. Attendees ($n = 2156$) of an intervention performance featuring monologues of five pre-selected former extremists (who each talked for about 10 min with a speech scripted by a theater company) were randomly assigned to a control group (no exposure) or treatment group (exposure).[22] Even though both studies found indications for the formers' perceived authenticity and credibility, the results are however limited in their relevance for the present research focus since the study designs did not test for the specific effects of the formers vis-à-vis other messengers in the same intervention (i.e. the control condition was no intervention at all).

To summarize, existing P/CVE research and practice is informed by an assumption that former extremists are credible messengers who are relatively more effective than other messengers. Even though there is an increasing degree of skepticism or nuance, formers are still engaged and utilized in this capacity. While work involving formers is ongoing, there has been a recognition of the limited evidence-base to support either claim regarding formers as messengers.[23] One of the challenges in measuring the credibility of formers is the tendency to conflate different attributes of interventions that utilize formers, such as individual characteristics of different formers, different mediums to communicate narratives, different types of messages, and a lack of a baseline to demonstrate pre-post changes due to the intervention. Subsequently, it is unclear whether the effectiveness of messages from former extremists are attributable to them as former extremists, per se, vs. other, uncontrolled factors.

Police Officers

As a P/CVE-relevant comparison group to formers' credibility, police officers hold a significant and controversial role in this domain. The majority of studies, however,

debate police involvement in P/CVE programs targeting Islamist extremism; for example, in the United Kingdom, where the available literature points to widespread public criticism and fear of a criminalization and stigmatization of Muslim communities.[24] Confidence and trust in police within the U.K. is lowest among Muslim communities in areas deemed to be at risk of extremist violence.[25] Indeed, a 2020 systematic literature review regarding police programs seeking to increase community connectedness for reducing violent extremist behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs found insufficient evidence to conclude whether such interventions achieve these goals or not.[26] Still, other studies have at least indicated partial effectiveness in police-led P/CVE programing,[27] and countries such as Germany have a long standing tradition of police and intelligence-led primary to tertiary P/CVE programs.[28] A recent survey of German respondents exploring the acceptance and awareness of P/CVE actors across target ideologies demonstrated that the police belong to the most often contacted actors when seeking help against extremism.[29] However, higher age groups with more right-wing attitudes were significantly more likely to reach out to the police for help, indicating a potential link between police credibility in the P/CVE field and political attitudes. Further, in a rare evaluation of an intelligence-led deradicalization program for right-wing extremists (in the German state of North Rhine Westphalia), trust and perceived credibility (as indicated by the program clients) could be shown.[30] Though not involving the police as main actors, intelligence services are logically actors closest to law enforcement in this domain. Hence, the previously mentioned evaluation offers another glimpse into the possibility of security officials as potentially credible P/CVE actors in the minds of program participants.

Social Workers and Victims

As comparison groups for formers and police officers, the present study utilized victims of extreme right violence and social workers as alternative messengers. This allowed comparisons of formers with other messengers who derive credibility solely from biographical experience (i.e. victims), and comparisons of police officers with other messengers who derive credibility from their professional status (i.e. social workers).

Next to formers, victims (or survivors) of terrorist and extremist violence are often named as particularly effective counter messaging sources due to their biographical credibility and higher likelihood to elicit an emotional connection with the message.[31] In addition, experimental research has demonstrated that victims of extreme right violence and terrorism, in Western countries, elicit more compassion and sympathy from audiences, and confrontation with their narratives can significantly predict affective and attitudinal outcomes.[32]

As the professional comparison group to police officers, the present study utilized social workers because this expertise is often highlighted as one of the most common and widely used professions in the P/CVE field.[33] In this body of research, social workers are typically presented as the natural counterparts of security agencies in an (often criticized) process of "securitization:" the overly security-oriented framing of counter-radicalization and P/CVE. In particular, the presumably greater trustworthiness of social workers, compared to representatives of security agencies (among system-involved persons), has been posited to support the widespread involvement of social workers in P/CVE.

Determinants of Source Credibility

An extensive amount of research has been conducted on what makes a messenger or source to be perceived as credible. The credibility of a source is measured through variations of Meyer's credibility index, which operationalizes credibility through five components: trust (or trustworthiness of the source), accuracy of the information, fairness of the source's arguments, completeness of the information and the perceivable lack of bias.[34] It is important to understand source credibility because most studies have found that highly credible sources are more persuasive among audiences and usually they lead to more behavioral compliance than a low-credibility source.[35] The present study focused on factors that make a particular source appear credible.

A major determinant of credibility is the expertise of the source, meaning sources who have qualifications and institutional experience are seen as more credible.[36] Elites derive credibility from different sources: whereas academics and career professionals derive credibility from their education and experience, elected officials have access to specialized information which the public are not aware of, or the public assume they are not aware of this information.[37] Lupton and Webb show that perceived credibility is conferred through credentials, such as institutional access, holding political office and holding educational qualifications. Unaffiliated experts are perceived as more credible than political elites and, upon leaving a post, officials can still be viewed as credible messengers. For instance, former military officers are perceived as credible because they had the skills and intelligence necessary to achieve the post and likely cultivated a substantial amount of topical knowledge while holding the post.[38] The relatively least credible sources were media sources, who were seen as less credible than political sources who were perceived as having more of a command of the issue.

Dispositional variables can mediate perceptions of expertise, trustworthiness and therefore source credibility. People who hold authoritarian dispositions are likely to find a high-credibility source as more persuasive and high authoritarians would focus on a highly credible source as a basis of attitude judgements when a source's argument was brief or too complex.[39] While these do not necessarily speak to receiver variables on *who* is perceived as a low or highly credible source, one may expect them to be relevant given studies find high-credibility and persuasiveness to be correlated. Ethnocentrism - which is correlated with authoritarianism[40] – has been shown to affect the perceived credibility of a source. Neuliep et al. show that those scoring highly in ethnocentrism scales tend to see the in-group as superior to outgroups, subsequently, they perceive outgroups as less competent.[41] Furthermore, those high in ethnocentrism perceive outgroups as threatening the goals of the in-group will perceive outgroups as threatening and not see them as trustworthy or credible. Ethnocentrism may also account for perceived credibility of law enforcement. Hence, one may expect ethnocentrism to be related to perceiving law enforcement as more credible.[42]

Identity can also account for differences in perceived credibility beyond ethnocentric dispositions, with several studies showing the salience of partisanship (or in-group identity) in shaping perceptions of credibility – with messengers perceived as co-partisans evaluated as more credible than nonpartizans.[43] Baum et al. show that messages are more likely to change attitudes when a messenger criticizes the policy of their own party, whereas criticism or praise from a messenger in a different party has no effect

on attitudes. Furthermore, evaluations by a messenger which damages the messenger's own interests are viewed as more credible than 'cheap talk' where the evaluations by a messenger serve the messenger's own interests.[44] Several other studies have shown that the persuasiveness of a source relates to whether the message is congruous with the messenger's own self-interest.[45]

Based on research on the determinants of source credibility, the present study questioned whether common assumptions with regard to credible messengers in P/CVE hold. Perceived expertise, qualifications and credentials underpins perceptions of credibility. In P/CVE, formers and victims tend to draw expertise from biographical experiences whereas police and social workers tend to have formal qualifications and are linked with institutions which may give them access to information others would not. Thus, on one of the main dimensions of credibility, formers and victims can be considered one class of messengers who are relatively lower in expertise than social workers and police. Subsequently, when analyzing the credibility of messengers, the present study grouped them into two classes based on biographical vs. institutional expertise, although messenger types were analyzed separately where relevant. Building on an examination of the theoretical base on source credibility the present study hypothesized that, contrary to assumptions, formers and victims will not be perceived as credible messengers.

First, formers typically claim expertise on their former movement however whether this translates into credibility depends on the level of that expertise and the audience perceiving the experience as granting expertise. Furthermore, there is no indication that biographical or first-hand knowledge of issues contributes to perceptions of credibility.[46] Therefore on this basis, given the effects of perceived expertise on perceived credibility, one would expect formers and victims not to be percevied as credible.

Second, this study argues that formers and victims are potentially viewed as engaging in 'cheap talk', or rather, they struggle to generate 'costly credibility' because audiences cannot perceive how speaking out against extremism places costs on their interests, as opposed to serving their own interests. Of course, formers and victims do face serious harm in acting as messengers but equally they may benefit – a major criticism of former involvement in P/CVE is some formers are motivated by financial gain or publicity.[47] Victims may benefit in quasi-therapeutical recognition of their suffering, which was shown to be strong motivator to engage in P/CVE for parents of extremists and terrorists (who perceive themselves as victims of terrorism as well).[48] Subsequently, it is unclear whether formers and victims are capable of clearly signaling costly credibility.

Third, it is unclear whether partisan credibility would help formers generate credibility because it is unclear whether formers, by being a 'former', would be viewed as part of the far-right milieu in-group. If general audiences or the far-right milieu view formers extremists as still part of the extremist movement, their criticism of right-wing extremism would likely generate credibility. However, the dynamic of exiting an extremist movement is to break away from attitudes and symbols associated with the movement but equally formers face extensive social stigma and struggle to be accepted back into society.[49] For these reasons, formers are likely to be perceived as *not* belonging to the extremist in-group by either general audiences or far-right milieus, and therefore they cannot generate partisan credibility, similarly with victims.

In summary, the theoretical literature on source credibility provides little indication that former extremists or victims would be perceived as credible, either among a

general audience, a far-right milieu, or relative to other messengers. As outlined below, credibility was measured in relation to the mean of the credibility index and in relation to a control group which did not specify a messenger type. With regard to former extremists and victims as messengers, the following were hypothesized:

H1: Former extremists and victims will not be perceived as credible messengers among a general audience

H2: Former extremists and victims will not be perceived as credible messengers among a far-right milieu

Next, considering the credibility of police and social worker messengers, to reiterate, P/CVE research and practice assumes police messengers lack credibility, particularly among the Islamist milieu, however research on source credibility suggests the opposite. First, police and social workers are more likely to perform higher with regard perceived expertise due to their qualifications, credentials, and are more likely to have access to information unavailable to other messengers.[50] Studies have shown that police are viewed relatively more credible than other messengers,[51] due to their perceived knowledge of law and powers to enforce social sanctions.[52] Second, while both messengers may not be perceived as imposing costs on themselves and could be considered to engage in 'cheap talk', institutional authority and perceptions of fairness would potentially compensate or dampen these effects. Third, partisanship and ethnocentrism are likely to shape perceptions of credibility among a far-right milieu where authoritarian and ethnocentric attitudes are prevalent and tend to predict support for law enforcement. While the theoretical base for hypothesizing perceived source credibility of police and social workers is to an extent inconsistent across the three factors, as existing research emphasizes the salience of perceived expertise and studies have shown police to be viewed more credible,[53] including among those high in ethnocentric attitudes,[54] the following were hypothesized:

H3: Social workers and police will be perceived as more credible messengers among a general audience

H4: Social workers and police will be perceived as more credible messengers among the far-right milieu

Finally, considering the relative perceived credibility of messengers, the present study compared two classes of expertise (e.g. messengers' biographical expertise and messengers' institutional expertise). Additionally, messengers were also compared to a no-attribution control group: the same counter-narrative message made without reference to the message's source.

H5: Former extremists and victims will be perceived as less credible messengers compared to social worker and police messengers among a general audience, a far-right milieu and the control group

Method

Design

The present study employed a 5-level (messenger type), between-groups design. With an additional factor, far-right attitudes, measured as a continuous covariate: a linear composite index of three factored items (see "Results").

Participants

Participants were ($n = 2{,}618$) adults (age 18 – 89; interquartile range 35 – 64), recruited through U.K. survey firm, "YouGov," and selected to be a representative sample of the U.K. population. Of these, 20.47% were excluded for failing the inattentive responding checks; that was much (~15%) less inattentive responding than has been found in previous computer-administered experimental research.[55] Therefore, the final sample was comprised of 2,082 participants: still affording the study 98% statistical power to detect even small effects:[56] much (18%) more power than the (80% power) conventionally required.

Materials & Procedure

The dependent variable of this study employed Meyer's credibility index,[57] which has previously been utilized in risk awareness communication.[58] In the course of the experiment, participants were asked to read one of four short vignettes, that presented a brief P/CVE narrative targeting the threat posed by extreme right recruitment and radicalization. The control group read the same prevention statement without any information regarding the message's source. The vignettes presented the narrative from the perspective of A) a former right-wing extremist, B) a victim of extreme right violence, C) a social worker, and D) a police officer (see the full vignettes in Annex I). After reading the vignette, the participants were asked to rate their assessment of the messenger's trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, completeness and bias, along the following 5-point Likert-type scales:

> Please select the number between the pair of words that best describes your feelings about the information provided previously.

- Can't be trusted 1 2 3 4 5 Can be trusted
- Is inaccurate 1 2 3 4 5 Is accurate
- Is unfair 1 2 3 4 5 Is fair
- Doesn't tell whole story 1 2 3 4 5 Tells the whole story
- Is biased 1 2 3 4 5 Is unbiased

For the subsequent analyses, the above five items were factored into a single composite item (centered about the mean, whereby zero represented the midpoint of credibility [$m = 3.14$, $\alpha = .84$], translatable to "neither credible nor uncredible").[59]

Additionally, the three survey items, below, gauged participants' level of sympathy with far-right ideology (i.e. ethnocentrism, measured on 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from "Disagree strongly," to "Agree strongly"). The survey items capture broad prejudices to out-groups and in-group superiority, reflecting ethnocentric attitudes[60] which has been shown to correlate with militant far-right extremism.[61] These three items were factored into a single composite item representing an ethnocentrism index (centered about the mean, whereby zero represented the midpoint of ethnocentrism [$m = 2.35$, $\alpha = .82$], translatable to "Disagree" with respect to the ethnocentrism items.[62]

- I'm not really interested in the customs and values of other cultures
- Allowing immigrants into Britain enriches British culture (reverse coded)
- People in my culture could learn a lot from people in other cultures (reverse coded)

This milieu is typically the target audience for secondary and tertiary P/CVE intervention – however this audience is not necessarily supportive of violent extremism.[63] The 'far-right milieu' shares attitudinal dispositions which means they may be involved, sympathetic or vulnerable to far-right violent extremism.[64] In this context, former extremists either aim to discourage this audience from becoming (more) involved in violent extremism or they encourage people to exit violent extremism.

Results

After evaluating balance across experimental conditions (see Table 1),[65] a series of multivariate ordinary least squares regressions were performed to examine the impact of messenger identity on perceived credibility of the prevention message (Table 2). There was a main effect of messenger identity (Control, Former, Victim, Social Worker, and Police) on their perceived credibility (see Table 2, model 1). Specifically, on average, individuals who read the prevention message attributed to the police officer reported positive (above the mean) perceptions of message credibility ($b = 0.11$, se = 0.05, $p = 0.02$). Alternatively, respondents who read the unattributed message (control condition) reported, on average, lower (below the mean) perceptions of credibility ($b = -0.11$, se = 0.05, $p = 0.03$). Message credibility attributed to the social worker, victim, and the former were not statistically distinguishable from the mean: which, to reiterate, is conceptually equivalent to being perceived as "neither credible nor uncredible." Messenger identity alone, however, was only able to account for 1% of the variation in perceived credibility of P/CVE message.

Additionally, there was a main effect of respondent ethnocentrism (see Table 2, model 2). On average, when controlling for messenger identity, an increase in ethnocentrism was associated with a decrease in perceived credibility of the messenger ($b = -0.19$, se = 0.03, $p < 0.01$).

Finally, as shown in Table 2 (model 3, and depicted in Figure 1), there was a significant interaction between messenger identity and ethnocentrism, such that—for individuals who read the statement attributed to the police officer—increases in ethnocentrism were associated with lesser decreases in perceived credibility than the control group. Likewise, in the formers condition, increases in ethnocentrism were associated with a lesser decrease in perceived credibility. These attenuations of the overall negative effect of ethnocentrism on perceived credibility were not observed in the social worker or victim conditions. By accounting for ethnocentrism, and the interaction with the messenger conditions, the resulting models explained significantly

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by experimental condition.

Variable	Control	Former	Victim	Social Worker	Police Officer	Overall
Messenger Credibility	−0.09 (1.00)	−0.08 (0.83)	−0.00 (0.86)	0.11 (0.98)	0.14 (0.90)	0.00 (0.92)
Ethnocentrism	0.02 (0.90)	−0.02 (0.90)	−0.04 (0.93)	−0.14 (0.85)	0.07 (0.96)	0.00 (0.91)
Demographics						
Age	51 (17.43)	52 (16.90)	51 (16.69)	50 (17.78)	52 (17.29)	51 (17.22)
Female	217	204	217	194	214	1036
Male	200	194	207	197	210	1018
N	416	398	424	391	425	2,054

Note: Values reported are means and standard deviations by experimental condition and overall. The standard deviations are reported in parentheses. Mean respondent age is rounded to the nearest year.

Table 2. Regression results.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Experimental Condition			
Unattributed	−0.11* (0.05)	−0.10* (0.05)	−0.10* (0.05)
Former Far-Right Extremist	−0.08 (0.04)	−0.08 (0.04)	−0.08 (0.04)
Victim	−0.00 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)
Social Worker	0.09 (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Police Officer	0.11* (0.05)	0.13** (0.05)	0.12* (0.05)
Ethnocentrism		−0.19*** (0.03)	−0.32*** (0.06)
Interaction Terms			
Former x Ethnocentrism			0.17* (0.08)
Victim x Ethnocentrism			0.13 (0.08)
Social Worker x Ethnocentrism			0.10 (0.09)
Police Officer x Ethnocentrism			0.20* (0.09)
R^2	0.01	0.05	0.05

Note: Sample size for all models is 2,082. Standard errors are reported below coefficients and are heteroskedasticity robust.
***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

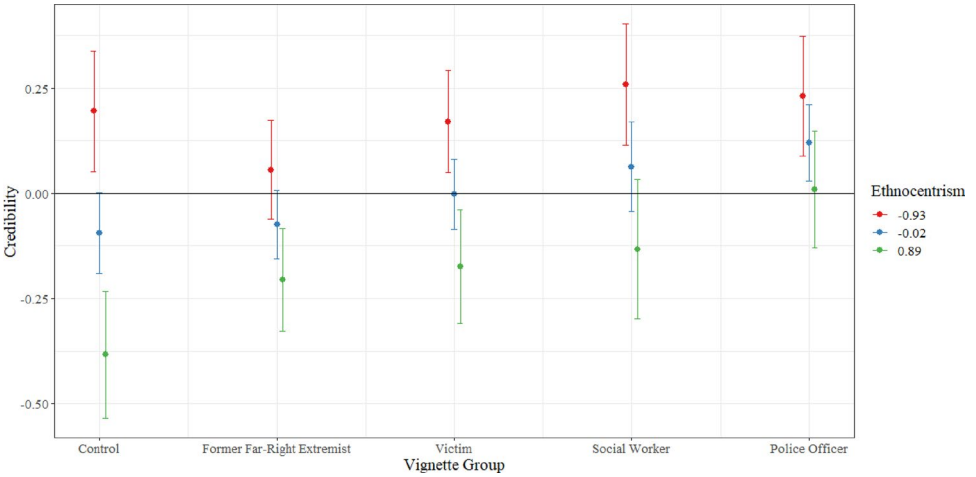

Figure 1. Mean effect of messenger on perceived message credibility by levels of ethnocentrism.

more variation in perceived credibility than model 1 (R^2 = 0.05 and 0.051 for models 2 and 3 respectively).

Model 3 is visualized in Figure 1 which displays the mean values (and associated 95% confidence interval error bars) of credibility, per vignette group, at the mean and one standard deviation both above and below the mean on the ethnocentrism index.[66] As displayed, among those that scored lowest on the ethnocentrism index, all messengers except the former far-right extremist were viewed to be somewhat credible (i.e. above zero). In contrast, individuals who held the highest ethnocentrism perceived former far-right extremists, victims of far-right violence, and unattributed statements (control condition)—i.e. all conditions, except for the social worker and police officer—as less credible than average.

In addition, the present study tested for potential effects in different age cohorts and gender, as some prior scholarship on the impact of PVE programs in schools using formers as speakers has found differing reception and credibility scores between boys and girls.[67] The present data did not show any such effects for age, sex, or

interactions thereof with respect of how credible the various counter-messengers were perceived to be ($p > .05$).

Discussion

By engaging with the existing evidence base on source credibility, this study found reason to doubt the assumptions which have underpinned research and practice on the role of former extremists in P/CVE. Our first set of hypotheses (H1 and H2) tested whether former extremist messengers and victim messengers were perceived as credible. The perceived credibility of formers was statistically insignificant, meaning it made no difference to a general audience if the message was unattributed or presented through a former's perspective. Crucially, the present study found that former extremists were not perceived as credible messengers among the far-right milieu, which challenges the rationale for utilizing former extremists as messengers in P/CVE research and practice. Similarly, victims of extreme right violence were perceived as neither credible nor lacking credibility among general audiences although they were perceived as lacking credibility among the far-right milieu. This finding also came as surprise, since earlier studies have indicated that victimization experience relating to extreme right violence are indeed strong predictors of compassion and attitudinal change.[68] These findings are important insofar as they challenge the assumption that former extremists or victims are perceived as credible messengers among the far-right milieu (the audience whom far-right counter-narratives seek to target).[69] The lack of significant findings among a general audience are also important in challenging assumptions regarding the credibility of these messengers; in short, former extremists and victims did not shift perceptions of credibility either upward or downward relative to the mean (which, to reiterate was equivalent to "neither credible nor uncredible"). Additionally, our hypothesis (H5) that former extremists and victims would be comparably less credible was only supported in one condition – former extremists were perceived as less credible than the police among a general audience.

Our second set of hypotheses on the perceived credibility of police messengers challenged assumptions in the P/CVE literature that assert messengers such as the police face a credibility-gap.[70] Our findings show police were viewed as credible messengers among a general audience (H3), although they were neither credible nor lacking credibility among the far-right audience (H4). However, compared to the (unattributed) control group, the far-right milieu viewed the police as more credible, meaning the inclusion of police as a messenger had a less negative effect than if a counter-narrative was unattributed (H5). In relation to P/CVE research and practice discussed above, these findings regarding the credibility of police messengers are surprising, as police messengers have typically been marginalized in discussions as possible credible messengers whereas former extremists have been viewed as more credible.[71] However, we acknowledge that within the far-right milieu a great variety of attitudes toward the police exist, ranging from strong support ("Blue Lives Matter", "Thin Blue Line") to open hostility (especially among militias and sovereign citizen type groups). This naturally has a likely significant impact on our finding regarding police credibility among far-right audiences and points yet again to the contextuality of the effects.

Our findings did not support our hypothesis regarding social workers as credible messengers. Based on theories of source credibility, the null finding in this regard

could suggest that respondents are not aware of the expertise social workers may have in the P/CVE sphere. Hence, based on these data, the credibility of such professionals is dubious, if they are utilized as P/CVE counter-messengers. [72]

In summary, our findings should be seen in light of prevailing work in P/CVE, which our findings challenge quite radically in some regards and give pause for greater caution (and further research) in others. In general, far-right former extremists – the main focus of this paper – are neither viewed as credible messengers nor lacking credibility; crucially however, they are viewed as lacking credibility among the far-right milieu audience which matters most in secondary and tertiary P/CVE. Police, on the other hand, are viewed as credible messengers and are not perceived negatively by the far-right milieu (in contrast to former extremists). Below, the policy implications of these findings are discussed: preceded by an attempt to explain the findings on former extremist credibility in relation to theories of source credibility.

Conclusions, Policy Recommendations, and Limitations

The findings of our study challenge embedded assumptions in P/CVE work. Far-right former extremists are perceived as neither credible nor lacking credibility among a general audience. If a given former extremist is perceived as credible, these findings suggest that such credibility is due to factors (e.g. messaging, personality, medium) other than his/her identity as a former extremist per se. Consequently, future research should focus on isolating various attributes of messaging from former extremists to understand what makes a former extremist a credible messenger (apart from that identity per se).

A major finding of the present study was that far-right former extremists are perceived as lacking credibility by the far-right milieu. This is especially poignant, given that such an audience is the target audience of secondary and tertiary far-right P/CVE initiatives. Consequently, this should give policymakers and P/CVE program managers reason to doubt the effectiveness of employing former extremists in a given P/CVE counter-messaging initiative. Nevertheless, future research could explore whether this finding holds when the degree of commitment to the movement is varied and whether it holds in the context of Islamist, ethnonationalist or eco-terrorist (for example) extremism. Furthermore, the vignettes are focused on preventing entry into the far-right environment and not on encouraging to leave it. Future follow up research should conduct additional experiments with vignettes with a stronger deradicalization and disengagement focus, since this would be the main goal of secondary and tertiary P/CVE programs.

Additionally, a surprising finding (per the P/CVE literature, but unsurprising given the communications literature on source credibility) was the relative credibility of police as messengers. Therefore, policymakers and P/CVE program managers should not summarily dismiss the prospect of utilizing police as counter messengers: even within secondary and tertiary P/CVE initiatives. However, in practical terms the national context might have a significant impact on this finding. Public fears and criticism of racist motivated police violence or far-right infiltration of law enforcement agencies[73] would likely result in immediate reactance to police actors in P/CVE in some countries

such as the United States for example. Interestingly, the U.K. context of our current survey is also known for large scale public criticism of law enforcement actors in the P/CVE context based on perceived racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic attitudes attributed to the police.[74] This does not appear to have negatively impacted the credibility of police messengers for a general audience. Furthermore, we acknowledge that even the notions attached to the label "P/CVE" and its publicly attached components might make a significant difference for any impact that such programs and tools can have. To implement effective P/CVE programs and methods, strategic and well-adapted public relations and communicative framing based on evidence and local perceptions, attitudes, and preferences are essential for any type of P/CVE.[75] Future research could therefore test whether this increased perception of credibility of police officers translates into attitudinal and behavioral change on behalf of message recipients in different context and with different strategic framing of P/CVE.

(Not) Engaging Formers and Victims in P/CVE Work

Although it is somewhat assuring to know that formers do not appear to have "below average" credibility in the eyes of a general audience, the practice of widely deploying them as supposedly uniquely credible voices in counter and alternative narrative campaigns must be reevaluated on the basis of the present findings. First, as mentioned, one avenue of future inquiry is to consider "what makes a former extremist messenger credible:" apart from their identity as formers per se. For example, individual/personality characteristics (e.g. charisma[76]), the clear lack of vested interests, and genuine expertise (for example, in-depth involvement at a senior level) are possible drivers of credibility, which indicates the potential of other messenger groups for credible P/CVE campaigns, such as academics for example. Future research should more rigorously explore and evaluate the various factors impacting credibility in the P/CVE field. Only in this way will P/CVE researchers and practitioners be able a) to systematically analyze and understand the factors that contribute to perceptions of formers as credible messengers, and—hence—b) to make empirically-informed decisions about whether and how to involve formers as counter-messengers.

Similarly, our findings with regard victims were surprising in the context of P/CVE research and practice. In this respect, future counter or alternative narrative P/CVE campaigns—especially those in the U.K., which the present sample represented—must reevaluate and carefully reconsider whether the potential psychological risks and costs of involving victims in this work are actually outbalanced by the perhaps insignificant benefit of influencing an ethnocentric target audience.

Limitations

Despite being the first empirical study to provide experimental evidence for the credibility of different actors in P/CVE in comparison to each other, our findings come with important limitations. First, our findings speak to former extremists as a general type of messenger but there are individual characteristics of formers which will make some former extremists potentially credible messengers. Aspects

such as personality, charisma, or engaging storytelling might result in drastically different levels of perceived credibility among the audience for all the messengers we tested and others as well (e.g. teachers, parents, policymakers). Many individual former extremists will be viewed as credible however we would argue this credibility emerges from factors distinct from their former role, such as individual characteristics, personal networks, messaging that successfully signals expertise, partisan credibility and costly talk. Thus, while we cannot say former extremists in their totality are lacking credibility, we can say that any credibility among a far-right milieu emerges from factors other than simply being a former extremist and it is important to understand what these factors are to identify who will be an effective messenger. For instance, credibility that emerges from within-movement expertise is likely to depend on rank and time within the movement, although it is still likely that expertise is transitionary and many formers involved in P/CVE would not be considered to have this level of within-movement expertise relative to other professional experts.

Secondly, our study tests the effects of a short P/CVE counter-narrative in order to isolate the effects of messenger type, whereas formers typically use deeper biographical narratives. Therefore credibility may emerge from the type of messaging deployed. Future research could therefore study the effects of message-type on credibility alongside messenger type.

Thirdly, our study focuses on the far-right milieu. One of our most significant findings is perceived credibility of former extremists is likely to vary by the ideological background of the former extremist. We show the salience of ethnocentrism in shaping perceptions of credible messengers and contrary to assumptions in P/CVE, the police messenger was the only messenger the far-right milieu did not view as lacking credibility. If our theory holds – that ethnocentrism and in-group identity shapes perceptions of credibility – we would not expect an Islamist milieu (however defined) to view the police as a credible messenger. Despite some countries being more advanced in this particular P/CVE field (e.g. Germany), arguably the largest share of P/CVE programs globally targets Islamist extremism and terrorism. The perceived credibility of formers in this space could be different.

Fourthly, our study must be seen as context dependent. Even though the significant public criticism of PREVENT and the long tradition of former extremists working in the P/CVE field in the U.K. provide for a particularly strong background to our findings, the effects might be different in other countries. The different cultural and legal roles ascribed to the police, the general public trust in law enforcement agencies, or the scale and nature of media reporting regarding P/CVE programing[77] might significantly impact and alter our findings when applied to other national contexts.

Finally, our study cannot speak to which determinants are dominant in shaping perceptions of different messengers. We have drawn upon a range of studies on source credibility to identify variables which have been shown to shape perceived source credibility, which include: expertise, costly and partisan credibility, and ethnocentrism. Empirical research shows each of these variables influences perceived source credibility and while these are useful in hypothesis formulation and theorizing on the determinants of source credibility, our findings show more research is required on the interplay between these variables across different messenger types.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Daniel Koehler is the Founding Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS) and Editor in Chief of the Journal for Deradicalization.

Gordon Clubb is Associate Professor in Terrorism at the University of Leeds

Jocelyn J. Bélanger is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at New York University Abu Dhabi

Michael H. Becker is a doctoral student in the Department of Justice, Law, and Criminology at American University.

Michael J. Williams is the Founding Director of The Science of P/CVE

ORCID

Daniel Koehler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2940-7050
Gordon Clubb http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5168-2043
Jocelyn J. Bélanger http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3881-0335
Michael J. Williams http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5630-9814