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Social Work Methods and Prevention of Radicalization

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Abstract

This article, a revised and expanded version of Ostwaldt (2022a), serves as a discussion impulse to introduce the German-language discourse on radicalization prevention to an international audience. It examines how specific social work methods and working principles, such as multi-perspective casework, functional equivalents, and community-based approaches, contribute to enhancing radicalization prevention efforts. The article contends that despite the extensive use of social work methods in radicalization prevention, the field suffers from a fragmented methodological framework and lacks standardized professional guidelines, leading to notable inconsistencies in practice. To address these issues, the article advocates for a systematic professionalization of radicalization prevention, emphasizing the need for specialized training programs and clearly defined competency profiles. Additionally, the article highlights the need to distinguish between supportive social work and explicitly preventive measures to reduce ambiguity in practice. By systematically integrating social work methods, the field can enhance its theoretical foundation, achieve clearer professional standards, and better address the root causes of extremism. This publication seeks to inspire a broader international discourse on the critical role of social work in radicalization prevention, emphasizing the necessity for methodological rigor in effectively addressing and mitigating extremist tendencies.

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1. Introduction: Radicalization Prevention in Germany – A Brief Overview

The field of radicalization prevention in Germany has a long-standing tradition, particularly in the area of right-wing extremism, often intersecting with social work. As early as the 1990s, initial approaches were developed that incorporated social work methods into efforts targeting right-wing extremist youth (Krafeld et al., 1993). In the aftermath of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, attention to religious extremism—particularly Salafism and Islamism—intensified, initially framed largely within a security policy context. Over time, especially with the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the departure of individuals from Germany

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to Syria and Iraq, prevention and exit programs began to complement security-focused initiatives.

A pivotal development in Germany's current prevention landscape was the establishment of the federal program Demokratie Leben! in 2015. This program initially had a budget of 40.5 million euros and by 2019 had grown to 115.5 million euros, making it the most extensive funding initiative in the country focused on promoting democracy and preventing extremism (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2020). The spread of IS and the increasing number of individuals joining from Germany prompted the German government to launch the National Prevention Program Against Islamist Extremism, which allocated approximately 400 million euros between 2017 and 2020 (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2017). These funds supported both the expansion of extremism prevention programs and the development of deradicalization and exit counseling services. In 2020, Demokratie Leben! entered its second funding phase, which runs until 2024, with an annual budget of around 180 million euros. The subsequent phase, beginning in 2025, is set to last eight years, with a notable increase in the program's duration. In addition to this, the federal states also implement their own funding schemes, and the Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education) has consistently allocated funds to extremism-related projects in recent years. Furthermore, private foundations, such as the Alfred Landecker Foundation, have significantly contributed to right-wing extremism prevention efforts. In addition to the various projects funded to promote democracy and prevent extremism, most German states operate their own counseling centers dedicated to deradicalization and exit assistance.

Understanding the landscape of radicalization prevention in Germany requires recognizing the central role that civil society actors have traditionally played in this work. Government institutions are typically involved in deradicalization and exit counseling, although some states still collaborate with civil society partners in these areas. The descriptions of funding structures here are not exhaustive but aim to provide a sense of the significant financial resources that have been channeled into prevention work in recent years. As a result, a differentiated and diverse landscape of prevention initiatives has emerged, encompassing a wide range of projects. For instance, Freiheit et al. (2021, p. 53) identified

over 1,500 projects addressing religiously motivated extremism, approximately 600 of which remain actively engaged in prevention work.

These developments underscore the evolution of radicalization prevention into a broad and increasingly complex field of practice. Given this complexity, I consider it increasingly important to step back and examine the methodological approaches that define this work more closely.

This article serves as a structured stimulus for further debate, inviting critical reflection on current practices and fostering a deeper examination of the intersection between social work and radicalization prevention. It draws substantially from a previously published article by the author (Ostwaldt, 2022a), but is presented here in a revised, updated, and internationally oriented form. With this publication, the author aims to introduce the predominantly German national discourse on the relationship between social work and radicalization prevention to an international audience, fostering broader discussion. To this end, the concept of prevention is briefly outlined to provide a foundation for the subsequent ideas. The article is then structured into two consecutive main sections that reflect the thought process leading up to its writing, specifically regarding the relationship between social work and radicalization prevention. First, considerations regarding the integration of methods are explored; specifically, how can methods from social work be applied in radicalization prevention, and what value could such integration offer? This is followed by more fundamental reflections on methodological debates within radicalization prevention, discussing what such debates might look like, whether they are necessary, and why. The article seeks to develop theory based on practice, while acknowledging that this might give the impression of theorizing practice. Consequently, this article attempts to close the circle by developing theory from practice and demonstrating the value of such theory for practical application.

2. On the Foundations of Prevention

Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), often used alongside Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), has gained prominence as a global priority in response to phenomena such as the rise of IS, the departure of foreign fighters, and home-grown terrorism (Al-Lami, 2009; Frank &

Reva, 2016). The United Nations General Assembly has also underscored its importance in Resolution 70/109, highlighting education and tolerance to promote non-violence and cooperation. However, PVE remains a politically driven slogan with limited theoretical depth. Thus, it is necessary to establish a foundational understanding of prevention to contextualize discussions on radicalization prevention in social work, particularly in the German-speaking domain.

Two key prevention models are relevant here. Gerald Caplan's triad of prevention (1964) classifies measures based on timing: primary prevention aims to avert undesirable conditions, secondary prevention addresses emerging issues, and tertiary prevention focuses on mitigating established problems. Gordon's model (1983), on the other hand, organizes prevention by target groups: universal prevention addresses the general population, selective prevention targets at-risk groups, and indicated prevention focuses on individuals showing early signs of the problem.

For this discussion, I adopt Gordon's framework (universal, selective, indicated), as it more effectively aligns with prevention work in radicalization contexts. Following Koehler (2017), this discussion focuses on prevention approaches rather than repression or intervention.

3. Methods of Social Work in Radicalization Prevention

The relationship between social work and prevention, in general, has long been a topic of debate. Lindner and Freund (2001, p. 73) speak of a "prevention boom in youth work," cautioning that, under this logic, all work with young people risks being interpreted from a preventive angle. In a later article, Lindner criticizes how the entire field of social pedagogy has been co-opted by the concept of prevention: "Through such rhetorical maneuvers, all social pedagogical action is now contaminated by the notion of prevention: education is prevention, participation is prevention, parenting is prevention, support is prevention, empowerment is prevention, communication is prevention, capability is prevention, and helping individuals realize their life plans is prevention" (Lindner, 2013, p. 363, author's translation).

There has been little effort to explain the current boom in the use of the prevention concept in social pedagogy. It is evident, however, that a political agenda has played a significant role in the rapid growth of preventive work over the past decade. Policymakers have increasingly recognized the need to address radicalization on multiple fronts through preventive measures, which has resulted in large-scale funding programs that have channeled hundreds of millions of euros into prevention projects in Germany. Economic considerations have also played an important role in this context. Döring, Röing, and Boemcken (2020, p. 19) found, through an interview study, that the term "prevention" was often used strategically to secure funding for initiatives that did not necessarily have a direct connection to prevention. The author of this article has made similar observations in the context of examining the role of Islamic and migrant organizations in extremism prevention (Ostwaldt, 2020). The economic dimension is undeniable, especially from an institutional perspective, where the creation or preservation of jobs is a key concern, as prevention is currently in high demand. For this reason, it is important to compare the relationship between these two fields of work on specific levels. As outlined, the focus will now be on the methodological intersections.

Over the past decades, social work has developed a diverse and well-tested portfolio of methods, which has emerged from and continues to be shaped by extensive discussions on methodology. Research highlights the significance of trust-building and the establishment of meaningful relationships in social work to prevent radicalization. As Haugstvedt (2019) points out, trust is a two-way process critical for engaging clients at risk of radicalization. This underscores the importance of applying client-centered methods and motivational interviewing to create open dialogues about values and ideologies. At the same time, Hutson (2021) emphasizes the increasing challenges posed by violent extremism and advocates for the role of social work in addressing these issues due to its long-standing focus on social justice and violence prevention.

Collaboration between social workers, police, and security services adds another layer of complexity to prevention efforts. Haugstvedt and Tuastad (2023) reveal that such cooperation often raises ethical challenges, particularly concerning role definitions, professional autonomy, and client confidentiality. If these challenges are not managed carefully, they can erode trust between social workers and their clients, undermining the

effectiveness of intervention strategies. To navigate this, maintaining clear professional boundaries and ethical principles is essential.

Furthermore, social support for social workers themselves is a crucial element that enhances the sustainability and effectiveness of their work. Haugstvedt (2020) identifies organizational support, peer collaboration, and professional acknowledgment as key factors that help social workers manage the stress and uncertainties inherent in radicalization prevention. This support not only bolsters social workers' well-being but also strengthens their ability to remain committed to the principles of empowerment rather than control.

In the course of this development, current research on social work refers to the three classical methods of the field: casework (individual assistance), group work, and community work. These three methods form the foundational basis upon which a wide range of modern approaches has been built. While the classical methods address individuals, groups, or communities, modern methods complement this traditional approach. For the following discussion, I will focus on a further development of casework through multiperspectival casework, the conceptual foundation of community work based on spatial orientation, and a specific social work technique known as functional equivalents. Through these examples, I will argue that social work and social work methods in particular play an important role in radicalization prevention.

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this article is to initiate a dialogue that brings the specificities of the German debates into the international discourse. The methods and techniques of social work play a particularly significant role in Germany’s radicalization prevention landscape. As Kurtenbach and Schumilas (2021, p. 154) highlight in the previously mentioned MAPEX study, 451 out of 551 examined radicalization prevention projects report using approaches grounded in social work methods, followed by methods from civic education (447) and pedagogy (424). The authors note that a "broad concept of methods" (ibid., author’s translation) underpins the study’s data, which suggests that distinctions between methods from social work and pedagogy may not always be clear. As a result, the reported figures likely reflect a general orientation toward (social) pedagogical methods. Additionally, some of the surveyed projects cited experiential education approaches as an independent methodological orientation. However, based on their methodological paradigm, these approaches can also be classified under the methods of social work (Galuske,

2013). Although methodological borrowings from social work seem to be a common practice in universal and selective prevention work, systematic discussions on method integration largely exist only in the context of deradicalization and disengagement efforts (Berg, 2021; Berg et al., 2023; Dittmar, 2023), which, as mentioned earlier, are outside the scope of this article. Building on this foundation, this chapter explores three methods and concepts from social work—multiperspective casework, functional equivalents, and community work—and evaluates them from a methodological integration perspective, focusing on their applicability and existing applications within universal and selective radicalization prevention efforts.

Multi-perspective casework

In social work, *multi-perspective casework* represents a methodological approach centered on shifting perspectives to address complex social work scenarios effectively. In contrast to one of the primary methods in working with individuals, the social case work, which focuses on the relationship between social worker and client, it also takes into account the complex conditions of social work practice as well as institutional frameworks. In his textbook "Sozialpaedagogisches Koennen" (Social Pedagogical Skills), the first edition of which was published in 1993, Burkhard Müller developed his idea "that there really is something like a common base of social work competence, which lies across the diversity of the increasingly differentiating fields of work and which can be taught in a general study of social pedagogy at universities of applied sciences and universities" (Müller, 2017, p. 10, author's translation). According to Müller, case work represents the common basis of social work competence.

> "By a multi-perspective approach, I mean an approach according to which social pedagogical action requires a conscious change of perspective between different frames of reference. Multiperspectival practice means, for example, not mixing up the institutional, the pedagogical, the therapeutic, and the fiscal frames of reference of a youth welfare case, but nevertheless treating them as mutually relevant variables for each other." (Müller, 2017, p. 15, author's translation)

Like social case work, *multi-perspective case work* has a phasing of the assistance process. The phases of *anamnesis*, *diagnosis* and *intervention* are complemented by a fourth phase, *evaluation*.

The phase of *anamnesis* enables a broad gathering of information, which is not characterized by the labeling of the case, but by openness to different facets of case constellations. In addition, the anamnesis serves to identify the relevant information. Inevitably, this is already associated with a selection, which, however, should not be at the expense of openness to different case constellations. Coquelin and Salzmann (2023) have recently described the application of the social pedagogical anamnesis from a practice perspective. They state that "a holistic collection of knowledge and facts [is needed] in order to be able to come to an assessment at all, on the basis of meaningful interpretations, about what is the case and what is not" (ibid., p. 157, author's translation).

The second phase, the *social diagnosis* is characterized by the question "what to do?". The term and also the concept of social diagnosis goes back to Mary Richmond (1917). In recent decades, social diagnostics has increasingly become the subject of a lively professional discourse (Heiner, 2004; Pantuček-Eisenbacher, 2019), because it transforms the information gained in the anamnesis into social diagnoses that guide the assistance process. In this process, anamnesis and diagnosis can merge. "The focus of this phase is on a variety of questions such as: `What is the problem?`, `Who has what problem?', `What is to be done in the specific situation?', `Who has what mandate?' and `What resources are available to solve the problem?'" (Galuske, 2013, p. 195, author's translation).

The third phase, the *intervention,* includes that part of the assistance process in which the social-intervention is carried out. Müller (2017, p. 150) distinguishes three forms of intervention: the intervention, the offer, and the joint action. While intervention is seen as involving the exercise of power, the offer consists of suggestions that the client can accept or reject. Joint action, on the other hand, is characterized by cooperation with the client.

Finally, the fourth phase, *evaluation*, concludes the assistance process. This phase is about reflecting on the assistance process from a retrospective perspective in order to review decisions with regard to their appropriateness and effectiveness. In the conception of multi-perspective casework, evaluation mostly means self-evaluation, for which there is now a

considerable portfolio of different techniques (Heiner, 1994), which are visibly dissolving the boundaries between action and research methods (Galuske 2013, 345).

The four phases of *multi-perspective casework* hold particular relevance for radicalization prevention, with applications already adapted across various practical settings. The special value of multi-perspective casework for the prevention of radicalization is due to another perspective that distinguishes three dimensions of cases: *Case of*, *Case for*, and *Case with* (Müller, 2017).These dimensions establish different perspectives on or accesses to case constellations that are central within social work logics of action. The first dimension of the *case of* focuses on the character of social work as administrative action. Here, it is primarily about the factual aspect of a case; above all, therefore, about the categories into which the case is to be classified (both from a statutory and a bureaucratic logic), i.e., whether there is a specific legal basis to which the case can be assigned. In Germany, for example, this could be the child welfare endangerment, which is laid down in the SGBVIII (eighth Social Law) and defines specific mandates and, above all, competencies for social work in the event that the welfare of a child is endangered.

The dimension *case for* complements the dimension *case of* in a way that the necessity of interdisciplinary cooperation is emphasized. Social work is all too often structurally dependent in its actions on the actions and competencies of other instances (e.g. medical diagnoses or court orders). It is primarily a matter of considering the case as an "example of a recognized general (example of a theory, a norm, a phenomenon)" (Hilmar, 1986, p. 23, author's translation). This gives rise to a central competence that Sprondel (1979) early on called "referral knowledge" (author's translation); the knowledge of who else is or could be responsible for this case. Professionals must therefore know which aspect of the case generates a mandate for action for which institution in the help system or, in the best case, outside the usual help system: "Processing as a *case for* means recognizing the activity of other instances relevant to the case and doing what is possible to ensure that they play their part in a conducive manner" (Müller, 2017, p. 147authrors translation).

The third dimension, *case with*, is the dimension that concerns the core of social work. Here it is decided which further methods and techniques will be used; the question "What do I do?" is answered. The central starting point of this dimension is the principle that "cases can

only be solved together with those affected and that the greatest challenge is to gain their cooperation and to remove the obstacles to this" (Müller, 2017, p. 48, author's translation).

Mulitperspective case-work in the prevention of radicalization

The factors that play a role in the context of radicalization are manifold. The International Centre For The Prevention Of Crime (2015) has compiled these factors in a systematic review. The most striking aspect is the variety of contextual conditions that can play a role in the course of radicalization. In addition, a variety of different trajectory models (e. g.Moghaddam, 2005; Sageman, 2007; Silber & Bhatt, 2007) and models describing factors and conditions exist (Kruglanski et al., 2014; e. g. McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Moreover, it is now undisputed that the personality profile of a radicalizing person does not exist and that what matters is an interplay of resilience and vulnerability factors (Al-Lami, 2009, p. 3). The challenge for radicalization prevention is obvious: A careful and comprehensive analysis of living conditions and personality factors is needed to identify radicalization and initiate appropriate measures. Multiperspective casework can be usefully employed here. The dimensions of a case - *case of*, *case for* and *case with* - can, on the basis of a comprehensive socio-pedagogical anamnesis, coupled with a sensitive socio-pedagogical diagnosis, help to grasp the living environment of the client in the best possible way and in this way to obtain as holistic a picture as possible of any multi-problem situations of clients. In this way, a case of radicalization may become a case of social disadvantage, which could be dealt with by youth social work, or a case of a lack of family support and the associated deficits in opportunities for participation due to poorly developed social and cognitive skills, which can be dealt with with the help of the services of child and youth work within the framework of its emancipation and compensation function. This list could certainly be extended, e.g. by offers of migration social work or addiction support. This results in a direct link to the dimension *case for*: The classification of the case through different perspectives now opens up the possibility of acquiring institutions, facilities and initiatives for processing the case, which would not have appeared to the professionals as adequate partners in a mere case of radicalization. Here, the referral knowledge already explained plays a central role. The dimension *case with* then results specifically from the conclusions drawn from *case from* and *case for*. For the application of multi-perspective casework it is central that the case

dimensions can build on each other but do not have to. Thus, the perspective *case for* can dominate in a case, because the classification of the case in *case of* is difficult.

Functional Equivalents

While *multi-perspective casework* represents a method that provides a framework for social work or, as Galuske (2013, p. 198, author's translation) states, "is primarily a reflection tool [that] is applied to a wide variety of action strategies", the concept of *functional equivalents*, on the other hand, represents a working principle that aims to initiate project settings in social work fields of action "in which clients can first and over time learn that they do not need their antisocial or autoaggressive behavior to achieve self-worth, social recognition, and self-efficacy" (Boehnisch, 2018, p. 290, author's translation). The concept of *functional equivalents*, developed by Lothar Boehnisch, builds upon his work on 'Lebenslagen' (life situations) and 'Lebensbewältigung' (coping with life), focusing on alternative pathways for achieving self-worth and social recognition in social work. Life situations are the "product of social development (structured), but at the same time condition and initial situation (structuring) of the development of individual people and groups; life situations are initial conditions of human action just as they are product of this action" (Amman, 1984, p. 324, author's translation). For social work, the "socio-structural embedding of living conditions and thus (...) the resources of individual life coping" (Boehnisch, 2018, p. 30, author's translation) are of particular importance. Another basic assumption of the concept is that people fundamentally strive for subjective agency, especially when the psychosocial balance of self-worth, social recognition, and self-efficacy is at risk. Because life situations are primarily perceived as critical when the available social and personal resources are no longer sufficient to cope, "this striving for agency is usually structured not only cognitively-rationally, but above all emotionally and drive-dynamically" (Boehnisch, 2018, p. 24, author's translation).

In parts, the *life situation and life coping concept* can be connected to the theory of the so-called quest for singnificance (Kruglanski et al., 2014), in which the author's emphasize the following: "In summary, the seeming heterogeneity of motives underlying engagement in terrorism boils down to one major underlying motivation - the quest for personal significance" (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 74), "this quest constitutes a major, universal, human motivation

variously labeled as the need for esteem, achievement, meaning, competence, control, and so on" (Kruglanski et al., 2014, p. 73). Relating the concepts also seems useful because Lothar Boehnisch places deviant behavior itself in the context of coping behavior in critical life constellations (Boehnisch, 2017, ch. 3).

The concept of *Functional equivalents* gains importance when social work wants to offer coping strategies for critical life situations that support the restoration of the psychosocial balance of the client. It is essential that the *functional equivalents* offered are positioned close enough to the core of the deviant behavior or to the function of radical ideology for the individual or the group. In practice, this principle means that for individuals with tendencies to act violently, the functional equivalent should include similarly physical aspects (e.g. martial arts). For the prevention of radicalization, this principle entails restrictions, because a tendency to use violence is, according to common classification, already to be located in the deradicalization and in most cases to be classified as security-relevant, so that security aspects also play a role here. For the fields of action of universal, selective and indicated prevention focused on in this article, it is therefore particularly necessary to take a closer look at the functionality of ideology behind corresponding attitude patterns. The role of ideology in the process of radicalization is subject to constant change. While radicalization processes in the 1990s - as can be seen, for example, with regard to the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 attacks - were associated with a profound ideologization and sometimes lasted for years, a decline in ideological debate in the course of the radicalization process can be observed in the 2010s (Gaudette et al., 2023).

In this context the importance of religion is also being discussed. The discourse in this regard is far too extensive to be presented in detail here. In essence, however, two positions can be identified: On the one hand, researchers identify radicalization as an active engagement with religious content (Aslan & Akkilic, 2017) or take the position that radicalization toward terrorist violence originates in radical Muslim milieus (Kepel, 2009). The counterpart to these positions is, for example, the thesis of a "Lego-Islam" that "can always be adapted to new requirements and in fact has nothing in common with the forms of traditional Islam taught in the majority of mosque communities" (Kiefer et al., 2018, p. 26, author’s translation). The meta-analysis by Al-Lami (2009, p. 3) also concludes that those who have become radicalized in the phenomenon area of religiously based extremism,

particularly neo-Salafism, are largely religiously analphabets. The consensus finding is that religion can be a factor in the radicalization process, particularly in the context of the "reconstruction of a lost identity" (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, p. 801) and the associated instrumentalization of religion. It should be limited here to point out the beginning of this complex of topics, namely the constant change to which the role of ideology in the radicalization process is subjected. It is possible that in the coming years there will again be a shift toward ideological confrontation, because the goal of leaving the country for a supposedly Islamic state will give way to achieving fundamental social change in the home country.

For the use of *functional equivalents* in the prevention of radicalization, specific challenges arise from this, namely a systematic analysis of the function of ideology within the respective radicalization process is required (which would again bring *multi-perspective case work* into play at this point). On the basis of such an analysis, it is possible to offer adequate services that enable the restoration of self-efficacy and other needs. Here again, a parallel to the concept of quest for significance emerges. Kruglanski et al. (2014, p. 79) suggest that the quest for self-efficacy does not necessarily have to end in anti-democratic or anti-human ideologies, but can equally be reflected in "pro-social ideologies" (ibid.). The desire for radical social change can thus also be expressed democratically, thus enabling self-efficacy at the same time. The climate justice movements can be cited as a vivid example here: The actions and protests, in relation to compulsory education also in the form of civil disobedience, increase the self-efficacy of those who join groups such as Friday for Future. In essence, democratic protest movements can thus also be *functional equivalents*.

Community Work and Social Space Orientation

Alongside individual social casework and social group work, community work completes the classic methods of social work. This tripartite structure indicates that the method of community work operates beyond the levels of individual cases and groups, moving within the sociocultural environment, the neighborhood, or the district. Community work originated in the so-called community organizing efforts in the slums of the USA, Canada, and Great Britain. During the Settlement Movement in 19th century London, Toynbee Hall, a neighborhood and education center, was established. Jane Addams brought

the idea of such a center to the USA, founding the Hull House in Chicago, which focused particularly on the needs of immigrants. It wasn't until the 1950s that the methods of community work became more widely known in Germany. This historical contextualization is important as it illustrates the perspective underlying community-oriented approaches, which do not address individuals or groups but focus on the population within a neighborhood or community. The challenge in examining community work is certainly that it is highly integrative of various methods, and numerous diverse approaches exist (Galuske, 2013, p. 103). The fundamental principles of community work have become firmly embedded in the working principles of social professions, not just in social work, emphasizing that people must always be considered in the context of their environment—that the community influences individuals and, reciprocally, those individuals influence the community.

From this foundational idea of community work established in social work in the 1960s and 1970s, an established method of social work emerged based on extensive discussion. In the 1990s, there was a heightened interest in spatially oriented approaches, such as neighborhood management and other spatially networked social work offerings (Galuske, 2013, p. 300). The background for this surge in spatially oriented approaches includes the concept of Lebensweltorientierung (everyday life orientation) described in the 8th Child and Youth Report as a structural maxim of social work in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag, 1990). The core of this concept, attributed to Hans Thiersch, is the assumption that "from the perspective of everyday life to be managed, life difficulties are seen both in the normality of everyday tasks and in zones of special burdens and inadequacies" (Thiersch, 2020, p. 89, author's translation). Everyday life orientation thus focuses on the everyday life of individuals, particularly the place (not only in a spatial-physical sense, as will be shown later) where life occurs and where people can apply and develop strategies for managing life. Social work, based on the premises of everyday life orientation, must focus on the aforementioned everyday life management to contribute to the development of a more successful everyday life, always under the premise that clients are fundamentally competent to live their own lives. For spatially oriented child and youth welfare services, Hinte et al. (2000, p. 72, author's translation) describe the goal as "weaving relationship networks in the residential quarter, initiating groups, and building and maintaining diverse cooperation structures." With the

catchy phrase "from case to field," Hinte et al. (2000, author's translation) succinctly describe the spatial reorientation of social services.

In recent decades, various approaches have been established under social space orientation, each with differing definitions and understandings of social space. For instance, Hopmann (2006) distinguishes six different perspectives on social space: administrative, resident, social space as a control variable, and social space as a resource. Additionally, social space can also be understood as the catchment area (e.g., of a facility) or as the place of social work (public space or building). Social space-oriented social work requires a combination of different spatial concepts, which are not arbitrary but rather based on fundamental assumptions of social work. Schönig (2020, p. 15) summarizes these assumptions for social space orientation as follows (author's translation):

> "Practical social work with the residents of a social space is based on the fact that different social space definitions are relevant for the respective target groups through their actions and sense-making. These social space definitions describe the action spaces of individuals and groups and usually differ from administrative social space boundaries. They determine social space-oriented work in practice. Life-world reference, orientation to people's will, and use of their personal resources are keywords that indicate a subject-related concept of space in practical social work."

Space and Radicalization

Not only in social work do space concepts play an important role, but perspectives on space can also complement the existing knowledge in the study of radicalization processes and factors. Indeed, as Kurtenbach (2021) notes in his text "Radikalisierung und Raum" (Radicalization and Space), the spatial aspect of radicalization has been somewhat neglected. Insights from spatial sociology can therefore be useful in highlighting the influence of space on radicalization and vice versa, as well as the connections to the concept of social space orientation and the field of community work. The following sections will outline key research strands in this area.

In spatial sociology, absolute space as a geographic unit is distinguished from relational space. The former represents social structural factors such as housing or

unemployment and social inequality. An absolute understanding of space can be exemplified by the concept of nation-states or city and county boundaries, where clear demarcations define one space compared to another, or not compared, due to arbitrary separations (Kessl & Maurer, 2019). Relational space, on the other hand, focuses on interpersonal relationships in any form. These relationships do not have to be physical but refer to a "relational (re)arrangement of social goods and people (living beings) in places" (Löw, 2001, p. 224, author's translation). For examining radicalization, context effects, as defined by Kurtenbach, can be valuable: "Context effects are the results of a process of environmental adaptation of the individual to a perceived prevailing norm in the residential area" (Kurtenbach, 2017, p. 60, author's translation). These context effects can be caused by various forms of segregation (ethnic, social, demographic) (Kurtenbach & Schumilas, 2021). There is no direct link to radicalization, but the aim is to explore how and in what form context effects can be associated with established radicalization theories. Kurtenbach (2021, p. 30) suggests that factors such as increased vulnerability, existing or lacking network structures, and perceptions of collective and individual discrimination could be theoretical points of reference. For instance, the theory of relative deprivation provides a theoretical model that can bridge spatial sociology and radicalization theories (Kurtenbach, 2021, p. 34) and has already been considered in the design of preventive measures (Ostwaldt & Coquelin, 2018). This theory describes the discrepancy between a status that the individual subjectively anticipates for their personal life based on various self- and external attributions and the objectively measurable and subjectively experienced discrimination and other limiting factors such as biographical burdens or strokes of fate. This discrepancy, broadly speaking, can be seen as dissatisfaction and can, in conjunction with other influencing factors (increased presence of vulnerability factors such as precarious social environment or lack of ambiguity tolerance), lead to a cognitive opening, questioning traditional patterns of coexistence and finding alternative worldviews more attractive (Ostwaldt & Coquelin, 2018).

For establishing a connection between spatial sociology and radicalization theories or for considering contextual factors in radicalization research and ultimately in prevention work, local infrastructure plays a central role, as noted by Stapf and Siegert (2019). They identify potential contextual factors within the neighborhoods they studied that could be associated with radicalization: social and ethnic segregation, distrust in public institutions and

their deficient equipment, and a perception of being neglected, i.e., forms of social discrimination (Stapf & Siegert, 2019, p. 30).

Social Space Orientation in Radicalization Prevention

Given that the spatial factor in radicalization has received little attention in research, there are currently just a few radicalization prevention approaches with a distinct social spatial orientation in Germany.[2] Instead, individual approaches can be identified that highlight social spatial perspectives, particularly in municipal contexts. For example, Kurtenbach and Schumilas (2021, p. 159) investigate the preventive impact of local support structures in Dortmund's Nordstadt, explicitly referencing social spatial aspects. Likely, other municipally oriented projects also feature social spatial approaches, but no systematic studies on these approaches are known to the author. Child and youth services are more advanced in this area. As noted by Treeß (2002), the professional debate in child and youth services has already reached a much higher level of reflection in this regard. For radicalization prevention, there is significant potential to be tapped by examining the transferability of the social space orientation method with all its conceptual approaches.

4. Professionalization of Radicalization Prevention through a Methodological Discourse?

From the previous considerations, an attentive reader may draw a key insight and raise an important question. The insight could be that social work methods indeed offer a substantial benefit for radicalization prevention. The subsequent question, considering that these methods are already being used in radicalization prevention, might be: What purpose does it serve to initiate such a discourse? While these methods are indeed utilized in radicalization prevention, there is little reflection on their application. If the field of radicalization prevention aims to further professionalize, such a discourse is essential. To elaborate on this thesis, I will briefly

[2] e.g. the project „Kommunale Fachberatung: Prävention und gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt“ (Municipal Expert Consulting: Prevention and Social Cohesion) which supports municipal authorities nationwide in counties, cities, and towns in further developing multi-professional structures and effective local prevention programs aimed at countering radicalization and promoting social cohesion (https://www.kommunale-fachberatung.de/, retrieved November 11, 2024).

present the German-language debate on the professionalization of social work and apply it to radicalization prevention.

Professionalization and Social Work: A Reflection

Professionalization and professionalism are two keywords that have sparked an extensive, long-standing academic debate within social work. Theoretical discussions on social work professionalism offer numerous approaches and directions (Knoll, 2010). Professions research—simplified—deals with questions such as: What constitutes social work as a profession? What is professional social work? And with what self-understanding do social workers see themselves as professionals?

Dewe and Otto (2018), building on theoretical considerations and research, differentiate between "profession" as a specific form of social occupation on the macro-level of society, "professionalization as a social process specific to a professional group, discussing the ambivalent process of establishing professions", and "professionalism as a non-technological state of being, manifested as habitualized, situational behavior under typically highly complex and paradoxical action demands" (Dewe & Otto, 2018, p. 1191, author's translation). The foundation of such an understanding of professional social work can be found in a specific model of social-pedagogical action, which Dewe and Otto (2012) previously developed under the term *reflexive social pedagogy*.

The Lack of a Professionalization Debate in Radicalization Prevention

For the field of radicalization prevention, such a professionalization debate has not yet emerged (Hafeneger & Ostwaldt, 2023), even if there has been specific research which point out the necessity of professional social work in dealing with radicalization (Haugstvedt and Tuastad 2023). This could be due to several factors: first, radicalization prevention projects have only been established over the past decade; second, they continue to face precarious funding conditions, which complicates long-term professional development. On the other hand, some project evaluations suggest increasing professionalization in the field, particularly in deradicalization work (Cherney, 2020; Cherney & Belton, 2021; Möller et al., 2015; Uhlmann, 2017). However, upon closer inspection, it remains unclear how professionalization

is defined and how the field, in its diversity, develops professionalized activity areas and specific competency features.

Therefore, it seems necessary to develop a foundational understanding of professionalization, one that is productive for an early stage of a professionalization debate (see Hafeneger & Ostwaldt, 2023). Two perspectives seem central for radicalization prevention: while an institutional perspective focuses on the factors that contribute to professionalization and professionalism on an organizational level, an individual perspective examines the competency features and performance standards related to practitioners' training and continuing education (Becker & Schmitt, 2018; Mieg, 2016). The professional transformation of fields and professions at the institutional level can be analyzed and evaluated using various criteria. Wilensky (1964) phase or multi-level model suggests differentiating between seven features and stages of professionalization processes and the development of professionalism:

1. Job as a full-time occupation
2. Establishment of educational institutions
3. Creation of academic programs
4. Formation of local professional associations
5. Creation of national professional associations
6. State recognition
7. Development of a professional code of ethics

This systematization provides an initial framework for assessing efforts toward professionalization and professionalism. Applying this model to radicalization prevention reveals that many steps have yet to be fully realized, especially regarding state recognition, standardized education programs, and ethical codes specific to the field. Therefore, the initiation of a professionalization debate, centered around methodology and competency development, is critical to enhancing the credibility, effectiveness, and institutional standing of radicalization prevention work.

Professionalization at the Institutional Level

In recent years, the field of radicalization prevention has become increasingly differentiated, leading to the separation of distinct areas of action (Heinze, 2018). Civil society organizations implementing projects in this field have organized themselves into advisory networks and Democracy Centers, as well as the Federal Working Groups on Religiously Motivated Extremism (BAG RelEx) and exit work in Right Wing Extremism (BAG Ausstieg zum Einstieg). Additionally, advisory services focused on distancing and deradicalization in the context of religious extremism are part of the network of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). Furthermore, there are numerous exit programs in right-wing extremism, which, however, are not connected through such an advisory service. These working relationships and advocacy groups aim primarily to contribute to the development of quality standards and serve as platforms for continuing education and the exchange of experiences among their members.

Within the BAMF's advisory services, a training curriculum for professionals in radicalization prevention was developed, with the goal of eventually integrating it into university programs (El Difraou et al., 2021). Continuing education programs for professionals have been offered for several years, such as a model project integrating prevention content into the child and youth work concentration of the Bachelor's program in social work at the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University (LAG Mobile Jugendarbeit / Streetwork). Additionally, the University of Education in Heidelberg offers corresponding training programs (Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg). However, a fully established degree program for radicalization prevention, such as the master's program on right-wing extremism at the University of Marburg (Universität Marburg), has not yet emerged in the field of religiously motivated extremism.

Professionalization at the Individual Level

As mentioned earlier, the acquisition of skills based on professional performance standards is a central pillar of professionalization and professionalism (Mieg, 2003). For the field of prevention, this particularly means the necessary formulation of competence and performance profiles, alongside the establishment of specific (academic) training programs. This would also be a significant contribution to the professionalization of the field at an

institutional level. Despite the increasing development of radicalization prevention, there remains a lack of clear concepts regarding the required competency profiles. Much of the knowledge is gained through *learning by doing* and is acquired through continuing education and professional conferences.

The current state of research draws heavily on findings from the study of deradicalization processes. For instance, the 2013 *Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders* emphasized that the quality of deradicalization programs—particularly within the context of correctional facilities—depends heavily on the training of the professionals involved (GCTF, 2013). In 2017, the European Union's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) addressed the training of those working in radicalization prevention and deradicalization during a conference. A resulting working paper highlighted the need for a tailored training agenda for professionals but did not specify concrete theoretical training content. However, it emphasized the importance of "multi-agency cooperation, and multi-agency training programmes" (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017, p. 5) as key to good training.

Recently, Koehler and Fiebig (2019, p. 55) identified 33 core areas relevant to working in religiously motivated extremism through a comprehensive literature analysis, although most of these focus on deradicalization efforts. Additionally, the National Center for Crime Prevention (NZK) published *Evaluationskriterien für die Islamismusprävention* (Evaluation Criteria for Prevention of Islamism, EvIs) (Ullrich et al., 2019), offering a thorough overview of indicators that are particularly relevant to the field of what the author's call "Islamism prevention." The EvIs tool developed in this study aims to track the progress of participants in prevention programs and offers an initial reference point for developing a competency profile in radicalization prevention.

So far, efforts to define specific competence and performance profiles for universal, selective and indicated radicalization prevention are still in the early stages. The sector of deradicalization seems to have made more progress in developing these competency profiles, as it has drawn from existing research and practical experiences. A key challenge for the future is the establishment of clear, standardized training and competency requirements across all levels of prevention, ensuring that professionals are well-equipped to meet the demands of this critical and evolving field.

Methods in Radicalization Prevention

In addition to the institutional aspects of professionalization in a field of work, and the individual performance and competence profiles, methodization plays a central role in the efforts to professionalize any occupational field. For the professionalization of radicalization prevention, a method portfolio is needed that engages with, or evolves in interaction with, a (scientific) reflective process. As (Holthusen et al., 2011, p. 23) already argued, preventive work also requires substantiated strategies that can demonstrably prevent attitudes and behaviors, providing a methodological framework for the uncertainty described earlier.

Referring to the overview study by Kurtenbach and Schumilas (2021, p. 155) mentioned at the beginning of this article, it can be concluded that no specific prevention methodology appears to exist. Instead, the field of radicalization prevention mainly draws on methods from social work, pedagogy, and civic education. The claim that "prevention has been able to establish itself as a methodological orientation both in general thought and in professional discussions" (Autrata, 2010, p. 23, author's translation) cannot be affirmed for the field of radicalization prevention. Interestingly, there are positions in the prevention discourse in Germany suggesting that developing a specific prevention methodology is unnecessary, as the "classical toolkit of social work" (Döring et al., 2020, p. 28, author's translation) is seen as sufficient. However—and this is an important point, although it goes somewhat beyond the scope of this paper—even the methodological debate around prevention as a method in social work may be overestimated. Prevention lacks the conceptual depth of other social work methods, as already outlined. The reflection on prevention, which may be understood more as a meta-method or interpretative framework, should also be revisited in social work.

A further look at the study by Kurtenbach and Schumilas (2021, p. 154) reveals that out of 551 examined projects, 459 reported targeting "general population groups," while 302 projects primarily addressed professionals. A similar pattern emerges in the survey of project objectives or "intended impacts" (ibid., p. 152). Here, the goals of raising awareness, promoting tolerance, democracy, and intercultural competence dominate. More specific objectives related to the phenomenon of radicalization, such as the cessation of extremist activities, disengagement from ideology, and demobilization or distancing, are mentioned far less frequently (ibid., p. 153). As Oulad M´Hand and Nadar (2022, p. 5) noted concerning the

aforementioned study, nonspecific approaches seem to have become prevalent in radicalization prevention to avoid stigmatizing effects resulting from phenomenon-specific attributions. This aspect will be explored further in the following section, but it remains an important point to bear in mind.

For a professional theoretical analysis of this field of work, these findings are particularly relevant. As noted in the previous chapter, the methods of social work—such as multi-perspective casework, *functional equivalents*, as well as community work and neighborhood orientation—could indeed be applicable to radicalization prevention programs. This leads to a challenge, formulated here explicitly as a question:

> *How can professional prevention work be designed when its applied methods are indistinguishable, or only marginally different, from those of other professions—particularly social work—and when both the target group and intended impacts are formulated in nonspecific terms?*

The author acknowledges that this question and its underlying assumptions are subject to the limitations of the data. While the study by Kurtenbach and Schumilas (2021) provides a concise overview of the prevention landscape in Germany, a more thorough answer to the question of applied methods and professionalization efforts requires further empirical research (sell also Hafeneger & Ostwaldt, 2023).

5. Final Remarks and Outlook

Up to this point, two interconnected considerations have been presented. First, methods from social work that offer a specific added value for radicalization prevention were introduced. However, these methods have not yet been explicitly integrated into the methodological discourse on radicalization prevention because—at least according to current research—there is no well-developed methodological discourse within radicalization prevention. Such a discourse would be necessary to advance the professionalization of this field and to differentiate it from other fields of practice, such as social work. This differentiation is particularly challenging because a broad understanding of prevention blurs the distinction

between target groups and methods applied in prevention work and those used in social work. Consequently, many projects labeled as preventive work employ empowerment and other supportive methods, but these projects often fall under the logic of prevention when presented to funding bodies.

There are few concrete suggestions so far that satisfactorily answer the forementioned question. However, Hafen (2002) proposed a concept some time ago that deserves mention here. He suggested separating supportive programs from those that have a purely preventive focus. In this understanding, prevention would be anything explicitly directed against a specific phenomenon. For the framework of universal, selective, and indicated prevention applied in this article, this would imply the conceptual dissolution of universal prevention, which would instead be integrated into social work or other supportive initiatives, such as civic education. Thus, prevention projects would only include those with an explicit prevention-oriented logic. This does not imply that projects currently considered universally preventive should be abolished, but rather that they should be integrated into regular structures of social work.

Such an adjustment to the funding and project landscape would conceptually fulfill the prevention triad proposed by Caplan too, as primary prevention, as outlined, primarily has a supportive and promoting character. This approach could help to at least partially resolve the tension between social work and radicalization prevention. It might be worth considering limiting prevention work to projects that operate within a selective and indicated prevention logic, focusing on individuals who are at risk or already show early signs of radicalization. Here too, the competence of social workers in dealing with individuals exhibiting deviant behavior could be beneficial. These projects could support social workers with specialized knowledge, helping them address tendencies toward radicalization as part of their regular work.

For this to succeed—and this is a critical aspect—sufficient personnel resources within regular structures are essential to allow for flexible responses. These considerations lead to the suggestion of broadly funding regular structures so that resources can be freed up to integrate counseling and training services—particularly in the field of prevention—into their work. By narrowing the focus of funding for prevention projects while simultaneously expanding funding for regular structures of social work, this approach could contribute to the

professionalization of radicalization prevention. This would allow the field to be more clearly defined, initiate methodological discourse, and promote methodologically integrated work. At the same time, regular structures would be strengthened, supportive programs expanded, and freed from the constraints of a prevention-based logic. Ultimately, this would bring substantial benefits to both fields of practice.

6. Conclusion

This article, understood as an international contribution to the ongoing German debate, focused on the relationship between social work and radicalization prevention, with a particular emphasis on integrative methodological considerations. It was demonstrated that there is significant value in the structured integration of social work methods into radicalization prevention. However, this necessitates the reflection and development of an independent portfolio of methods for primary and secondary radicalization prevention. The professionalization pursued by stakeholders in this field should be accompanied by the development of professional standards and corresponding methods.

Moreover, it was shown that the relationship between social work and radicalization prevention in prevention practice is often characterized by a lack of differentiation, especially regarding the conceptual orientation of primary prevention projects. To address the tension between prevention logic on one side and supportive project approaches on the other, it may be beneficial to define prevention projects strictly as those with an explicit preventive logic. This approach would enable supportive projects to evolve independently, free from the restrictive preventive focus currently tied to project funding.

Consequently, the field of radicalization prevention could benefit from a more deliberate focus on methodological development and integration, fostering a professionalized environment with clear operational frameworks. The author is aware that such a proposal may, at first glance, seem detached from practical prevention efforts and appear overly theoretical. The limiting factor here is certainly the consideration of sponsoring and funding structures. Nevertheless, the author believes these considerations are necessary, as the field of radicalization prevention can only achieve professionalization and develop a clear identity if

these transformation processes are thought through long-term, addressing both content-related and structural development.

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