



The British  
Psychological Society  
Division of Forensic Psychology

# Ethical guidelines for applied psychological practice in the field of extremism, violent extremism and terrorism



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This document was created by the British Psychological Society, Division of Forensic Psychology (DFP) Extremism working party, facilitated by Nicola Bowes and Debbie McQueirns. The authors of the document are: Zainab Al-Attar, Jackie Bates-Gaston, Christopher Dean and Monica Lloyd. They are international experts in this area and we gratefully thank them for sharing their knowledge and experience.

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## Background

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These guidelines are primarily intended for practitioner psychologists involved in clinical work related to extremism, violent extremism or terrorism, either in the prevention of a first terrorist offence, or working with those after the event to prevent re-offending. Within a pluralist society, working with those whose motivation is ostensibly political carries particular ethical challenges which these guidelines seek to clarify. Aspects of these guidelines may also be helpful to research psychologists.

The primary guidance for the work of practitioner psychologists is the *BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct*. This document is intended to provide guidance on how this Code can be implemented to applied psychological practice in the field of extremism, violent extremism and terrorism. To assist with this, ethical considerations are described under the four key ethical principles of the *BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct* (Respect, Responsibility, Competence and Integrity) and the *HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics*. This document should be read in conjunction with these two documents and the *BPS Practice Guidelines*.

Inevitably there is a degree of repetition in this document. The themes that repeat broadly concern the importance of retaining objectivity and managing attitudinal and cultural bias, and the counter-extremist impact of modelling respectful attitudes and behaviour, separating the person from the crime. Where these themes repeat they are cross-referenced to the paragraph where they were first mentioned.

**NOTE:** *There continues to be significant debate about conceptual definitions in this field. Definitions adopted in this document are not necessarily reflective of the diversity of definitions proposed or used by practitioner or research psychologists in this field. Given that the majority of practitioner psychologists have a legal duty – the Prevent duty – to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism, terminology has been used which is consistent with that adopted in this legislation (see glossary). This is to ensure that professional practice aligns with legal obligation although it is acknowledged that these do not solely determine professional practice.*

# 1. Respect for the dignity of persons and peoples

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**Statement of values:** Psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over persons and peoples (and) with particular regard to people's rights.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Privacy and confidentiality
- Respect
- Communities and shared values within them
- Impacts on the broader environment – living or otherwise
- Issues of power
- Consent
- Self-determination
- The importance of compassionate care, including empathy, sympathy, generosity, openness, distress tolerance, commitment and courage.

The *HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to promote and protect the interests of service users and carers – including treating service users and carers with respect, making sure consent is provided and challenging discrimination – and respecting confidentiality, including using and disclosing information appropriately.

## **Specific ethical considerations include:**

- 1.1 Practitioner psychologists should familiarise themselves with the terms extremism, violent extremism and terrorism, as defined by relevant policy and legislation. A glossary is provided at the end of this document to assist with the current definitions in this field and their provenance. These labels can be contentious. In practice it is important to retain a professional focus on the illegal and/or harmful behaviour associated with these terms and its assessment and management, avoiding where possible labels that may be experienced as stigmatising.
- 1.2 Practitioner psychologists working face to face with those who have committed terrorist offences need to be aware of the limits of privacy and confidentiality they can extend, as their reports may be accessed by agencies with a duty to protect national security. These limits of confidentiality and privacy should be made clear to stakeholders and to clients before face-to-face work begins, and a clear and unambiguous written and dated consent form may be completed that takes into account the client's understanding of consent, and potential need for an interpreter if required. Consent is not required if the practitioner psychologist is asked for an opinion that does not involve first-hand direct contact with the client. Practitioner psychologists also need to work consistently with safeguarding, disclosure and informing procedures required by law or by virtue of their employment.

- 1.3 As with all offenders, seeking informed and explicit consent for those charged with or convicted of a terrorist offence is important. The same consent procedures are applicable to this work in accordance with the principles and standards of the *BPS Practice Guidelines* and *HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics*. Written consent from the offender will be required to access information from certain other agencies (e.g. National Health Service), and practitioner psychologists should clarify the limitations of any information used to inform their assessment.
- 1.4 Practitioner psychologists may be asked to conduct work with those who have not been arrested, convicted or sentenced for terrorism or terrorism-related offences but who are under suspicion. In these circumstances, practitioner psychologists should be sensitive to an individual's legal status and seek consent to interview them; and encourage their clients' engagement and be open about the nature of their role and the potential benefits of engagement both for the individual and for the safety of the general public. They should also acknowledge the limitations of predictions of harm based on pre-criminal behaviour.
- 1.5 Every individual has a right to hold and express their own beliefs within the limits of the law, and practitioner psychologists may be hesitant about challenging these in the context of terrorist offending. However, challenging beliefs and attitudes, where these are in themselves significant to offending behaviour based on case formulation on an individual, is central in forensic psychological practice, and the same applies to terrorism offences. Where beliefs are challenged, practitioner psychologists should have a very clear rationale for their actions and share this in a sensitive and respectful way that invites clients to consider, address or change their beliefs in the context of a collaborative and therapeutic dialogue.
- 1.6 In working with extremism, practitioner psychologists should be mindful about how their practice may be viewed by the communities from which their clients are drawn and avoid stigmatising individuals or their communities and seek instead to build understanding and respect and encourage inclusion.
- 1.7 Practitioner psychologists may be exposed to societal pressures and fears surrounding the terrorist threat. Under these circumstances, psychological processes and emotions, such as unconscious bias, prejudice or fear may impact on their professional practice. Psychologists have a duty to remain mindful of how such circumstances and processes may impact on the objectivity of their practice. Helpful responses to this potential include: regularly reflecting (e.g. in supervision) on how events, like any high-profile crime, may impact on personal thoughts, feelings and actions; questioning whether it is appropriate to engage in certain practices if their objectivity is potentially compromised; or through furthering knowledge and understanding about how to manage the impact of processes such as unconscious bias.
- 1.8 As with other offences, practitioner psychologists have a duty to separate the person from the crime and maintain respect for the offender. This is the basis for a trusting and meaningful engagement that can promote and encourage change. A relationship based on trust, respect, understanding and empathy with a professional with different beliefs may provide a unique opportunity to alter any hostile perceptions of those who have taken up an oppositional position. Conducting therapeutic work in a spirit of openness,

empathy and compassion can help to counter the attitudes associated with violent extremism, such as dogmatism, righteousness and the dehumanisation of others.

1.9 It takes courage to embark on work which may be without precedent, maybe the subject of intense and sometimes hostile scrutiny, and can make a vital and distinct contribution. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the evidence base, psychologists apply relevant psychological methodology (e.g. individual and collaborative case formulation) where they believe this will be of clinical or therapeutic benefit to the client. Practitioner psychologists are trained to undertake multi-level analysis of complex behaviour (e.g. individual, social and political/cultural), and understand the psycho-social dynamics of group behaviour, and often apply this knowledge to complex presentations. Therefore, the lack of an established knowledge base in the field of terrorism should not in itself discourage efforts to build one.

## 2. Competence

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**Statement of values:** Psychologists value their responsibilities to persons and peoples, and to the profession and science of psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contributions to society.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Possession or otherwise of appropriate skills and care needed to serve persons and peoples
- The limits of their competence and the potential need to refer on to another professional
- Advances in the evidence base
- The need to maintain technical and practical skills
- Matters of professional ethics and decision-making
- Any limitations to their competence to practise taking mitigating actions as necessary.

The *HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to work within the limits of their knowledge and skills – including keeping within their scope of practice and maintaining and developing their knowledge and skills, and to delegate appropriately.

**Specific ethical considerations include:**

- 2.1 Practitioner psychologists working in this area need to be familiar with key literature on the psychology of terrorism and/or violent extremism which is developing rapidly as knowledge and understanding grows. However, there are other sources of knowledge from the political science and sociological literature, and from non-governmental organisations and personal accounts. Psychologists should be open to using information from such sources to inform their work, but also be explicit about their limitations and their competence to interpret these from their own cultural perspective.
- 2.2 Practitioner psychologists need to remain aware of and keep updated about government policy in the field of counter-terrorism and extremism and their legal and professional duties in relation to this.

- 2.3 Practitioner psychologists working in this area should complete the appropriate training for using specific products designed for assessment or intervention with individuals who have committed terrorist offences. They should seek to use those specifically developed for this purpose that are informed by psychological theory, principles and evidence and keep up to date with the literature on developments with such tools or approaches.
- 2.4 When acting as professional or expert witnesses, practitioner psychologists must clearly stipulate the limits of their expertise in this field, and where their access to information is limited by its sensitivity, this needs to be clearly stated. Limitations may also take the form of a lack of understanding of the cultural, political, linguistic or theological aspects of the case.
- 2.5 Extremist violence and terrorism touches on other fields of practice such as history, socio-economics, politics and religion. Without aiming to become experts in these areas, practitioner psychologists are required to take action to close gaps in their knowledge that may detract from their ability to fully understand the context of their client's offending or radicalisation pathway. They must also ensure that they have supervision in place from someone who has the necessary knowledge, experience and skills to assist them in this.
- 2.6 The media calls on many 'experts' from different disciplines, organisations and agencies for comment on terrorist attacks or for insights into the motivations and character of those involved, including academics, 'experts through experience' or 'formers'. Practitioner psychologists should only comment if they are competent experts who are qualified, (Registered Psychologists with the HCPC) AND include: (1) those with significant experience; (2) those that have developed psychologically informed approaches, tools or guidelines with national or international reach; (3) those with experience of working directly with this client group; (4) those with media training and experience of presenting to their peers.
- 2.7 Work in this field may be subject to particular scrutiny by other agencies, the media or members of the public. All work should be conducted and reported with due consideration for the possibility that it could become the subject of significant public interest.
- 2.8 Practitioner psychologists should only provide opinion on issues directly related to their experience and expertise. Before agreeing to any media engagements, the intended benefits of their contribution – such as informing the wider debate – should be weighed against the potential drawbacks. These include undermining their work with individuals or trusted bodies, or risking the reputation of their profession if contributions are untimely, inappropriate or could be misconstrued.
- 2.9 Practitioner psychologists should be aware of and use as appropriate national and international resources and networks to inform and support their work and ensure that the resources that they use are the most current, in particular in relation to legislation. This is an area where considerable new learning is emerging and policies, strategies and guidance documents are being regularly updated to reflect this. Appendix 1 provides some key resources that are current at the time of the publication of these guidelines, but this would not be considered exhaustive.

### 3. Responsibility

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**Statement of values:** Psychologists value their responsibilities to persons and peoples, to the general public, and to the profession and science of psychology, including the avoidance of harm and the prevention of misuse or abuse of their contribution to society.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Professional accountability
- Responsible use of their knowledge and skills
- Caution in making knowledge claims
- Respect for the welfare of humans, non-humans and the living world
- Potentially competing duties.

The *HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to communicate appropriately and effectively – with service users and carers, colleagues and when using social media and networking sites – to identify, reduce and manage risk, to report and follow-up concerns about safety and to consider their own health.

**Specific ethical considerations include:**

- 3.1 Practitioner psychologists need to be aware of how their own attitudes and behaviour may impact on clients. A strong awareness of and ability to reflect upon the influence and any implications of their own political, moral and religious views and attitudes will help to ensure that their objectivity is maintained and clients' extreme views are not reinforced. (cf: 1.7)
- 3.2 Practitioner psychologists have a responsibility to contribute their knowledge, skills and values in this field where this has the potential to benefit both individuals in need and wider society. Such contributions include designing, developing and implementing assessments and interventions, and growing an evidence base from empirical beginnings, informed by psychological analysis, standards and values, where alternatives would arguably be less evidence-based, systematic, effective or defensible.
- 3.3 Practitioner psychologists have a responsibility to remain ethically aware in this area of work. Where a psychologist feels that an employer or commissioner requires them to work for purposes that are not consistent with their code of conduct, it is their responsibility to identify this and adhere to their code of conduct. They have a duty to consult with their professional peers if they are in any doubt about what constitutes appropriate professional practice.
- 3.4 Psychological practice in the field of violent extremism remains in its infancy. Although an evidence base is building there is, to date, limited rigorous empirical data to reference in supporting knowledge claims in this field. Practitioner psychologists should therefore avoid making dogmatic, definitive and unsubstantiated statements of 'truth', and be particularly mindful of how they communicate their knowledge, acknowledging its limitations and welcoming debate and critiquing of their claims.

- 3.5 Working in this field may bring particular stresses and pressures from the sometimes competing expectations of different agencies, the interpersonal challenge of some clients and issues around the safety and security of both themselves and their clients. Practitioner psychologists must ensure they have regular supervision and peer support to build and maintain their resilience to such stresses and to retain a professional sounding board to provide a perspective on their practice. (cf:1.7; 3.1)
- 3.6 Practitioner psychologists need to be especially vigilant regarding their own safety and security (and those of family members) when working directly with individuals known to be associated with violent extremist groups. Such individuals or groups may actively seek to disrupt this work through intimidation, threats or acts of violence. There should be clear procedures in place prior to any work commencing to prevent or manage such incidents. These may include being alert to clients seeking personal details and being cautious in sharing personal details on social media. Adherence to the Society's *Supplementary Guidance on the use of Social Media* would be appropriate as a starting point.
- 3.7 Practitioner psychologists also need to be particularly sensitive to and vigilant about the safety and welfare of clients, especially those seeking to disengage from a violent extremist group. Such actions may put clients at considerable risk from those wishing to prevent this. Practitioner psychologists have a duty to monitor their clients' safety throughout the period of any assessment or intervention, checking regularly about such risks or other consequences such as social exclusion and/or emotional distress.

## 4 Integrity

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**Statement of values:** Psychologists value honesty, probity, accuracy, clarity and fairness in their interactions with all persons and peoples, and seek to promote integrity in all facets of their scientific and professional endeavours.

In applying these values, practitioner psychologists should consider:

- Honesty, openness and candour
- Accurate unbiased representation
- Fairness
- Avoidance of exploitation and conflicts of interest (including self-interest)
- Maintaining personal and professional boundaries
- Addressing misconduct.

The *HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* also outline the need for practitioner psychologists to maintain appropriate boundaries, to be open when things go wrong – including being open with service users and carers and in dealing with concerns and complaints – to be honest and trustworthy in personal and professional behaviour as well as to keep accurate and secure records.

### **Specific ethical considerations include:**

- 4.1 Professional values such as openness, honesty and candour may sit in stark contrast to those adopted by violent extremist groups. This puts practitioner psychologists in a potentially influential position in terms of modelling a more inclusive and respectful way of relating to others, if barriers to communication can be overcome. (cf: 4.1)
- 4.2 A significant challenge for practitioner psychologists undertaking this work is establishing a working relationship with those whose offending has been motivated by antagonism to government(s). Practitioner psychologists should not seek to hide the fact that their work may be undertaken on behalf of the state but strive to create a safe and respectful space in which a constructive relationship can be nurtured. (cf: 1.6)
- 4.3 Being commissioned and paid by government can be perceived negatively by individuals or the groups they are associated with and lead to a tendency for those individuals to discredit and undermine work in this field. Practitioner psychologists need to be clear about their position, and be prepared to articulate this before embarking on face-to-face work with those who may challenge their role. Communicating their professional values, being explicit about their agenda, showing compassion for their clients' challenges and setbacks and taking a pragmatic approach can all be effective ways forward.
- 4.4 Practitioner psychologists may be more sympathetic to certain causes and less sympathetic to others. This may operate outside of their awareness and hinder their ability to work in an even-handed way across the spectrum of terrorist offending. It is helpful to remember that the target for intervention is the harmful and/or illegal behaviour and not an individual's general belief system. Practitioner psychologists should avoid working with clients whose causes they are particularly sympathetic or unsympathetic towards or ensure that any attitudinal biases are monitored in supervision and mitigated.
- 4.5 Practitioner psychologists conducting face-to-face work with individuals should appreciate that one of the most powerful tools they have is their ability to demonstrate their own humanity and respect for the welfare of others, including their clients. This is important regardless of their crime, race, age, gender, religion, nationality or any other distinguishing feature. Such an approach has the potential to encourage clients to reconsider how they themselves may categorise others in ways that justify harm. (cf: 1.7; 3.1; 3.5)
- 4.6 Terrorist attacks are designed to achieve an impact on society far beyond their immediate victims, amplified by widespread reporting in TV and newspapers and through the debates that follow in social media. Practitioner psychologists are not immune from this impact and need to recognise the potential risk aversion this may induce in the context of risk assessment. It is important to retain an objective and proportionate approach to this task. When practitioner psychologists are part of a community that has been the target of a terrorist attack they need to be aware of the potential impact of this on their attitudes towards clients who have carried out such attacks. This is not uncommon with other forensic clients who may have targeted victims with whom practitioner psychologists may identify, and supervision and support can help to maintain objectivity. Not all will be comfortable working with those

convicted of terrorist offences, and those who find it difficult should be able to avoid it without censure. (cf: 1.7; 3.1; 3.5; 4.4)

- 4.7 The professional background of practitioner psychologists allows them to take a distinct and influential role with their partners and stakeholders in this field. Practitioner psychologists' standards and values can influence the work of others to ensure that policies and procedures remain fair, proportionate and effective. They ought not be afraid to express their values of integrity and probity and challenge other stakeholders whose actions may be undermining of their colleagues or amount to misconduct or impropriety.
- 4.8 This field, arguably more than most, poses complex challenges that make the balance of responsibility (e.g. to reduce harm) and integrity (e.g. openness) a highly nuanced one. There may be some instances where practitioner psychologists are privy to highly sensitive information about risk that they are not able to disclose to the client but upon which they are duty-bound to base their judgements. Some may be subject to heightened security vetting and be responsible for sensitive information that is not in their gift to disclose to their clients. In these circumstances practitioner psychologists have a duty to balance a complexity of responsibilities: to their clients, to the public/national security, and to their employer/organisation. Practitioner psychologists should therefore familiarise themselves with the complexity of their duties, roles and potential consequences of their actions, and identify an ethical balance that supports their practice and is commensurate with their professional code of conduct.

## Glossary

All definitions are taken from HM Government's Prevent Duty Guidance (HM Government, Revised Prevent Duty Guidance: for England and Wales. Revised 16 July 2015. London: HM Stationery Office. ISBN: 978-1-78246-793) unless otherwise specified.

**Client:** A person with whom a psychologist interacts on a professional basis (British Psychological Society *Practice Guidelines*, 2017).

**Extremism:** The vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also include in our definition of extremism calls for the death of members of our armed forces, whether in this country or overseas. (Revised Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales, originally issued on 12 March 2015 and revised on 16 July 2015, paragraph 7).

**Extremist offenders:** Are those whose offences are committed in association with a group, cause or ideology that propagates extremist views and actions and justifies the use of violence and other illegal activities in pursuit of its objectives. (Extremist Offenders Working Group, NOMS 2007)

**Radicalisation:** The process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups.

**Violent extremism:** Extremism accompanied by violence.

**Terrorism:** An action that endangers or causes serious violence to a person/people; causes serious damage to property; or seriously interferes or disrupts an electronic system. The use of threat must be designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public and is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause (Terrorism Act 2000).

**Terrorist-related offences:** Are those (such as murder) which are not offences in terrorist legislation, but which are judged by HMPPS to have been committed in relation to terrorism.

## Appendix 1: Suggested resources

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The following links and documents provide context for good practice, professional duties and responsibilities. Most of these are regularly updated and the psychologist should ensure that they are aware of the most recent guidance or policy statement.

**The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN):** Focuses on supporting practitioners in countering violent extremism across education, health, prisons and probation, families and communities, law enforcement and victims across European nations.

[https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en)

**The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalisation to Violence in Prisons (2016):** provides practical guidelines for practitioners working in prisons and probation settings on the management of violent extremist offenders and radicalisation to violence. This guidance is targeted at all nations and jurisdictions.

[www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal\\_justice/Handbook\\_on\\_VEPs.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/Handbook_on_VEPs.pdf)

**The Council of Europe Handbook for Prison and Probation Services Regarding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism (2016):** Provides practical guidelines for practitioners working in prison and probation settings on the management of violent extremist offenders and radicalisation to violence. This guidance is primarily targeted at member states of the European Council but also other jurisdictions.

<https://rm.coe.int/16806f9aa9>

**Additional Guidance on the Role of Psychologists/Psychology in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs (Hedayah and Internation Centre for Counter-terrorism (ICCT)) (2013):** Provides guidance on the specific role of psychologists in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for violent extremist offenders.

[www.icct.nl/download/file/Hedayah-ICCT%20Psychology%20Good%20Practices.pdf](http://www.icct.nl/download/file/Hedayah-ICCT%20Psychology%20Good%20Practices.pdf)

**HM Government Counter Extremism Strategy (2015):** Provides an overview of the UK government's strategy to tackle extremism and terrorism, including the roles and responsibilities of different sectors in society.

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/470088/51859\\_Cm9148\\_Accessible.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf)

**HM Government Prevent Duty Guidance (2016):** Provides guidance for specified authorities in England and Wales on the duty in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance#history](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance#history)

**HM Government Preventing extremism in schools and children's services (2015):** Provides guidance on what the government is doing to prevent extremism in the education and children's services sectors.

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-extremism-in-schools-and-childrens-services](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-extremism-in-schools-and-childrens-services)



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