
Supporting disengagement and reintegration: qualitative outcomes from a custody-based counter radicalisation intervention

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Abstract

The rehabilitation and reintegration of radicalised offenders has become an increasing area of concern internationally. This has led to investment in interventions aimed at the de-radicalisation and disengagement of terrorist/radicalised inmates. However, little is known about the delivery, content and outcomes from such formal interventions. This paper fills this gap by providing results from an evaluation of a disengagement program in the Australian state of New South Wales called PRISM. The Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) is an intervention delivered by Corrective Services NSW aimed at prison inmates who have a conviction for terrorism or have been identified as at risk of radicalisation. Data reported here is part of a larger second evaluation of PRISM and draws on interviews with PRISM staff (N=10) and PRISM clients (i.e., inmates and parolees; N=12). The paper examines outcomes from the intervention in relation to the benefits PRISM clients derived from participation and explores different qualitative dimensions of client progress. The responses of PRISM clients are compared against the observations of program staff who work with these individuals. Results provide lessons for how formal interventions can facilitate disengagement and reintegration. Broader lessons for the delivery and evaluation of CVE interventions are identified. Limitations in the study design are also acknowledged.

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Introduction

The aim of rehabilitating convicted terrorist and radicalised prisoners and preparing them for release into the community has become a key government priority internationally (Cherney 2018b; Koehler 2017b; Schuurman, & Bakker 2016; Silke & Veldhuis 2017). For example, in

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the U.K. there is increasing concern about the number of convicted terrorists approaching release in the coming years (Grierson & Barr 2018). As a response, the U.K. counter-terrorism strategy CONTEST was renewed in 2018 and included a new emphasis on desistance and disengagement aimed at individuals serving terrorist-related sentences (HM Government 2018).

However, little evidence currently exists to support claims that formal interventions aimed at the rehabilitation and disengagement of terrorist offenders are effective in promoting desistance from violence extremism (El-Said 2015; Feddes & Gallucci 2015; Koehler 2017a, 2017b; LaFree & Freilich 2018; Neumann 2010). A number of studies have shed light on the processes of disengagement and desistance (Chernov-Hwang 2018; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2018). However, when it comes to the role of formal interventions in these processes, the evidence is more limited. It has been pointed out, though, that the evaluation of interventions targeting convicted terrorists and those identified as at-risk of radicalisation is not straightforward (Cherney 2018a; Chubb and Tapley 2018; Koehler 2017a; Marsden 2015). Added challenges include identifying what would constitute valid indicators of success (Baruch et al 2018; Cherney 2018a; Horgan & Braddock 2010; Koehler 2017a, 2017b; Marsden 2015). Operationalising such indicators is all the more difficult given there are few studies on what benefits and outcomes are derived from formal interventions to counter violent extremism (CVE).

The aim of this paper is to fill this gap in current knowledge by examining qualitative outcomes from an in-custody-based program called the Proactive Integrated Support Model - PRISM – intervention in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). The intervention is delivered to convicted terrorists and inmates demonstrating extremist behaviours and associations. Drawing on interviews with PRISM clients and program staff, the paper examines outcomes from the intervention in relation to the benefits PRISM clients derived from participation and explores different qualitative dimensions of client progress. The responses of PRISM clients are compared against the observations of program staff who work with these individuals. Such an analysis can help to highlight whether perceived expectations

and benefits overlap or diverge between staff and clients in order to gauge how well the intervention achieves its aims in the eyes of those who deliver and receive it.²

It needs to be acknowledged that there are limitations with the study design and data sources. It is not claimed here that the evidence presented in this paper indicates that the PRISM intervention causes disengagement or desistance. The data presented is part of a second evaluation of PRISM. Results from an interim assessment of PRISM has been reported elsewhere (Cherney 2018a). The current paper draws on new data from PRISM staff and clients, with the measurement of quantitative outcomes relating to indicators of disengagement the subject of a separate publication (Cherney & Belton, forthcoming).

So as to situate the current study in the literature, relevant research is first reviewed on the disengagement of individuals who have radicalised to extremism. This includes examining definitional issues, the conditionality of disengagement, features of formal interventions and their role in supporting disengagement, desistance and reintegration. The PRISM intervention is then outlined, with the study design and interview sample described. Results are then divided between data collected from interviews with PRISM clients and staff. Self-reported benefits from participation as well as observations of client change are explored. The paper ends by considering the implications of the results for the design and evaluation of interventions targeting radicalised offenders.

What the literature highlights about helping to support disengagement

There is no uniform or agreed-upon definition within the terrorism literature surrounding the term disengagement. Often, it is contrasted with de-radicalisation, which is normally understood as entailing a form of cognitive change, whereas disengagement is regarded as referring to a behavioural shift away from violent tactics (Clubb 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen 2018; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). This distinction has informed arguments in the literature that it is possible you can get one without the other, in that an individual can be disengaged

² I would like to acknowledge one of the reviewers for highlighting this point.

from violent extremism (e.g., due to aging out or a loss of faith in violent tactics) but still be radicalised in the sense of continuing to believe in the underlying ideological cause (Chernov-Hwang 2018; Clubb 2015). This recognition has also influenced arguments around the role and goals of formal interventions targeting violent extremists. For example, Silke (2011) has argued that disengagement is a more realistic goal of interventions targeting convicted terrorists given there are serious questions about whether their radical beliefs can be changed. While a valid argument, the process of disengagement does require some type of cognitive change in which violence is no longer understood or regarded as a viable option. Also, it is potentially likely that over time a person may become de-radicalised as a result of their disengagement, which can be facilitated through interventions that help to generate desistance from violent extremism. Such understanding is partial given there is little literature that explores the types of support provided to intervention clients, whether they are seen as beneficial and the levels of client progress. As argued by Chubb and Tapley (2018), a wider understanding of program efficacy is needed to fully understand the outcomes resulting from interventions targeting violent extremists. The current paper sets out to explore this issue in the context of interviews with PRISM clients and staff. In this paper, the term disengagement is adopted given this is how the aims of PRISM are described to clients and how staff conceptualise their work with inmates (Cherney 2018a). Also, the term disengagement captures a broader range of change that can help generate desistance (and hence encompasses different forms of support) beyond cognitive shifts. However, as argued above this should not discount the possibility that interventions can help moderate ideological beliefs.

Bélanger (2017) makes a useful distinction between what he terms as explicit and implicit de-radicalisation, arguing that in order for interventions to generate disengagement, programs have to incorporate both elements. Explicit de-radicalisation aims to delegitimise the use of violence by tackling underlying ideological rationalisations. For jihadists, this can involve theological debates with Muslim scholars (i.e., Imams). Such an approach does form part of a number of programs internationally (El-Said 2015; Koehler 2017b). On the other hand, implicit de-radicalisation includes attempts to offer alternative options for achieving

meaning and purpose, as a way of diverting individuals away from radicalised pathways and milieus. This can include such activities as family counselling, vocational education, art therapy and meditation (Bélanger 2017, p.g., 124). Currently, however, we know little about the content of CVE interventions and how these different features are operationalised in practice (Koehler 2017a). As argued by Koehler (2017a), this is relevant to the identification of program standards, best practice and staff training. Intervention content and delivery will be explored further below when examining PRISM.

A number of scholars have pointed out, though, that disengagement is largely conditional, influenced by a range of factors (e.g., Chernov-Hwang 2018; Chubb & Tapley 2018; Ferguson, McDaid & McAuley 2018; Marsden 2017) relating to idiosyncratic circumstances (e.g., psychological functioning or age) and external conditions (e.g., political and community contexts and institutional treatment of radicalised individuals). The same applies to arguments relating to the reintegration of radicalised offenders following their release from prison. The conditionality argument draws attention to the fact that formal interventions can only hope to facilitate client change by addressing a range of needs. This can also be influenced by whether clients perceive the support they are provided as worthwhile (Cherney 2018a). This latter issue is particularly important given that convicted terrorists can be incarcerated for long periods of time and can be detained in highly secure environments. Hence, they may be suspicious, resistant and hostile to any support offered. The implication is that interventions can potentially make a difference to disengagement and reintegration, but other reasons or factors can also play a role. This requires an exploration of other less explicit program outcomes that at first sight may not be regarded as directly related to disengagement and reintegration, but may help set up the conditions under which they can occur.

The perspectives discussed above on definitional issues relating to de-radicalisation and disengagement, the distinction between explicit and implicit de-radicalisation, and the conditionality of individual change, are relevant to one another in relation to the design and evaluation of CVE interventions. For example, how one conceptualises program aims will

determine the emphasis placed on explicit and implicit de-radicalisation, thus determining the range of needs that will be addressed. However, these responses may or may not facilitate disengagement and reintegration owing to other factors at play. Tackling these needs is the link between program aims and outcomes. The issue, though, is that little is currently known about the types of needs that programs set out to address and how clients respond to those supports (however, see Bélanger 2017; Cherney 2018a; Chernov-Hwang 2018; El-Said 2015; Koehler 2017b). The latter has been empirically understudied given the lack of primary research that involves accessing intervention clients. The current study sets out to address this gap by examining the benefits PRISM clients derived from participation in the intervention. Research indicates such benefits can include psychological support, encouraging offence insights, job and educational assistance, family reconciliation and promoting alternative social identities (Chernov-Hwang 2018; El-Said 2015; Koehler 2017b; Marsden 2017; Webber et al 2018).

The PRISM Intervention

Beginning in February 2016 and initially operating as a pilot intervention, PRISM is aimed at prison inmates in the NSW correctional system who have a conviction for terrorism, or have been identified as at-risk of radicalisation due to demonstrating extremist views and/or associations. At the time of writing, there were 31 inmates in the NSW prison system specifically classified as terrorist detainees.³ NSW has the highest number of convicted terrorists in Australia compared to any other Australian state (Cherney 2018b).

³ This is specifically as of 24-9-2018, which includes sentenced and un-sentenced offenders. This number does not include inmates who have been identified through police and correctional intelligence as presenting a radicalisation risk due to their associates or behaviour in prison. These exact numbers cannot be provided owing to the sensitivity of such information. Inmates charged for terrorism-related offences in NSW are classified as AA inmates. Classification AA refers to the category of inmates who, in the opinion of the NSW Corrections Commissioner, represent a special risk to national security (for example, because of a perceived risk that they may engage in, or incite other persons to engage in, terrorist activities) and should at all times be confined in special facilities within a secure physical barrier that includes towers or electronic surveillance equipment (see Corrective Services NSW 2015, p.g., 4).

PRISM is currently the only dedicated custody-based intervention aimed at violent extremists and radicalised offenders in Australia. It is a voluntary program delivered by a team of psychologists who work in partnership with a religious support officer (RSO), Services and Programs Officers (SAPOs)⁴, allied health professionals and other agencies identified for involvement in an individual's case assessment and intervention plan. Referrals into the program come from a variety of sources, such as the Correctional Intelligence Group,⁵ correctional centre psychologists or correctional centre governors. Inmates can also self-refer into the program. Once consent is obtained from an inmate, a risk and needs assessment is undertaken that informs the development of an individual's treatment plan/goals. Consent is also provided for members of the PRISM team to contact family members and community supports. PRISM does not operate like a traditional correctional intervention that has set modules. It is a support service that aims to address the psychological, social, theological and ideological needs of radicalised offenders. The primary objective is to redirect clients away from extremism (i.e., facilitate disengagement) and help them to transition out of custody (i.e., assist in their reintegration). This is achieved through individually tailored intervention plans which means that specific intervention goals can vary across clients (Cherney & Belton, forthcoming).

Method and Data

The data reported in this paper is part of a second evaluation of PRISM and draws on interviews conducted between May and June 2018 with past and current PRISM clients, as well as staff who engage these clients and work with them on their intervention goals.⁶ The

⁴ Services and Programs Officers work with offenders in custody to identify relevant services and programs.

⁵ The Correctional Intelligence Group (CIG) gathers, coordinates, analyses and disseminates intelligence throughout the custodial and community-based correctional system in NSW.

⁶ For this second evaluation of PRISM, a total of 38 interviews were conducted, which included: interviews with previous and current PRISM staff; personnel within and external to CSNSW connected to the PRISM intervention (e.g., Senior Managers, Correctional Intelligence Group, Community Corrections); interviews with offenders who had or were currently participating in the PRISM intervention, including those in custodial placements and on parole. Case notes for 15 PRISM clients were also accessed including risk and needs

author is not involved in the delivery of the program, nor was he involved in its original design. The interview sample includes previous and current PRISM staff members comprising ten interviewees that included PRISM psychologists, senior program managers, religious support officers/Muslim Chaplains and Service and Program Officers. A total of twelve previous and current PRISM clients were also interviewed, which comprised eleven males and one female. Six of these respondents were still in custody and six had been released into the community on parole. The majority of the clients interviewed were Muslim (N=11), while one male was a white supremacist. Five of the six inmates interviewed were in prison for terrorism-related offences, while the remaining seven respondents (i.e., one inmate and the six parolees) had committed non-terrorism related offences (e.g., armed robbery) but had been identified as at-risk of radicalisation due to their associates or behaviour in prison. Levels of participation in PRISM across the client interview sample varied in length from some who had two to four engagements, to clients who had been engaged in the intervention for up to two years. At the time of completing this research, a total of eighteen individuals (including current and previous clients) had participated in the PRISM intervention.

Written consent was obtained from all the interviewees, with the research receiving ethical clearance through the University of Queensland Research Ethics Committee and the Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW) research committee. A plain language statement explaining the research was provided to all participations outlining processes of consent and maintaining confidentiality. Interviews with PRISM staff occurred at their nominated places of work. Interviews with parolees who had participated in PRISM occurred at the Community Corrections office to which they reported. Interviews with inmates were conducted in a non-monitored secure interview room at the correctional centre in which they were housed. All interviews with parolees and inmates were completed face-to-face. No other third party was present during these interviews. Subject to consent interviews with PRISM

assessments. The case notes were quantitatively coded for indicators of client change relating to disengagement. Also, client progress was assessed across Barelle's (2015) dimensions of pro-integration using triangulation techniques that quantitatively coded for client change across staff and client interviews, progress reports and client case notes.

staff were audio-recorded. Interviews with PRISM clients were not audio-recorded. Participants were recruited through the assistance of CSNSW and the NSW Ombudsman. Potential interviewees were identified and then introductions were facilitated by these agencies, with the author explaining the aims of the research and eliciting consent from the interviewees.

Interviews with PRISM staff canvassed a range of topics relating to the design and implementation of the intervention, but also covered the engagement of PRISM clients, their intervention goals and observations relating to their progress and what changes or setbacks they had observed. PRISM staff were asked to identify significant milestones for particular clients. Interviews with PRISM clients covered a range of topics, including, for example, issues related to their offending, their ideological beliefs, their reasons for consenting to participate in the program, the content and quality of engagement with PRISM staff, the development of their intervention plan, their concerns about participation and what they gained, and if they identified certain supports and intervention components as worthwhile, or useless, and why. Interviews ranged in length from anywhere between one hour to up to two hours. For five of the offenders, it was the second time the author had interviewed them.

The qualitative interview data was coded by the author based on thematic analysis using NVivo 12. Due to the sensitivity of the information, the author was the only researcher to code the data. Hence, no test for inter-coder reliability could be conducted, which should be noted as a research limitation. However, every effort was made to verify particular examples, topics or issues across two or more interviewees so as to cross-check their validity. This, though, was not always possible; owing to their operational experience or particular situational/organisational position and background, some interviewees had intimate knowledge of certain topics, issues or cases that other interviewees lacked.

The interview data does reflect an inherently subjective and personal experience, which can raise questions about its accuracy. The PRISM client sample size is small and there is always the risk of social desirability in the answers they provide. There is also a risk that interviewing clients who were still participating in the intervention risked distorting the

intervention outcomes rather than waiting until they had completed the program. It is hard to identify if this was the case and given the intervention does not have a set number of modules, identifying the optimum time to conduct an interview becomes challenging and was dictated by the availability of PRISM clients who could be interviewed and their willingness to participate in an interview.

Some might argue the interview responses of PRISM clients should be taken at face value owing to the risk of deception. However, no incentive was provided for participation and, while possible, there is no clear reason why clients would have decided it was in their interests to have deceived the interviewer (who was the author) about their involvement in the intervention. This does not discount the possibility that some PRISM clients were not always open and honest in their responses, but many were motivated by the opportunity to be able to express their own positive and negative judgements about PRISM and if and how the intervention helped. The accounts provided by PRISM staff reflect their grounded perspectives and, thus, provide practitioner insights into the reactions of clients to the intervention and what changes have been evident. These staff had in some occasions engaged PRISM clients for nearly two years. The responses of clients should be understood as demonstrating efforts to express their experiences of engaging in the PRISM intervention and if and how it changes their self-perceptions and behaviours. The numerical code (e.g., 026, 038, etc.) that appears in Table 1 below and in particular paragraphs, or at the end of a quote, is the unique identifier for each interviewee.

Results

Self-Reported Benefits of Participation

All inmates and parolees were asked what benefits they derived from PRISM, regardless of how long they had or were engaged in the intervention. Table 1 provides a count of the number of specific self-reported benefits per the twelve PRISM clients that were interviewed.

Table 1: Number of self-reported benefits mentioned by PRISM clients

Interviewee	No. of benefits reported
027	5
029	5
037	4
010	3
013	3
012	2
024	2
032	2
036	2
028	1
030	1
031	0

These benefits included providing skills to help inmates to deal with the stress, anxiety and frustration that can result from being incarcerated, particularly within a maximum security environment (e.g., interviewees 010, 012, 024, 029 and 027). This, for example, related to helping offenders to deal with the disappointments (and frustrations) resulting from the denial of parole or stepping down to a lower security classification that would allow for day and work release. For example, one client stated that PRISM staff had helped to elicit from him reasons for his frustration in not progressing out of maximum security and would subtly suggest alternative ways of assessing such situations, stating: *this comes from the discussions, sometimes I can be festering over some things, but then they [i.e., PRISM staff] offer other ways of looking at it* (032). Another client (a parolee) recalled that the skills and strategies he had been taught by PRISM staff had helped him to control his anxiety and cope with his time in jail. This client stated that the PRISM psychologist had suggested he draw a diagram of different issues he faced that caused anxiety and stress and was assisted in

identifying alternative ways of coping. This interviewee recalled that this exercise was a worthwhile activity, stating it also provided him with skills to use when released into the community: *often I can get depression, I suffer depressions, this approach, that they [i.e., PRISM] went through it helped me day to day [in jail] and what goals I needed to set, it still helps now*, going on to state:

My mind, all my attention was on my daily routine, I got employed in jail, in the bakery, they [i.e., PRISM] got that...it was important in keeping me occupied...it helped pass the day, occupy my mind, I was focused, helped me with a routine...I remember she [in reference to a PRISM staff member] helped me to try and get things out of my head, told me to picture a river in my head, and to picture my thoughts going up the river...they [i.e., PRISM] encouraged me to keep up my art, reading, playing the guitar...this helps to take your mind off things, especially when you're in a cell (029).

The above benefits relate to improving psychological coping (also further highlighted below), which can be understood as an important, but less explicit and indirect, need relating to facilitating disengagement, which is a primary objective of PRISM. The reason is that inmates have to be in a functional psychological state to help facilitate self-reflection about their behaviour, beliefs and plans for the future, with the latter essential to preparing them for release into the community. Hence, some activities aimed at disengagement should also be understood as related to reintegration outcomes.

Muslim clients felt engagements with staff offered them an opportunity to more clearly articulate their religious beliefs (e.g., interviewee 030). One client stated the discussions with PRISM staff had provided him the opportunity to articulate his understanding about jihad and explain the difference between beliefs and acts, with acts of jihad covered by specific Islamic rulings that forbid violence being committed by Muslims against Australian citizens. This was regarded as important in demonstrating that one did not hold extremist beliefs.

Some interviewees stated engagements with the Religious Support Officers (RSO – who were also Muslim), as well as the PRISM psychologists, helped to expand their religious understanding and knowledge (interviewees 037 and 027), and think more critically about Islam and the ways in which extremists refer to and justify their actions in reference to particular Islamic principles, e.g., jihad (e.g., interviewees 013, 028 and 032). One interviewee recalled this was helpful in resisting the influence of extremist inmates who tried to sway his religious beliefs when in prison and gave him the confidence to challenge such inmates, stating: *“the sessions with the Imam, taught me how to disagree with some [in reference to extremist inmates in jail] in relation to religious issues, but in a nice way”* (013). One inmate stated that discussions with the PRISM RSO at the time had helped to improve his insight into the meaning of jihad in a more objective way, stating: *“all I knew at the time [in reference to when he began planning an act of terrorism] was the call to jihad and the need to help the repressed...they [PRISM Chaplain/RSO] expanded that out a bit (jihad) without the emotion being involved”* (032). Here, we observe two benefits that can be understood as explicit de-radicalisation – one relates to strengthening resilience against the influence of other extremists, the second in helping to expand religious knowledge and understanding through dialogue.

Some clients stated their participation in PRISM had facilitated self-reflection about the reasons behind why they were charged and incarcerated and generated insight about their offences (e.g., interviewees 027, 029, 037 and 032). Related benefits included helping clients to gain insights into the influence of their associations (who had drawn them into extremism and who in some instances were also serving prison time) and the need to distance themselves from those associates within custody and also those in the community, who they may encounter when released from prison (e.g., interviewees 029, 037 and 027). For example, one inmate stated the following in reference to the benefits of PRISM:

Helped [me] learn more about my associations [who were plotting an extremist act], made me think more about was it necessary to have them, I really didn't see them as a problem, but I also didn't see how they were causing problems for me, how they were

affecting me. I felt bad, if someone has helped me, been good to me – not all of my associates always did bad things – I don't want to just say good bye, shoot them down, I felt some guilt and loyalty to my friends, but I needed to look at the bigger picture – that I had to cut these guys off... (027).

Another interviewee, who was on parole, reflected that PRISM had:

Helped me to build a whole new perspective, with people from my past, how to avoid them...I was young and easily led, I was stuck in the past, by my extremism...I was so confused, at the time [in reference to when he was in prison], then PRISM came along, it helped with, things to do, to set me up for the future, now I associate with different people and nationalities (029).

The insights generated about the influence of associates should be understood as an important conditional factor in generating disengagement, given the significant role of social networks in influencing an individual's radicalisation pathway (Chernov-Hwang 2018; Nesser 2018).

A number of clients stated that engagements around the identification of educational goals had made them come to realise how important education was in relation to their religious, personal and social development (e.g., interviewees 027 and 037). For example, one parolee stated that:

I came to realise how important education was...ninety percent of people in my position, are not educated, do not have any formal education, you can be a religious person, and not be educated, you can sleep under the dome in Mecca, but if you are not educated you are like a dog with no leash (037).

This same parolee made reference to PRISM giving him “*life skills*”, which he identified as essential to him coping when he was released from prison. While this result highlights benefits related to reintegration outcomes, improving awareness about the importance of

educational goals is applicable to disengagement, because it gives clients choices and options to develop alternative forms of meaning, purpose and insight.

Assistance with preparing for release was also cited by other clients (e.g., interviewees 010, 013 and 029). For example, one parolee stated that prior to him being paroled, PRISM staff had engaged him about his plans for release and return to the family home and also encouraged his family to visit him before his release:

...we talked about what will happen, when I get out, plans for the future, helped me get my mind off the drama at home. I had no visits for a long time, but close to being let out my family came and saw me [due to the engagements of the Religious Support Officer]. But it made me focus and talk about what I want to do with my life, life goals, family and travelling, these are plans (010).

Another parolee recalled that his intervention goals had focused on his release and what he would do when re-entering the community (e.g., finding employment), how he would cope and what types of support structures he needed to have around him for assistance. This same parolee stated that PRISM staff had also continued to engage him when on parole and discussed with him during parole office visits where he was going to work, and who he was seeing in the community, as well as advising him what Mosque he should pray at (interviewee 013). Another reported that prior to his release, PRISM staff canvassed his proposed daily schedule when on parole, such as the need to see his doctor, secure work, continue with his art and catch up with family members (interviewee 029).

The benefit of just being given the opportunity to engage with PRISM staff was cited by a number of parolees and inmates (e.g., interviewees 029, 037, 010, 030 and 024). This related to being given the opportunity to put “their side forward” (i.e., perspectives about their offending and circumstances surrounding their offences) to someone who was non-judgemental. Just having someone with whom to talk issues through was cited as beneficial. For clients charged for terrorism offences, engagement in PRISM had led them to reconsider that perhaps CSNSW was concerned about their welfare despite them feeling abandoned by

the ‘system’ as terrorist inmates. Participants made such comments as: “*At least they [i.e., PRISM] wanted to get to understand me, I get called a terrorist from staff and inmates, they PRISM gave me someone to talk to*” (024); “*there are benefits in talking through issues with them [i.e., PRISM staff] ...helps keep the future in your mind, keeps you positive*” (037). This result draws attention to the fact that one aim of formal interventions like PRISM is that they can provide a counter narrative to the perception among radicalised inmates that the “system” is against them. This can be important in helping to promote open engagement with intervention staff, which will have an impact on the overall effectiveness of such programs.

The one interviewee who reported no specific benefits from participating in PRISM was interviewee 031. This particular respondent had only recently consented to participate in the PRISM intervention at the time of the interview and engagements had not yet extended to completing any formal assessments or identifying intervention goals. One interviewee stated that their involvement in PRISM had helped them to secure parole, stating their participation was cited in their parole decision (e.g., 036).

While interviewees acknowledged and provided examples of the ways PRISM had helped in their rehabilitation and reintegration, there was a recognition among some clients that they were already on a pathway towards disengagement prior to participating in PRISM. These particular interviewees did not deny that PRISM had helped, it was just that they had already begun to have doubts about their extremist beliefs and past behaviour. For example, one client stated that:

I was XX [age] when it happened. I am XX now [reference to age removed for confidentially reasons], I was already changed. I was out of that mentality before PRISM, I have moved away [from extremism], I read about the etiquette of Islamic warfare [in reference to part of the biography of Abu Bakr who was the companion of the prophet Mohammed], I read about it, Chapter One of the books, it wasn't the same as what I believed, this changed my mind, not because of PRISM or other people, this come from within, I have changed because I want to...yes people, I knew were into that stuff, but I decided to get into it...it's easy to blame others (024).

Another client who was a member of white supremacist groups stated that prior to prison he had already begun to have doubts about his extremist beliefs, having had an encounter with a Muslim that changed his views and also as a result of feeling burnt out from his participation in these groups. He stated he began to recognise that many white supremacists were hypocritical and were often willing to betray other group members. However, given the complexity of his mental health needs, PRISM was identified by this client as instrumental in consolidating this disengagement and helping him prepare for reintegration when released on parole. These two examples highlight how external factors outside of program components have a role in moving individuals along pathways away from violent radicalisation. The key for formal interventions is helping to leverage off these idiosyncratic experiences so decisions to disengage are consolidated.

Staff Observations of Client Progress

Interviews with PRISM staff (psychologists and RSOs) confirmed many of the explicit and implicit benefits and changes cited above by program participants. They observed progress among clients around improved religious knowledge and understanding, acceptance and engagement of plural views within Islam, improvements to daily routines within prison and ways of coping, and increased motivation around educational goals and engagement in work. Some clients were reported to demonstrate a willingness to be openly challenged about particular religious views within Islam, which was cited as significant, given they were identified as tending to align themselves with a Salafist interpretation of Islam that is characteristically rigid in orientation and ignores other perspectives within Islam (Thomson 2018; Wiktorowicz 2005). For example, in relation to one client, a PRISM staff member recalled that there was a focus on “*theological debate and dialogue and challenging him on certain religious views. He was open to being challenged and learning more about his religion*” (023). This relates to the need for creating and leveraging off cognitive openings that provide opportunities to promote critical thinking, helping clients to understand the plurality of views and schools of thought evident within Islam. Addressing such needs is

relevant given it has been pointed out that a lack of understanding about Islam creates vulnerabilities to radicalisation, because it allows individuals to be manipulated by ideological entrepreneurs and Islamist groups that are selective in their interpretation and reference to Islamic texts and traditions (Nesser 2018; Thomson 2018).

It was acknowledged that particular clients sometimes had limited insights into their offending behaviour and often struggled with understanding how seriously they were judged as a risk by CSNSW and external agencies/bodies, despite not having physically harmed anyone (e.g., they had downloaded extremist related material or had been arrested owing to plotting an act of terrorism). This, in particular, is relevant to those charged for terrorism-related offences. However, members of the at-risk non-terrorist group also sometimes lacked such insights, particularly relating to their past and current associations who were often a key source of concern. Also, it was observed that some clients struggled to comprehend how they were seen as a risk due to their potential to influence other prisoners in ways that could generate and promote extremist views and behaviours. Changing these comprehensions and putting in place plans to address them was a key area of work for PRISM staff. However, even with the most challenging clients, progress was cited as possible:

In terms of his progress [in reference to a particular client], I think he...has now started to understand that his words hold a lot of weight with people [i.e., in reference to this client influencing other fellow Muslim inmates along religious lines] ... So, he's certainly developed now, an understanding of how he's perceived by the system and has a better understanding of the impacts that he has on other people, so that's been good progress (018).

It was identified that particular clients, while consenting to participate in the intervention, were not always initially sincere and open in their engagements with PRISM staff. However, over time this would often shift. For example, one staff member recalls how difficult it was at first to engage a particular client, but observed this inmate became gradually more open and showed progress over time, stating:

...the first six months he was...it wasn't fun with him at all... It got to a point with him where he actually decided that I'm going to change the way that I behave towards these guys [i.e., towards PRISM staff]. I'm going to try and be more open with them... After that we started to do the real work with him, addressing different things. We got to a point where we openly disagreed about certain things regarding religion... It shows that he was being upfront. He was being open about these things. We got to that point with him. He was being reflective as well, reflective about his behaviour, his criminal conduct, the things that got him in jail, the things that got him on our books as well (016).

PRISM staff did provide a number of examples of major milestones for particular clients. For one client, being able to constructively deal with his anger and violence was identified as a significant step forward, with a Religious Support Officer (RSO) recalling:

I remember, he said to me [i.e., a PRISM client] distinctively, he said, you know that other day – because he's always got this, reacts violently to other incidents – he goes, the other day something happened. He goes, mate, you know, in the past I would have just belted that guy. He goes, you know what, I just started doing my beads thing [in reference to his daily meditation with prayer beads the RSO introduced him to] and I just stayed calm (020).

For another client, a key focus has been on helping him to gain insights about the negative influence of his associates, improving his religious knowledge, helping him to set educational goals and promote pro-social activities. For example, concerning this client, a PRISM staff member observed the following in relation to addressing the influence of his associates and other intervention goals:

That was a key thing, for him, was the influence of those negative associates, criminal and extremist. It's him who's then withdrawn communication, so that's been a really key thing for him; and the development of his personal goals... He's definitely shown

a lot of positive progress, from what we've seen... He's developing and in the process of working towards some very good realistic goals that would benefit him, in custody, that would then benefit him whenever he is back out in the community. That's quite key because several offenders in custody don't go into that level of detail of developing goals and then actually setting about seeing what they can do whilst they're in jail. So, that's quite significant. He's also demonstrating that he can live in a very pluralistic manner. He is working alongside and developing relationships alongside people of different cultures, races, backgrounds, religious groups, sexual groups, and there's been no issues (018).

The willingness of this client to work on understanding the negative influence of his associates from a religious perspective was also cited as an important indicator of progress. This was because his sense of loyalty to fellow Muslims was identified as influencing his reluctance and level of guilt about severing such ties (e.g., ceasing any forms of communication with radicalised associates, some of whom were serving sentences for terrorism offences). This also involved improving his knowledge about particular teachings within Islam that obliged Muslims to tell other fellow Muslims when their actions are harming others and that it is an obligation to stop them from doing so. Exercises undertaken by the Religious Support Officer were cited as having an impact by helping the client understand how these principles applied to his past and current dealings with his associates.

Similar to the observations of some clients, PRISM staff did acknowledge that prior to engagement in PRISM, particular offenders were already showing signs of disengagement, highlighting the conditionality of the process. This was mentioned in relation to four specific cases. For example, one client who was charged for a terrorist offence had already stepped down through the classification system to minimum security prior to his engagement in PRISM. In this circumstance, a key aim was to help “*formalise his disengagement*” (023), with progress made in aligning him with moderate Muslim texts, facilitating insights into his associates, developing a healthy relationship with his wife, and helping him to recognise the

challenges he would face in looking after his children when released. This was particularly important given he had been in jail for a significant amount of time and had missed much of his kids' childhood and adolescent life. Given his progress in disengagement, engagements with this inmate became increasingly focused on his reintegration through addressing specific needs related to helping him prepare and deal with the challenges he would face once released.

Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative data reviewed in this paper highlights a number of approaches and outcomes that have an implicit and explicit connection to the process of disengagement. While varied, the needs being addressed through the PRISM intervention help to improve psychological coping, promote self-reflection and offence insights, and focus on religious mentoring and the development of prosocial supports and activities. The value of the data is that it draws attention to the various goals of the intervention and how they are attempting to be achieved in practice.

The data also highlights the conditionality of intervention outcomes in which other idiosyncratic factors also make a difference. When this leads to self-reflection about one's extremist actions, it offers particular "hooks for change" (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph 2002) in which PRISM staff can leverage off and consolidate these shifts. There is a broader lesson here for other interventions targeting convicted terrorists or radicalised inmates, in that intervention providers need to be cognisant of capturing these shifts in their assessments and recognise their significance. These hooks for change could revolve around burn-out, family factors, work, education and distancing from associates. Hence, while the impact of interventions like PRISM may not be directional or linear (that is, causal in direction), they can make a difference. However, the point needs to be made that some of the benefits that PRISM clients outlined could be described as relatively standard forms of assistance characteristic of many in-custody rehabilitation programs. This draws attention to the fact that

some of the needs of radicalised/terrorist inmates are not all that different from “mainstream” offenders, particularly when it comes to their reintegration (Cherney 2018b).

Of course, it has been acknowledged there are limitations with the qualitative nature of the data presented here, as well as the research sample. However, the data illustrates implicit and explicit tactics and approaches aimed at generating change among radicalised offenders, indicates what this change looks like and how inmates can be prepared for reintegration once released from prison. Certainly, knowing if the latter is successful requires longitudinal research and the tracking of clients over time (Cherney 2018a). More broadly, the data presented here from PRISM clients and staff indicates that addressing the needs of radicalised offenders requires efforts that focus on strengthening protective factors against radicalisation and any risks of potential relapse, thus helping to facilitate disengagement and improving the chances of successful reintegration. While this is related to reducing the risk of recidivism and promoting ideological change, it does require a broader conceptualisation of program goals and outcomes.

The data reported here has provided insights into what formal CVE interventions entail, the types of needs they address, and changes facilitated and achieved. While at the time PRISM was implemented in 2016 there existed programs to rehabilitate convicted terrorists in countries abroad (Neumann 2010), it was largely an untested intervention in the Australian context. However, PRISM is underpinned by a well-tested case-management approach that has shown to be effective in assisting other high-need populations (Rapp, 1988; Vanderplasschen et al., 2007). This paper provides further detail on its content and evaluation (see also Cherney 2018a). Additional analysis also includes quantitatively assessing PRISM client change over time against indicators of disengagement (Cherney & Belton 2018). The data provided here on the PRISM intervention highlights the complexities surrounding the delivery and evaluation of CVE interventions and helps to fill the gap in existing studies on how programs set out to generate disengagement.

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