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MIXED METHODS

A Strategy for Appropriate Evaluation

Evaluations of projects and programs on preventing and countering violent extremism, civic education, promoting democracy and shaping diversity employ a variety of methods to achieve their results. While some primarily use quantitative methods, others focus on qualitative approaches. But evaluations also adapted the development and application of *Mixed Methods Designs*. Ideally, evaluations are tailored to their object in order to ensure a valid and reliable answer to research questions and to meet the demands of various stakeholders. How can *Mixed Methods Designs* contribute to achieving this goal? The following policy brief is intended to be a guide for practitioners and administrators. It provides key recommendations for the use of *Mixed Methods Designs* for evaluation.

Different Tasks Require Different Methodical Approaches

In the last two decades, projects and programs addressing violent extremism, civic education, and diversity have experienced rapid developments in funding, size, and complexity. They encompass a broad range of levels and tasks, such as:

- Promotion of civil society engagement for democracy and diversity;
- Support for individuals affected by extremist hate speech and/or violence;
- Support for distancing and deradicalization;
- Promotion of innovation and transfer.

In response to these demands and stakeholder expectations (typically public authorities, administrations, and the projects themselves), evaluations must answer the following questions:

- Does the project reach its target audience?
- What are the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of the project or program?
- Can causal mechanisms leading to specific outcomes be identified?
- How do projects cooperate in networks, and why?
- What works for whom and under what circumstances?

The diverse tasks at hand require methodological variety. For instance, some programs' size calls for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure appropriate evaluation. Quantitative surveys can provide an overview of the data available and qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation are essential for understanding distancing processes. *Mixed Methods Designs* are useful for shedding light on different aspects of programs that comprise qualitative as well as quantitative aspects. Thus, quantitative, qualitative, and *Mixed Methods Designs* offer different possibilities to address specific levels, scopes, and questions in evaluations of respective projects and programs. Generally speaking, a *Mixed Methods* approach promises a combination of different methods and ensures valuable evaluation.



Different Methods Have Different Strengths and Weaknesses

The application of empirical methods depends on many factors: Which empirical method to apply in evaluations depends on multiple factors and resources, among others:

- the interests of the financing entity (e.g., a project or a federal department),
- the time available for the empirical investigation,
- the program size at stake,
- the character and focus of the evaluation (e.g., impact or process evaluation) and
- the characteristics of the object of evaluation (e.g., a long-term deradicalization project or pilot/explorative study on a certain field of practice).

Evaluators have to weigh and balance all these factors and apply a design that appears to be the most appropriate for the evaluation object, given the resources available. After all, evaluation results should be valid, capturing those traits of the research object that are meant to be captured. Depending on the design, they should provide overviews and/or in-depth insights into individual cases, processes, or constellations. Quantitative and qualitative methods, in this respect, have different strengths and weaknesses (see info boxes for a brief overview).

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INFO BOX

Qualitative Methods

- are non-standardized,
- explore individual experiences and perspectives,
- uncover nuanced insights,
- are suited for in-depth understanding and
- address individual problem constellations.

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INFO BOX

Quantitative Methods

- are standardized,
- meant to research large populations,
- allow inferences on big populations and
- are essentially 'blind' to new and surprising aspects.

There Is No One-Size-Fits-All Solution in the Choice of Methods

Thus, empirical methods of evaluation should not be seen as a choice between either quantitative or qualitative designs, but that each method has its strengths and weaknesses. In other words, there is no such thing as an absolute, fixed, and time-transcending 'gold standard' evaluation design, but a multiplicity of 'situational goldstandards' that have to prove to be effective allow for good research in relation to particular questions, objects, and contexts.

One strategy of research could, of course, be to nonetheless apply only one method – may it be due to research economy or the needs and interests of program administrators – and to reflect on the limitations of this approach. But in terms of object adequacy, a combination of different methods in a *Mixed Methods Design* may offer a way to play out strengths and avoid weaknesses in order to gain a more complex and valid picture of a project or program, its effects, impacts, outputs, and outcomes.

Applying a *Mixed Methods Design*: an Example

To better illustrate this, let us run through a particular scenario to discuss method-related decisions:

In a large federal program on countering violent extremism, 25 pilot projects are asked to develop new deradicalization approaches for right-wing extremists over the course of five years. Their continuous evaluation is supposed to provide the projects and the program administrators with empirical data, allowing for inferences and assessments on which approaches have the greatest impact on radicalized individuals.

Due to the pilot character of the program, the variety of pedagogical approaches to be developed, the highly individual, sensitive, and context-dependent nature of deradicalization processes and the possibly limited willingness of clients to participate in investigations, the evaluators decide to develop a *Mixed Methods Design*.

In order to answer the overall question which of the newly developed approaches do work how, and why, two qualitative questionnaires will be developed in a first step: One for a sample of practitioners and one for their clients. It is assumed that both groups have either different or similar views on why and how the potentially innovative approaches might work. As the goal of this specific evaluation is to explore potential mechanisms that lead to deradicalization successes, the design needs to be open to different contexts and perspectives (of clients, practitioners, and other stakeholders) in order to gain new insights on deradicalization. This once again highlights the strength of using qualitative interviews.

In addition, the success of new approaches will be assessed using a standardized quantitative instrument. In order to gain an overview of the entire range of pilot projects and to determine indicators of successful deradicalization (such as ideological and organizational distance from violent extremism), a panel study with 100 clients will be conducted. As well, findings and hypotheses on possible correlations between the type of vocational training and the success of the model projects are to be generated. Therefore, a quantitative standardized questionnaire on vocational training and other aspects of the practitioners' professional background will be used to create an overview of the approximately 150 social pedagogues working in the model projects.

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INFO BOX

Mixed Methods

- combine elements of both quantitative and qualitative methods,
- offer flexibility to address diverse research questions and
- provide a comprehensive view by integrating quantitative breadth and qualitative depth.

At the end of the funding period, the evaluation results were able to illustrate some of the key aspects of the project work. Qualitative empirical data was collected to illustrate the different perspectives of the various stakeholders and provided insights into the perceived operating modes, strengths and weaknesses of the pedagogical approaches. Quantitative data provided an overview of the entire sample and enabled the development of hypotheses about the relationship between various job-related factors of the practitioners and the project's success. The mix of methods allowed a "black box evaluation" to be avoided, which would have blocked insights into the processual nature and development of approaches.

The evaluators were able to develop a model of (un-)successful implementation and practice from the various data and thus provide an empirical basis for the further development of new prevention programs.

In this brief outline of a possible evaluation design, we can see that different methods provide different insights into a variety of aspects that are of great interest for program administrators as well as practitioners or researchers. Due to

the large number of clients and practitioners involved, quantitative methods can provide an overview of certain cross-project or cross-field aspects, i.e., aspects that are not specific to individual projects, clients, or practitioners but are attributes of the whole sample. Qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observation or focus groups, on the other hand, offer the opportunity to gain empirical insights into the specificity of the approaches developed, the relevance of contextual factors in concrete situations and the diverse perspectives of the people involved.

In order to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible of the dynamically developing field of deradicalization approaches, it is advisable to consider different methods that each contribute their specific strengths.

Further Information

The corresponding PrEval Expertise, reading recommendations and information on the authors can be found at: <https://preval.hsfk.de/handreichung0524>



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Further information on the project and the partners involved can be found at:

<https://preval.hsfk.de/en/>

