

Rebuttal on report ‘Testing reliability, validity, and equity of terrorism risk assessment instruments’ by Emily Corner and Helen Taylor

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Since 2015, the Australian Government has implemented at least two formal risk assessment instruments as part of their efforts to counter violent extremism, including the VERA-2R and Radar. In December 2021, Emily Corner and Helen Taylor undertook what they claimed was a “holistic and impartial analysis” of the VERA-2R and Radar. This was intended to demonstrate the extent to which these risk assessment instruments accurately classified offenders or overestimated or underestimated the risk they posed. They argued that the findings from this project should be used to inform the development of policy and practice in Australia’s response to countering radicalisation and violent extremism. The first part of their study comprised analyses of literature and manuals of the VERA-2R and Radar. The second part comprised a vignette study with students, experts and some trained experts. The main conclusion of the report was that both VERA-2R and Radar lacked a strong theoretical and empirical foundation, and had poor inter-rater reliability and questionable predictive validity. However, these results can be seriously questioned because the authors did not follow the specified required training for the use of the VERA-2R nor did they include information related to the VERA-2R instrument including recent research studies on the validity and reliability of the VERA-2R. On several occasions in the document, it was stated that sources are inadequate to determine whether the VERA-2R meets their criteria for a reliable instrument. In this rebuttal we respond to such claims and correct the flawed conclusions based on our experience with the VERA-2R in Europe and based on recent studies undertaken in Europe with respect to validity.

Background and Judicial Use of the VERA-2R in Europe

In Europe the VERA-2R is widely used by trained professionals to assist with decision-making in the criminal justice process. In recent years, the number of VERA-2R trained professionals in Europe has increased to more than 1000 professionals for different judicial purposes. Insufficient training and experience have been found to be associated with inaccurate violence risk assessment (Tao et al., 2012). Therefore, in Europe an intensive theoretical and case-based training using the comprehensive VERA-2R manual with all coding principles (available in four languages) is obligatory when using the VERA-2R as a SPJ tool. This supports the development of analytic skills and confidence in users undertaking violent extremism risk assessment using the VERA-2R and risk management. Finally, the training also supports users write appropriate risk reports, and how to evade common pitfalls (<https://www.vera-2r.nl>). The training highlights the value of supervision, consultation and feedback from more experienced professionals since this can improve violent extremism risk assessments of VERA-2R trained professionals (Pressman et al., 2018; Sarma, 2017).

Confusion about the risk specification of the VERA-2R, in which setting it should be applied and which subjects should be subject to assessment.

It is possible that untrained individuals reading the manual could mistakenly interpret terms like ‘ideologically motivated violence’ and ‘radicalization to extremist violence’ as meaning that the VERA-2R could be used to assess the risk of violent extremism in individuals vulnerable to radicalization or

radicalized individuals. The VERA-2R is a risk assessment tool specifically intended for violent extremists and terrorists. It was not developed to assess non-violent radicalization. The VERA-2R is based on the available data of extremists and terrorists and is intended to be used for the individual assessment of the risk of persons inspired by any of the beliefs, principles, ideas or values that fall within the *spectrum of ideologically motivated violence*. The VERA-2R has been designed to support the assessment of the risk of violent extremism and not the risk of radicalisation. It can be applied to various violent extremist subgroups and behaviours. As with all risk assessment instruments, future research will be beneficial to further differentiate and validate approaches and following future research, certain items may be found to be more important in specific subgroups. Due to a lack of homogeneity in terrorists and violent extremists, some individual risk factors may continue to be more important for specific violent extremists than for others. Studies require a substantial amount of (primary source) data and are currently being undertaken.

User guidelines related to risk specification, settings in which the VERA-2R should be used, subjects for assessment, how users should evaluate individuals and the overall risk formulation, are essential topics in the obligatory two-day training where intensive case-exercises are practiced with experienced trainers. The VERA-2R manual states that the tool can be used to assess the risk status and risk management at different stages within the criminal process when a person is accused, arrested or convicted of a violent extremist or terrorist offence, imprisoned or released from detention. Repeated risk assessments should be undertaken in the event of a change in the judicial situation and are relevant when convicted persons return to society. They may also be provided during supervision by the probation service to re-examine the risk status over the course of time and eventually to adapt the risk management. Corner & Taylor claim that this risk specification is too broad and concerns different forms of behaviour. If that would have been the case, this would also apply to many other SPJ tools such as the HCR-20V3 that supports risk-assessment of a broad variety of violent behavior. The VERA-2R is designed to assess the risk status, possible risk scenarios and the associated risk management of a person involved in (different forms of) violent extremist behaviour. As such this risk analyses can be used: a) in pre-trial settings to provide risk recommendations to the court; b) to support decision making related to a tailor-made approach and differentiated placement policies; c) to support decisions about the continuation of intervention and/or rehabilitation programs; d) to help to determine whether prisoners are eligible for parole; e) to be used to establish relevant risk indicators of someone who is under supervision (Duits et al., 2017; Pressman et al., 2018). In all these decisions, specific and up-to-date risk status and related risk management strategies are necessary elements in addition to all other available information such as provided by other assessment instruments, evidence, related reports and the experience of experts.

To assess risk in different settings using the same instrument (*i.e.* the VERA2R), it is important to be able to provide risk transfer information between trained professionals and any relevant organization. Since risk status can change over time, it is required to update the previous risk assessment(s) that have served as a base for prior decisions. New decisions related to risk status are required over time. Research into the VERA-2R user validity showed that professionals find the VERA-2R useful for structuring risk information and speaking a common risk language (Duits, Overdulse & Kempes, 2023). Another conclusion of this study was that the use of the VERA-2R by trained professionals and risk transfer information can be improved significantly. Therefore, inter-organizational and interprofessional good practice standards of the VERA-2R are needed in combination with booster training sessions (Duits et al, 2023). These booster-trainings are currently being developed and are scheduled to take place in autumn 2023.

VERA-2R includes only a small part of the 1500 variables found to be associated with radicalisation and violent extremism

As described above the authors are mistaken in their assumption that the VERA-2R is used to assess radicalisation. This is emphasized during formal VERA-2R training sessions. The VERA-2R is not grounded on the radicalization literature. It is grounded on the evidence related to violent extremism and terrorism. The use of the VERA-2R for (screening of potential) non-violent radicalized persons is strongly discouraged. The VERA-2R was not developed for nor is it intended for this purpose. Moreover, the literature on violent extremism is less extensive and empirical studies that are based on primary sources are scarce.

The items concerning social elements in the VERA-2R are not connected to the social networks of the individuals

The authors have used their own thematic categorization of indicators that is not in line with the VERA-2R domains to delineate which factors are related to the theme of social context and capability. The authors claim that this thematic categorization is important for the prediction of the risk of violent extremism according to the literature. They offer insufficient evidence for this claim. Further, they use a categorization that is partially based on radicalization literature rather than violent extremism research. They have inappropriately identified the “additional indicators” of the VERA-2R as providing a foundation for the assessment in their conclusions. This is a serious error of understanding and content of the VERA-2R. The additional indicators included in the VERA-2R are only intended to provide supplemental information on the mental health and related background of the individual under assessment. They are not to be interpreted as causal elements and are rated differently than the other risk related indicators. They are included in order to capture “additional” information on the individual that is available so as to provide a more comprehensive analysis but such information may or may not be relevant to violent extremism behaviour. The additional indicators are intended to document what is known or has been previously documented. This is clarified and stressed in the professional training of all users. The additional indicators are clearly identified as *additional* rather than fundamental risk related indicators such as those identified in the main section of the VERA-2R. It is evident that such critically important nuances related to the development and correct usage of the VERA-2R are missing, misinterpreted and/or misrepresented in the Corner and Taylor research. This has resulted in inaccurate conclusions.

The authors also state that there is “lack of information or interest as to how dynamic indicators develop” and that the descriptive items of social elements are not well related to the importance that social networks may have on violent extremism or extremism. Although the scientific knowledge is currently still limited, the VERA-2R specified that changes in risk related indicators and other relevant changes must be taken into account in assessing the overall risk of an individual. Such changes can be influenced by an individual’s new friendships or contacts, by a new social context, and/or be due to an interest in an extremist group and/or a need for group belonging. This information is supported by well documented research. Extremists have evolved, under the influence of their social networks, moving from ‘minor, less dedicated extremists (driven by camaraderie, susceptibility, sense-seeking) to dedicated terrorists (Bjorgo, 2011). Bjørgo emphasized the different and developing roles of persons convicted or suspected of violent extremism or terrorism. The awareness that persons can change their violent extremist behaviour, and that the drivers of violent extremism can change over time has been identified by such research. These changes should be taken into account when conducting a risk assessment. An awareness of all relevant risk elements and the skills required to incorporate all identified risk elements

relevant to an individual are central in all official and obligatory VERA-2R trainings. The lack training would diminish a correct understanding of the intention, purpose, practice and inclusion of any and all relevant risk and protective factors in a comprehensive VERA-2R risk assessment. Furthermore, the VERA-2R has never claimed to be able to predict the future action of an individual. Rather, it provides an expert user with a relevant framework to identify, document and evaluate the risk elements that are present and their importance based on the available information and evidence. The VERA-2R is intended to assist the professional arrive at a risk assessment that is as objective as is currently feasible, and to support the risk decision the expert makes with evidence. The VERA-2R does not make the risk projection, it is the professional who makes the risk related decision based on the evidence that is structured into the risk indicators and supported by the VERA-2R methodology.

Lack of theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the VERA-2R

The authors claim that the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the VERA-2R as cited in the user manual and supporting documentation is of poor quality. They argue that references mentioned in the manual do not refer to empirical literature, and that it is not clear how evidence was used in the development of the VERA-2R. We do not agree with the assumptions of the authors which are related to their categorization of the literature, their focus on radicalization rather than violent extremism and the static and dynamic factors. Although empirical references can always be improved and additional evidence related to professional user validity created, such improvements are in progress. Nevertheless, the VERA-2R tool provides risk assessment information and supports professionals in its current state. As has been noted by other risk assessment tool developers, the improvement and updating of an instrument is quite an exercise (Douglas et al, 2014). In addition, any changes made to the VERA-2R must be implemented in the manuals in all four different languages. Currently additions to risk formulation and scenarios are being included. This was not available to the authors at the time of their research and report. Moreover, the VERA-2R User Manual is not the only source of information provided during the professional training. Recent and relevant empirical literature is used and discussed during the training. In addition, there is little empirical, primary source-based research on violent extremists and terrorists. In order to obtain a more evidence-based professional approach in conducting violent extremism and terrorism risk assessments, the European Database of Convicted Terrorists (EDT) was developed (Alberda et al., 2021). The EDT is based on judicial documents and contains personal and contextual information about convicted (and deceased) terrorists and violent extremists. By analyzing this data, it is hoped that additional insights will be obtained in the future into the underlying indicators that drive an individual's engagement, continuation or disengagement in violent extremism and terrorism. This will support the further validation of the VERA-2R indicators, as well as the identification of potential additional relevant risk indicators for violent extremism and terrorism.

Reliability and validity of the VERA-2R

According to the authors "the VERA-2R does not follow the SPJ approach as defined by Hart & Logan (2011) since (1) there is little guidance on the gathering of case information, (2) no mention of the process for determining factor causality, and (3) no scenario planning." Here relevant information is left out of their study resulting in false conclusions. With regard to point one, the manual specifically states that 'where possible, information should be obtained from different sources, as is standard practice for all risk-analysis instruments for violence'. The VERA-2R training is aimed at the different judicial professionals and their working situation. There may be differences as to the type and amount of information to which different

professionals may have access. Police analysts using the VERA-2R may have access to information which other professionals may not have. This may be true for other contexts and professionals and be dependent on the time and context of the risk assessment. This training principle could be specified in future versions of the VERA-2R manuals but for now it is specified in the training. With respect to point two, factor causality is not used as a principle in the VERA-2R since risk factors do not necessarily have a direct causal relationship. A risk factor is considered relevant if it: 1) had an essential role in past violent extremist behaviour; 2) is likely to influence violent extremist behavior in the future; 3) is necessary to address to reduce risk. This is specified in training and is included in recent updated versions of the VERA-2R manuals. Finally, the SPJ approach that should be followed by the users of the VERA-2R is described and used in the mandatory two-day training course in which the principals of applying the SPJ approach (with relevant indicators, risk scenarios and specified risk management) are an essential part in the theory presented and practiced using case reports. On several occasions, the authors state that there is no or relatively little information about reliability and validity of the VERA-2R. They also state it's a relatively new instrument, developed in 2018. Studies on reliability have been conducted in Europe on the reliability and validity of the VERA-2R with assessors trained in the VERA-2R, and on the basis of extensive judicial files. This is of added value because in some limited research studies on reliability, case vignettes rather than actual files are used. Further, studies undertaken by the authors have relatively small sample size and/or do not include a rigorous training program identified in their study design. Studies conducted in Europe did document that the VERA-2R has good to excellent intra-rater and interrater reliability (Duits & Kempes, 2023). In addition, discriminative and divergent validity was tested. For the discriminative validity researchers assessed 33 convicted terrorist offenders and 33 convicted violent offenders using with the VERA-2R and compared outcomes. It was found that the VERA-2R incorporates indicators which are specifically relevant for terrorist offenders compared to violent offenders. For divergent validity a sample of 66 convicted terrorist offenders was scored with both the VERA-2R and HCR20V3. Results showed that, the concepts represented by the VERA-2R indicators are not incorporated in the HCR20V3, illustrating that the VERA-2R assesses a different type of risk than the HCR20V3. During training in the VERA-2R, the trainees are familiarized with the results of these studies. The papers can also be found on the VERA-2R website (<https://www.vera-2r.nl/>). Studies on reliability and validity will be ongoing.

Currently, many violent extremists are detained across Europe. In the upcoming years, many of these convicted individuals will be released. Recidivism rates in the future will be used for further validation of the VERA-2R. These positive reliability and validity results in Europe are in contrast with the study of Corner & Taylor. The different results are likely due to many of the limitations of the Corner and Taylor study. This study has not been peer-reviewed or published in a professional journal as far as this response is aware. Serious flaws in the study include the fact that a large group of VERA-2R users in the study were untrained. This is an important prerequisite to be able to use the VERA-2R in practice. It remains unclear how experienced the group of trained professionals were as well and how frequently they had been using the VERA-2R. Our study (Duits, Overdulte & Kempes, 2023) on user experience highlights the importance of regularly using the VERA-2R in practice. Finally, the study by Corner & Taylor used case vignettes. The validity of this method can be questioned and may influence how reliably such results can be translated to real life use. Importantly, the report implies that the authors use actuarial principles for evaluating the VERA-2R SPJ tool in their assumptions and conclusions. This would impair the accuracy of the results.

Conclusion

In contrast to the study by Corner & Taylor in Australia, our results in Europe point to adequate reliability and validity of the VERA-2R as an instrument to analyse risk status for violent extremism. In addition, since the VERA-2R is not designed as a screener for radicalisation but rather for violent extremism, most of the criticism of the authors on this instrument is not justified and/or not relevant. The VERA-2R is not a perfect tool, as are no tools available for this population. The VERA-2R is one of the few instruments that can help to structure risk analyses, organize the evidence into relevant risk related indicators that are pertinent to violent extremism and assist professionals to make a defensible risk assessment judgment based on the available evidence. Validity studies will be ongoing to further validate the tool. The manuals will be edited and improved over time. Any relevant suggestions resulting from the Corner & Taylor will be taken into account. Training and booster sessions should be regularly updated to meet the present state of the art regarding developments on both extremism and risk assessment. The VERA-2R remains an essential, reliable and valid tool to adequately support professionals to assess the risk of violent extremism in individuals.

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