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Municipal Policy Responses to Violent Extremism: An Institutional Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores and explains municipal policy responses to the grand challenge of violent extremism. Drawing on a content analysis of 60 Scandinavian municipal policies and using concepts from new institutional theory, the findings reveal that municipalities mainly translate and edit a variety of practices originally developed for purposes other than countering violent extremism, which result in an unfocused response with the risk of unintended and problematic consequences. Taken together, the results illustrate the downside of pressuring and rushing municipalities into co-producing efforts to counter or prevent the emergence or consequences of grand challenges without offering appropriate support or considering the specific objectives and limitations of municipal operations.

Keywords
public policy, institutional theory, grand challenges, countering violent extremism, Nordic region

Introduction

The responsibility for handling the grand challenges of our time is progressively being localised (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2013). Grand challenges characteristically concern large populations, extend beyond single organisations or communities, and "significantly and adversely affect human welfare and well-being" (Ferraro et al., 2015, p. 365). In terms of governance, this development has manifested in municipalities and other forms of local government around the world having to increase their rate of policymaking in response to various challenges (e.g., climate change, inequality and public health issues) (Ferraro et al., 2015; Svara et al., 2013). In the Nordic region, municipalities have considerable economic resources due to their fiscal capacities and the operational responsibilities of social services, such as healthcare, education, social care and urban planning, which all can be directly or indirectly linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as set forth by the 2030 Agenda (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021; Sellers & Lidström, 2007). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that the Nordic Council and the Nordic countries have emphasised the involvement and efforts of municipalities in their strategies to implement the 2030 Agenda (Sánchez Gassen et al., 2019).

Despite municipalities' central role in handling grand challenges, literature on municipal policy responses is theoretically underdeveloped (Hughes et al., 2018). Previous research

has explored how various factors such as institutional capacity, size and structure (Homsy & Warner, 2015; Krause, 2011; Svara et al., 2013), the demographic and political characteristics of city residents (Krause, 2011; Portney & Berry, 2010), issue proximity and severity (Hughes et al., 2018) and state influence (Homsy & Warner, 2015) affect the existence and content of municipal policies addressing grand challenges, while sociological theories and perspectives have been overlooked. This is unfortunate, as it increases the potential for a poor understanding of how the sociocultural environment influences the construction of municipal policies. Such knowledge is especially important when considering policymaking in relation to grand challenges, as such problems are typically characterised by complexity, uncertainty regarding how to address them (Ferraro et al., 2015) and massive public, political and media attention that pressures the responsible organisations to act (Clarke, 1999; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). The combination of uncertainty and institutional pressure (Oliver, 1991) creates a challenging situation for organisations; they are pressured to do something very quickly to demonstrate responsibility, initiative and control to maintain legitimacy, but that 'something' remains unclear.

This paper explores municipal policy responses under such challenging conditions and explains them using a sociological and cultural analysis based on concepts from new institutional theory (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Therefore, this paper conducts an analysis of 60 municipal policies (Denmark $n = 20$, Norway $n = 20$ and Sweden $n = 20$) that share the declared aim of countering violent extremism. Specifically, the analysis focuses on municipal efforts to counter violent extremism in Scandinavia, which represent a strategic case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Violent extremism is a grand challenge that has been recognised by the 2030 Agenda (Fink & Bhulai, 2016) and one that has been an issue for Scandinavian municipalities since around 2010 (Andersson Malmros, 2022a). The following research question is posed in the paper:

- What actors and practices are mobilised in municipal policies to counter violent extremism, and how are these legitimised?

The paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the background of municipal engagement in the countering of violent extremism is shortly presented, which is followed by an introduction to new institutional theory and the main concepts used in the analysis: translation, editing and apparent affinities. The methods, data and coding are then presented. This is followed by the presentation of the findings, which are divided into two categories: *practices and actors*. The paper continues with a discussion in which the manifested practices are conceptualised as internal and external apparent affinities, followed by a concluding section in which the paper's contributions are outlined and areas for future research are identified.

Municipal Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism

In response to the increasing fear of terrorism in Western societies (Kundnani, 2012), counterterrorism efforts post-9/11 have broadened their scope and are today not just a matter of disrupting the capacities of terrorist milieus but of influencing the intention to engage in extremism and terrorism among broader segments of society (Bjørgo, 2016; Heath-Kelly et al., 2015). As a result, the effort to fight terrorism has been transformed into a multi-level governance task that involves national departments and agencies, as well as local social welfare services, such as schools, social services and youth centres (Lid, 2020; Schmid,

2013; Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019). In Scandinavia, such local welfare services are organised by municipalities. In line with that responsibility, municipalities have been strongly encouraged by politicians, national agencies, and experts to develop local policies for countering violent extremism (Andersson Malmros, 2022b; Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019). There is also research from Sweden suggesting that municipalities have been pressured to act from the above-mentioned actors, for example, through the media (Andersson Malmros & Mattsson, 2017).

According to Jämte and Ellefsen (2020), most contemporary prevention policies share three "interlocking characteristics" (p. 192): (1) a pre-emptive logic, oriented toward identifying and targeting individuals and groups at risk of becoming radicalised; (2) an outsourcing of state-based social control as efforts are expected to be made by a wide range of local public actors and civil society organisations; and (3) a pluralisation of social control, evident in the increased number of actors and practices used in the countering of violent extremism. Local prevention in Scandinavia is often organised as part of governance networks or collaborative structures (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016; Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019). Stephens and Sieckelinck (2019) identify two broad rationales on which the collaborative approach is based. The first relates to strengthening society by: (1) building organisational capacity and a diverse tool-box; (2) improving dialogue and networks between groups perceived as opposed to or different from each other; and (3) building trust and legitimising efforts by creating links between the "grass-roots" and local public-sector actors (e.g., municipal employees). The second rationale relates to efforts concerned with intelligence sharing and intervention, and centres on: (1) creating links that can be used to facilitate a flow of information about those individuals perceived as vulnerable to radicalisation; (2) assessments and interventions targeting the identified individuals; and (3) facilitating training in and the sharing of best practices (Stephens & Sieckelinck, 2019).

Recent national mappings show that the call to co-produce efforts to counter violent extremism has been extensively heeded, as 147 of 290 Swedish municipalities (Sivenbring & Svanberg, 2022) and 63 of 98 Danish municipalities (Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, 2018) have developed policies to counter violent extremism in just a few years, without any regulative measures forcing them to. However, Scandinavian municipalities have little or no strategic or practical experience organising such efforts, resulting in extensive ambiguity as to how to organise (Andersson Malmros, 2017). Further complicating the task, reviews evaluating the effects of preventive and de-radicalising interventions provide little guidance, as 'hardly any empirically based evidence of preventive or de-radicalisation interventions exists' (Feddes & Gallucci, 2015, p. 17). The stimulation and pressure to act, the state of knowledge concerning 'what works' and the inexperience in handling the problem has resulted in uncertainty regarding what to do, which will certainly affect how municipalities construct their prevention efforts.

Despite the centrality of the local administrative level in the countering of violent extremism, it is largely understudied both in Scandinavia (Andersson Malmros, 2019; Bjørgo & Gjelsvik, 2015) and Europe (Vermeulen, 2014). Jämte and Ellefsen (2020) suggest that there is a specific lack of knowledge of how ideas, concepts, and policy recommendations are translated to and at the local level. Also, much research is based on single-case studies of municipalities (e.g., Andersson Malmros, 2021; Tammikko, 2018) or focuses on specific professional groups (e.g., Haugstvedt, 2021; Sjøen & Mattsson, 2020), and we lack a systematic overview based on data from a large number of cases about the practices and actors mobilised in municipal efforts.

A New Institutional Theory Perspective on Municipal Policy Responses

To analyse how the sociocultural environment influences municipal policy responses to grand challenges, the paper turns to new institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In contrast to instrumental, rational theories of organisational behaviour, this perspective considers the desire for legitimacy to be the central driver of public and non-public organisational action (Christensen et al., 2020; Selznick, 1957). This suggests that municipalities change their structures and behaviours in relation to the cognitive-cultural, regulative and normative scripts of behaviour found in their institutional contexts, which effectively stipulate how a municipality should look, behave and sound (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer, 2008). By conforming to such scripts, municipalities can increase their chances of being conceived as responsible, progressive and modern, which in turn helps them gain or maintain different forms of resources and support (e.g., economic, political, cultural and social).

In this paper's analysis, three concepts related to new institutional theory are especially important: translation, apparent affinities and editing. The concept of translation comes from the French intellectuals Serres, Callon and Latour, but Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) introduced the concept of translation to new institutional theory (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). The focus of studies of translation is on fashionable organisational ideas, objects, and practices, and how they are translated and changed as they travel in time and space, from one organisation to another (e.g., Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Translation presupposes the materialisation, or objectification, of ideas or practices because ideas and practices cannot travel by themselves but must be converted to words and images, such as pictures, PowerPoint presentations, prototypes, templates or, as is the case here, policies (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). Municipal policies to counter violent extremism should therefore be considered objects that materialise the culturally supported ideas of how violent extremism should be countered by municipalities. While this is expected to lead to some degree of isomorphism, local institutional conditions will produce micro-level variances in how countering violent extremism is organised by municipalities.

How are municipalities anticipated to approach the grand challenge of violent extremism under conditions of uncertainty and institutional pressure? Sociologist Lee Clarke (1999) draws on a wide range of examples (e.g., major oil spills, nuclear power plant disasters, and terror attacks) to illustrate how organisations' policies to handle grand challenges and disasters often are based on speculations or outright fantasies of what works or is effective. Indeed, such challenges are characterised by being so dynamic that they cannot be controlled and, therefore, knowing 'what constitutes effectiveness is terribly low or nonexistent' (Clarke, 1999, p. 4) when it comes to handling them (cf. Ferraro et al., 2015). Accordingly, Clarke (1999) suggests that such policies serve symbolic purposes first and foremost, and rhetoric indicating control and rationality will be excessive (Clarke, 1999).

Key components in policies to handle grand challenges and disasters are, according to Clarke (1999), so-called 'apparent affinities'. Apparent affinities are materialisations of knowledge – manifested in policies, practices, or other objects – that have been stabilised and legitimised in kindred fields or used in relation to a connecting issue. By connecting to a kindred field (e.g., the crime prevention field), the unknown challenge (i.e., violent extremism) appears more comprehensible and manageable than before. In Clarke's (1999) words, apparent affinities 'make recognizable that which is unknown or unknowable'

(p. 71). Such symbolic linking, in turn, helps to create a sense of control over the situation among employees, stakeholders and the public (Clarke, 1999).

The process of making an apparent affinity 'fit' its new purpose or context can be understood as a form of editing (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). The concept of editing offers a micro-level perspective on the translation process, explaining *how* objects, such as the practices and actors of interest in this study, are continuously reformulated and recontextualised to make sense in new contexts (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). In many respects, editing is a rhetorical process involving the construction of arguments for a given practice so that it makes sense to its users (Phillips & Malhotra, 2017; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).

The editing process is influenced by social 'rules' that affect how objects are transformed (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). A first set of rules concerns *context*. As an object is translated into a new organisational setting or purpose, the specific time- and space-bound features of the object are downplayed or omitted. In this way, the object is decontextualised to ensure that it is conceived as useful in the implementing context. A second set of rules concerns *logic* and how the effects of policies and practices are retrospectively rationalised to fit a causal problem-solving ideal. The third set of rules concerns *formulation*, which highlights how translated objects are formulated and reformulated into more dramatic terms and labels that are easy to discuss, make associations with and remember. An object may be packaged and repackaged to fit new contexts and purposes, and as 'even small reformulations … may fundamentally change its meaning or focus' (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017, p. 110), attention to micro-level changes in labelling and language is central to understanding the type of effects translated practices may have in new organisational settings.

Data and Methods

The 60 policies from Scandinavian municipalities (Denmark n = 20, Norway n = 20 and Sweden n = 20) included for analysis can be found in Appendix 1. In cases in which excerpts from the policies are cited as examples, the full reference is provided in the reference list. The data were collected between December 2017 and May 2018, and the policies were chosen based on two criteria. The first was the population size of the municipality, motivated by the fact that big cities play a central role in forming and institutionalising specific policy responses, as they provide leading examples of how to organise in relation to specific issues (Czarniawska, 2005). The second criterion was that the plan should be retrievable, either via municipal websites or through communication with municipal representatives. In two cases, a separate document containing a policy to counter violent extremism could not be found; instead, the contents of municipal websites on the subject of countering violent extremism were downloaded and analysed.

Coding and Analysis

The policies were inputted into NVivo, and content analysis was conducted to analyse the material. Inspired by Suddaby and Greenwood's (2005) use of content analysis, this paper applied a two-stage approach. The first stage of the analysis was descriptive and focused on which objects had been selected to constitute efforts to counter violent extremism, and therethrough corresponding to the first part of the research question (i.e., what actors and practices are mobilised in municipal policies to counter violent extremism). In this stage, the manifested content (i.e., the textual data) of the policies was structured and divided into two broad coding categories—*practices and actors*—identified as central elements to understand

how Scandinavian municipalities respond to the grand challenge of violent extremism. *Practices* encompass the acts and methods to be deployed, while *actors* highlight the organisational actors, actor groups and networks, both municipal and non-municipal, manifested in the policies. The categories were then structured in relation to the purpose of their inclusion. This helped to further divide the data and was considered a relevant process because the policies indicate that efforts to counter violent extremism are mainly conceptualised and structured as existing at three levels (i.e., primary, secondary and tertiary), thus influencing the meanings associated with the practices:

> Primary interventions are about preventing a problem from occurring, secondary interventions target individuals or groups in the risk zone and tertiary interventions are direct interventions related to people already identified as criminals. (Helsingborg, 2016, p. 6, my translation)

Building on this categorisation of the data, the second stage of the analysis focused on the latent content—or the implicit meaning structures (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005)—in the policies to understand how the actors and practices are legitimised (i.e., the second part of the research question). Here, rhetoric or 'the deliberate use of persuasive language to influence the creation and maintenance of cognitive categories' (Suddaby, 2010, p. 17) in the policies was analysed to understand which and how practices and actors were edited to 'fit' the purpose to counter violent extremism. In practice, and in line with Sahlin-Andersson's (1996) editing rules, this meant that the contexts, logics and formulations of the manifested practices and actors were examined and patterns of editing strategies discerned. A rhetorical analysis suited the aim of the paper well, as rhetoric in policies directed towards highly dynamic and uncontrollable phenomena, such as radicalisation and violent extremism, can be considered 'tools of persuasion designed to create the impression of expertise' (Clarke, 1999, p. 137) for audiences with interest in the issue. Hence, the use of rhetoric in policy is not unintentional or random but developed to legitimise constructions in the text.

Findings

Practices

When reviewing the wide range of practices (Denmark $n = 49$, Norway $n = 40$ and Sweden $n = 40$) to be used (see Appendix 2 for a complete list of the manifested practices), two general observations were made.

The first is that the shifting purposes of the different levels of intervention (i.e., primary, secondary and tertiary) resulted in an open frame in which most types of social, democratic, educational, psychological and security-oriented practices could be incorporated. Nearly all of the practices manifested in the policies at the primary level were developed to target other problems. For example, the material revealed many types of labour market initiatives, community work, dialogue forums, anti-discrimination efforts, family support and integration practices that could be noted. Put differently, and as exemplified below, everyday municipal activities are edited to fit the purpose of countering violent extremism:

> The city of Solna works to prevent radicalisation by offering good schools, child care, cultural and before/after-school activities, being an open and inclusive city, focusing on self-sufficiency and offering good jobs through partnerships with the private sector. (Solna, 2016, p. 5, my translation)

More divergent and perhaps surprising practices were also found:

> Evaluate the introduction of mobile-free schools in Gjøvik municipality. A mobile-free school day can provide a better learning environment and counteract bullying and offensive behaviour. Ultimately, this can counteract violence and hate crimes. (Gjøvik, 2016, p. 8, my translation)

There is no evidence suggesting that the use or non-use of mobile phones in schools has any sort of effect on extremism. However, this serves as an example of the editing processes observed in the policies. For most practices listed in Appendix 2, the logic (i.e., the underlying problem-solving rationale) of the practice was edited to create new meanings for the given practice (cf. Zilber, 2002). Consequently, the practice becomes decontextualised from its origin and decoupled from its intended outcome. Previous research has suggested that editing the meaning of already institutionalised practices serves an important purpose, as the practices are already familiar to the actors in the implementing contexts, thereby reducing uncertainty and legitimising efforts to counter violent extremism among municipal actors, such as teachers, social workers and youth workers (cf. Clarke, 1999; Phillips & Malhotra, 2017).

This connects to the second general observation, which is that many of the practices, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels, were developed to address security issues and were therefore connected to meanings associated with societal security. For example, practices such as reporting, referrals, assessments, screenings, risk management, monitoring and detection were found to be central to the organising of efforts in Scandinavian municipalities:

> A concern among teachers, educators, civil society groups, volunteers, colleagues, friends or family about a child, a young person or an adult showing signs of dissatisfaction is communicated to the SSP (a multiagency collaboration unit consisting of representatives from the school sector, social services and the police, author's note) by telephone or to the local SSP contact in one of the four school districts … This is to ensure that the right knowledge for identifying radicalised citizens is shared among front-line employees as quickly and efficiently as possible … In the event of suspicion or signs of radicalisation … the police district's Info houses are consulted for the next course of action. There is an ongoing exchange of information between the local Info group and Info house. (Holbaek, 2018, p. 12, my translation)

This could be the result of the policy field's historical proximity to the intelligence sector, which consequently provides social welfare actors with 'new' tools and meanings for their everyday work with youth. Concerning reporting of radicalisation cases, it should be mentioned that important differences between the Nordic countries exist. Previous research has shown that both legal frameworks (Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2019) and cultural and professional norms (Gøtzsche-Astrup et al., 2023; Andersson Malmros, 2021; Solhjell et al., 2022) differ, with Denmark (more permitting) and Sweden (more restrictive) in the opposite corners and Norway somewhere in between.

Actors

Numerous actors were found to play a role in efforts to counter violent extremism (Denmark $n = 19$, Norway $n = 17$ and Sweden $n = 21$; see Appendix 3 for a complete list of the manifested actors). In Norway and Denmark, municipal efforts are coordinated by the kinds

of multiagency collaborative structures traditionally used in general crime prevention. In several Danish and Norwegian policies, these collaboration structures were reformulated to incorporate the countering of violent extremism. For example, in Denmark, these structures were relabelled as local info-houses or info-groups (e.g., Holbaek, 2018), which work as information hubs where 'both general challenges and experiences from specific cases of radicalization are discussed, and it is agreed how the cases will be handled in cooperation between the municipality and the police' (Holbaek, 2018, p. 9). The Swedish municipalities introduced a specific and specialised role for the task of countering violent extremism: the municipal coordinator. The coordinators belong to various units in the municipal organisation, working mainly part time on questions concerning radicalisation, even though full-time exceptions exist (e.g., in Gothenburg and Stockholm). When they do not work full time, they are mainly employed as municipal security coordinators, but other common occupational positions are in fire departments, crime prevention and social services (see Andersson Malmros & Mattsson, 2017).

At the primary level, where the purpose of the work is to reduce the likelihood of a problem occurring in the first place, traditional social welfare actors, such as schools, social services and youth centres, play key roles in all the countries studied. Libraries, public health units, integration units, units working with refugees and public housing agencies were also frequently mentioned at this level. Collaboration with external organisations was also strongly emphasised, most prominently with civil society organisations and public employment services.

At the secondary level, where the purpose of the work is to prevent at-risk and risky individuals from becoming radicalised, social welfare professionals (e.g., teachers and social workers) are still highlighted as important figures, but their roles have changed from promoting welfare, democracy, emancipation and social support to assessing and reporting those suspected of being at risk of radicalisation. For this reason, they are expected to gather information about their pupils/clients, and this information is to be shared in detailed information exchange chains with the police as the final endpoint (e.g., Holbaek, 2018).

At the tertiary level, where the purpose of work is to rehabilitate (socially and psychologically) individuals already radicalised, the number of actors decreases significantly. While municipal actors are emphasised in most efforts at the primary and secondary levels, the police have become an increasingly important actor at the tertiary level, especially in Denmark and Norway. This is because this level is about managing already confirmed extremists using various resources. The role of the municipalities at this stage is to support individuals who are active in extremist milieus socially by enrolling them in disengagement, deradicalisation or resocialisation efforts.

As noted in the previous section on practices, efforts to counter violent extremism have contributed to the introduction of security practices, such as risk calculations, assessments, surveillance and control. For social welfare professionals, such instructions provide them with new conceptualisations of the type of problem they are dealing with (e.g., a potential societal security problem rather than a social one) and what solutions are appropriate for handling the problem (e.g., reporting the pupil or client to the security agencies). This reformulation of what social welfare professionals are expected to do in their everyday work creates paradoxes. For example, according to the national curriculums in Scandinavian countries, teachers are required to discuss issues of an ideological, societal and religious nature critically with their pupils. Such a task can be problematic, and the fundamental trust between teachers and pupils could be eroded if pupils are at risk of being reported to security services as vulnerable to radicalisation based on their arguments and opinions on such matters (Mattsson, 2018).

Discussion: Practices as Internal and External Apparent Affinities

The findings highlighted a considerable variety of practices, and the argument put forward here is that these should be conceptualised as apparent affinities: the creative and resourceful translation and editing of established bodies of knowledge, meanings and experiences to the 'new' grand challenge of violent extremism (Clarke, 1999). As suggested in new institutional theory, such organisational behaviour reflects the municipalities striving to reduce uncertainty and increase their chances of being conceived as legitimate by their sociocultural environment. Drawing on the findings, two major categories of apparent affinities were identified: external and internal.

Internal apparent affinities represent practices that are established among the municipal actors responsible for efforts to counter violent extremism but that had not been used for such purposes previously. By connecting Problem A (i.e., violent extremism) to Problem B (e.g., bullying) and emphasising their similarities, practices associated with Problem B can be used to combat Problem A. Given the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of efforts to counter violent extremism, the possibilities for this type of translation are extensive. In relation to the findings in this paper, prominent examples of internal apparent affinities are training in critical thinking, family counselling, cross-sector collaboration, dialogue training, prevention of alcohol and drug abuse and anti-discrimination efforts. These practices have in common that they were originally not developed to deal with violent extremism but have been edited to 'fit' this purpose. The problem-solving logic of the practices is specifically what has been edited, effectively being window dressed through rhetoric to seem fit for the job (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In terms of impact, such editing might result in what Bromley and Powell (2012) call the decoupling of means and ends. In means–end decoupling, the outcomes (ends) of the implemented practices have a weak relationship with the organisational rationale/goals behind adopting the means (i.e., countering violent extremism). For example, there is nothing to suggest that the use or non-use of mobile phones in schools has any sort of effect on hate crime and extremism. Taking into consideration the clear societal security agenda associated with efforts to counter violent extremism (Heath-Kelly et al., 2015), such editing can also be expected to affect the meanings associated with practices. As Zilber (2002) shows, 'old' practices gain new meanings when they are reinterpreted in relation to new purposes. For example, critical studies in counterterrorism have shown how cross-sector collaboration between schools, social services and the police, which previously had been used to identify troublesome youth and coordinate efforts to get them on the 'right path' in life, have, in the context of countering violent extremism, been transformed into information-sharing arenas and risk assessment services with a focus on handling potential societal security threats (Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2021).

External apparent affinities are practices that are highly uncommon in the implementing contexts but institutionalised in other fields and are directly used in relation to the countering of violent extremism. In an institutional environment characterised by uncertainty and institutional pressure to act, translating practices from other fields and contexts offers rationality and expertise and therefore helps transmit legitimacy to municipal efforts (Clarke, 1999). However, as previous research on municipal efforts to counter violent extremism has shown, translating external apparent affinities increases the risk of local resistance and unintended consequences (Andersson Malmros, 2021; Mattsson & Säljö, 2018). Practices translated from the societal security sector (e.g., the training and detection of suspicious behaviours, establishment of report chains, risk assessment training and police-led collaborative interventions targeting risky individuals) do not harmonise with the methods and

values of social welfare professionals, who typically approach concerns about their pupils or clients with an emphasis on the interests of the individuals and their well-being (Sivenbring & Andersson Malmros, 2021). The external apparent affinities confer a different meaning to everyday work with target groups—one concerned with societal security. When teachers and social workers are instructed to detect and report pupils/clients conceived as vulnerable to radicalisation, this results in inter-organisational paradoxes that are 'inherent in grand challenges' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019, p. 120). As an example of such a paradox, teachers have been, on one hand, instructed to build trust and teach about human rights and democratic citizenship; on the other hand, they are expected to use their classrooms as observatories to detect, on a very vague basis, future radicals and criminals and to report (legal) political opinions and crimes that have not yet been committed (cf. Mattsson, 2018; Sivenbring, 2019).

Taken together, these findings partly contrast theoretical assumptions in new institutional theory by illustrating how translation is much more of an internal business than what the literature has typically stipulated. Indeed, new institutional scholars tend to favour analyses focusing on the translation of fashionable ideas, objects and practices *between* individual organisations and fields. While this paper highlighted such examples (i.e., the translation of external apparent affinities), the paper emphasised how municipalities mainly translate and edit practices and the actors already institutionalised in the municipal organisation. The complex, multi-sectoral structure of Scandinavian municipalities constitutes a considerable resource, as already legitimised practices and bodies of knowledge can be translated between sectors and units *within* the municipality.

Contributions and Future Research

As stated in the introduction, municipalities and other forms of local governments around the world have increased their rate of policymaking in response to the grand challenges of our time. These types of challenges are highly complex and create uncertainty of what to do locally. In addition, politicians, the media, and the public expect municipalities to confront these challenges, resulting in intense institutional pressure to act. Drawing on the case of municipal efforts to counter violent extremism in Scandinavia, this paper has explored municipal policy responses under such institutional conditions, guided by the following research question: what actors and practices are mobilised in municipal policies to counter violent extremism, and how are these legitimised?

The paper's main contribution is that it demonstrates how Scandinavian municipalities, under institutional pressure to act, first and foremost mobilises and edits a wide range of practices traditionally used for other purposes than countering violent extremism and/or in other contexts than social welfare services. This can partly be understood as a reflection of the challenge's inherent complexity and insufficient knowledge of "what works". However, and as put forward in this paper, mobilising and editing practices traditionally used for other purposes can also be interpreted as: (1) a strategy to quickly demonstrate action and responsibility in relation to important stakeholders (cf. Clarke, 1999; Lawrence, 2017) and; (2) a way to legitimise and familiarise efforts to counter violent extremism among those social welfare professionals responsible for turning the policies into practice (cf. Andersson Malmros, 2021; Baak et al., 2022). This type of editing can, however, be problematic, as evidenced by the fact that the analysed policies were largely based on subjective assumptions of 'what works' and creative connections between different bodies of knowledge rather than existing evidence derived from research or local experiences and mappings of the issue (cf. Koehler & Fiebig, 2019). Consequently, many of the municipal approaches have been built on vague connections between the mean and outcome, which creates a fertile ground

for the sometimes unfocused, symbolic, and occasionally problematic practices observed in this paper's analysis. Put differently: instead of a careful and investigating 'what works'-attitude to the countering of violent extremism, the institutional pressure to act seems to have contributed to the emergence of an 'anything works'-attitude on the municipal level. While the local administrative level is set to play a central role in combating the grand challenges of our time, these findings illustrate the flipside of pressuring and rushing municipalities into co-producing efforts without offering appropriate support or considering the specific objectives and limitations of municipal operations.

While the policy analysis applied in this paper successfully highlights the range of practices and actors presented to be part of municipal efforts to counter violent extremism, the absence of observational or interview data about the actual implementation of the proposed measures comes with clear limitations in relation to what conclusions that are possible to draw. Analysing policies can help identify systems of knowledge and beliefs, and with that the risks, benefits, and misconceptions associated with such systems, but cannot account for the practical consequences related to the implementation of the policies. For example, how the identified risks related to securitisation play out in practice need further investigation using other methods. Furthermore, by only using policy data, the proposed answer to the question of how municipalities legitimise their approaches (i.e., by using apparent affinities) becomes largely theoretically driven and requires other data sources for validation. However, the analysis made here is not presented as a definitive and general answer to the question but a plausible and sociologically grounded one which takes both the empirical data and the sociocultural context in consideration.

In terms of future research, we still need more knowledge about why municipalities respond to the same type of challenge in considerably diverse ways. While some national patterns were discerned from this paper's analysis, it is still unclear why one municipality selected one specific approach while the neighbouring municipality decided on another. This observation calls for more micro-level empirical research on the sociocultural processes influencing municipal policy responses. For example, future research could focus on the role that previous experiences of managing similar issues play (e.g., racism or youth crime), the interests of specific local public administrators and politicians and other local institutional conditions affecting policymaking.

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Appendix 1

Municipal Policies Included in the Data

Sweden		**Norway**		**Denmark**	
Stockholm	Huddinge	Drammen	Skien	Frederiksberg	Aalborg
Gothenburg	Uppsala	Ski	Bergen	Copenhagen	Silkeborg
Örebro	Eskilstuna	Ålesund	Fjell, Askøj, Oygarden, and Sund	Esbjerg	Randers
Norrköping	Malmö	Horten	Oslo	Ringkoping-Skjern	Haderslev
Karlstad	Linköping	Stavanger	Kristiansand	Herning	Viborg
Helsingborg	Borås	Moss	Karmøy	Helsingør	Vejle
Solna	Gävle	Baerum and Asker	Kongsberg	Odense	Horsens
Nacka	Västerås	Fredrikstad	Larvik	Kolding	Hedensted
Halmstad	Sundsvall	Trondheim	Lillehammer	Aarhus	Frederikshavn
Lund	Kungsbacka	Hamar	Gjövik	Holbaek	Lyngby-Taarbaek

Appendix 2

Practices

PRACTICES	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Primary level	– Promote citizenship and democracy. – Ensure positive upbringing. – Develop social skills. – Prevent alcohol and drug abuse. – Engage in anti-discrimination efforts. – Engage in inclusion efforts. – Support civil society organisations. – Raise professional and public awareness of radicalisation and municipal efforts to counter violent extremism. – Create safe neighbourhoods in the suburbs. – Support newly arrived refugees. – Engage in integration efforts. – Improve knowledge of democracy and citizenship. – Provide critical thinking training (focus on the internet). – Provide dialogue and debate forums. – Provide early referrals if concerns about children arise. – Offer workshops and education about social control, antisemitism and Islamophobia. – Provide family and parenting support. – Increase collaboration among stakeholders. – Provide awareness training for first-line practitioners. – Public communications campaigns about radicalisation. – Engage in social outreach work. – Create collaboration networks and social commitment in vulnerable areas. – Provide counselling and grants to immigrants.	– Increase collaboration among stakeholders. – Ensure safe upbringing. – Prevent alienation. – Support civil society organisations. – Support integration of refugees. – Engage in anti-racism efforts. – Raise professional and public awareness of radicalisation and municipal efforts to counter violent extremism. – Promote international collaboration with EU and Nordic countries. – Increase tolerance in society. – Create new collaboration units working with the countering of violent extremism. – Provide training in democracy, tolerance and understanding other cultures. – Engage in integration efforts. – Offer leisure activities. – Provide critical thinking training (focus on the internet). – Provide anti-bullying programmes. – Promote the learning of Norwegian. – Create educational models to counter radicalisation. – Promote interfaith dialogue.	– Ensure safe living conditions. – Safeguard democracy and human rights. – Safeguard a multicultural society. – Engage in integration efforts. – Prevent alienation. – Improve knowledge of gender dimensions of extremism. – Ensure early detection of social concerns. – Raise professional and public awareness of radicalisation and municipal efforts to counter violent extremism. – Support youth identity work. – Increase skills for dealing with conversations about democracy. – Create new collaboration structures. – Create an intercultural/interfaith council. – Map extremism in the municipality. – Provide democracy and dialogue forums. – Control that civil society organisations follow democratic principles before they receive grants. – Offer critical thinking training (focus on the internet). – Participate in Nordic and European collaboration networks related to the countering of violent extremism.

Secondary level	– Detect and report at-risk and risky individuals. – Assess and screen cases of concern. – Enter into dialogue with at-risk individuals. – Engage in multi-agency information exchange. – Provide psychiatric help. – Provide help with housing. – Offer parenting coaches to those parents with children who are potentially radicalised. – Create networks for family and kin affected by extremism. – Provide dialogue workshops in vulnerable communities. – Offer family counselling. – Increase collaboration between public agencies. – Train professionals to detect risk signs. – Provide mentorship. – Create individual action plans. – Provide action cards for handling potentially radicalised youth. – Implement reporting chains. – Host concern talks – Increase awareness among first-line occupations.	– Create safe neighbourhoods. – Engage in social outreach work. – Detect (early) and report individuals of concern. – Engage with individuals of concern. – Detect (early) developmental concerns among children. – Monitor school dropouts. – Help ex-criminals reintegrate into society. – Engage in social outreach work in vulnerable youth milieus. – Provide parent and family counselling to those affected by extremism. – Engage in dialogue with at-risk individuals. – Provide concern talks. – Establish parent networks. – Use mediation services (Konfliktrådet) to resolve local issues.	– Detect (early) and report individuals of concern. – Challenge extremist rhetoric. – Enter into dialogue with at-risk individuals. – Increase collaboration with other public agencies and civil society organisations. – Support family and kin affected by extremism. – Engage in prevention efforts in troubled/vulnerable areas. – Provide alternatives to violence and criminality. – Offer multiagency information sharing about risk groups and individuals. – Develop new methods. – Create a local/regional concern/support helpline. – Promote the Tolerance Project (educational model). – Create network groups for family and kin affected by extremism. – Promote Samtalskompassen (model for detecting and correcting potentially radicalised youth through dialogue). – Offer training to help professionals detect risk signs.
Tertiary level	– Promote referrals, reporting and information sharing about radicalised individuals. – Collaborate with the Danish prison and probation service. – Offer family counselling. – Create individual action plans. – Develop exit programmes. – Offer mentorship programmes. – Promote The Good Release (programme for rehabilitating ex-criminals). – Provide parenting coaches. – Host concern talks. – Create and offer action cards for dealing with cases of acute radicalisation.	– Promote referrals and reporting of radicalised individuals. – Support parents. – Help with housing. – Monitor foreign fighters. – Promote concern talks given by the Norwegian police. – Offer exit programmes. – Offer mentorship programmes. – Create individual action plans. – Create guidelines for handling foreign fighters.	– Promote referrals and reporting of radicalised individuals. – Promote resocialisation efforts. – Offer individual action plans. – Provide internships. – Establish a regional concern/support phone line. – Create exit programmes. – Engage in hotspot surveillance. – Establish SIG teams (social task group). – Establish and provide mentorship programmes.

Appendix 3

Actors

ACTORS	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Primary level	– SSP collaboration unit (consisting of representatives from the school sector, social services and police). – Schools. – Social services. – Youth centres. – Municipal communications units. – Before/after-school activities and cultural activities. – Libraries. – Public employment services. – Civil society organisations. – Housing agencies. – Municipal integration units. – Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration.	– SLT collaboration unit (most often consisting of representatives from the school sector, social services and police). – Schools. – Social services. – Youth centres. – Municipal communications units. – Before/after-school activities and cultural activities. – Public employment services. – Libraries. – Civil society organisations. – Kindergartens. – Public health units. – Municipal integration units. – Regional resource centre for the prevention of violence, trauma and suicide. – Mediation service (Konfliktrådet).	– Municipal coordinator. – Schools. – Social services. – Youth centres. – Municipal communications units. – Before/after-school activities and cultural activities. – Public employment services. – Housing agencies. – Civil society organisations. – Municipal integration units. – City planning offices. – Public property sector. – Fire department. – Public health services.
Secondary level	– SSP collaboration unit. – Police. – Schools. – Social services. – Youth centres. – Family and kin. – Municipal INFO houses. – Regional INFO houses. – Municipal integration units. – Danish Prisons and Probation service. – Psychiatry units. – Danish Security and Intelligence Service.	– SLT collaboration unit. – Police. – Social Services. – Schools. – Youth centres. – Family and kin. – Norwegian Correctional Service. – Regional resource centre for the prevention of violence, trauma and suicide.	– Municipal coordinator. – Police. – Schools. – Social services. – Youth centres. – Civil society organisations. – Swedish Prison and Probation Service. – Family and kin. – Labour market sector. – Fire department. – Public property sector.
Tertiary level	– SSP collaboration unit. – Police. – Danish Security and Intelligence Service. – Municipal INFO houses. – Regional INFO houses. – Social services. – Danish Prisons and Probation service.	– SLT collaboration unit. – Police. – Norwegian Police Security Service. – Social services. – Family and kin. – Norwegian Correctional Service. – Regional resource centres for the prevention of violence, trauma and suicide.	– Municipal coordinator. – Police. – Swedish Security Service. – Social services. – SIG units (social task groups). – Regions (healthcare, psychiatric units). – Labour market sector. – Civil society organisations.