

Comparison of VERA and ERG22+ & Their relevance in the French context

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The context



France: numerous terrorists attacks since 2012 & particularly since Jan. 2015, making it one of the most targeted country in the Western world.

⇒ State prison and probation efforts to curb this trend

⇒ Third sector 'deradicalisation' centres

⇒ An acute need for accurate risk assessment

⇒ French probation services use a French translation of the VERA₂



Question



Is VERA (Pressman, 2009; Pressman & Flockton, 2012) the best option?

In Europe, a second tool: ERG22+ (NOMS, 2014)

Why: There are reasons to believe that recent terrorists acts may be committed by different people for different reasons, making it less self-evident that a tool developed in Canada on the basis of worldwide case-examples and historical forms of terrorism and with a different legal threshold for what constitutes terrorism is pertinent.

Parenthesis: focus on a parallel study

A study with a team of my students ([H-Evans, ongoing](#)) on 20 pre Merah -2012) and 20 post Merah French soil terrorist acts measuring for (alas as everybody else, on open sources)

- DSM-V PD, Cluster B (ASPD, BPD, NPD)
- '8 (RNR) Essentials' (in [Bonta & Andrews, 2017](#)) (in this sense see [Desmarais et al., 2017](#))
- ERG22+ factors

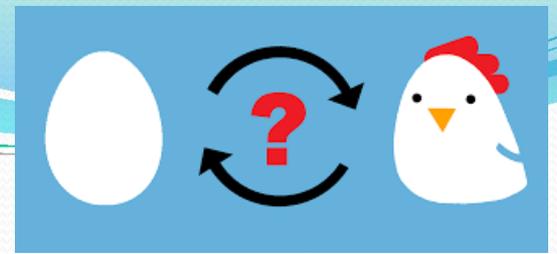
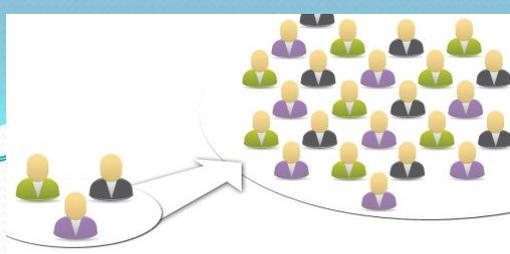
Found (inter alia) very significant differences and particularly post 2012:

- Much *much* more criminal and violent priors
- Much *much* more criminogenic needs
- Less ideology and more identity issues
- Lower education & social background

(similar findings: [Lloyd & Dean, 2011](#))

But we also found a similar (& quite high) prevalence

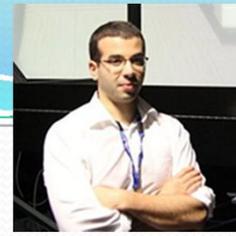




How difficult is it to develop a tool?

- 1) There's a lot we know about the psychological and contextual risk factors (see inter alia for a collection: [LaFree & Freilich, 2017](#)) – but none of these factors has proven correlational let alone causal (most being sociological in nature)
- 2) Everybody's same old pb: open access sources – relevant data are classified, subjects are either inaccessible, uncooperative, or dead
- 3) [Monahan \(2012\)](#): pb with sample size => impossible to develop an actuarial tool any time soon => SPJ the best option

But one thing is for sure: we cannot reasonably rely solely on unstructured clinical judgement, particularly in view of the types of recruitment/training that our staff typically receive. (in France the majority have a lawyer's background: [de Larminat, 2012](#)).

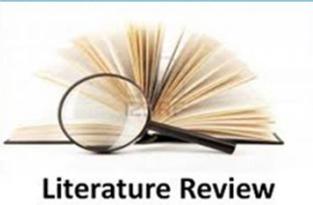


How

I have been the leading expert in charge of a team of N6 experts (2 criminologists (1 French, 1 Canadian), 1 French psychologist with expertise with dangerous offenders, 1 Dutch forensic psychologist with experience in a TBS and in both treatment and research eval; 1 French specialist of Islam and Arabic; 1 UK expert (Christopher) in violent extremism and developer of ERG + a treatment programme), developing a treatment programme for medium risk offenders thought to be at risk, or foreign fighters returnees for a Paris based third sector agency.

We were trained in the use of VERA by Elaine Pressman.

I had access, via NOMS, to ERG material, coding material and literature.



How were both tools developed?

1) VERA:

Step 1: an SPJ guide in 2009 on the basis of a) **research findings on violence and violence prediction** (mostly [Saucier et al., 2009](#) and [Sageman, 2004](#); see [Pressman, 2009](#); [Pressman & Flockton, 2014](#)),) and b) **discussions with experienced forensic clinicians**'

Step 2: **2010 revised version after feedback** from 'experts working in law enforcement, corrections, and forensic psychology' ([Pressman & Flockton, 2012](#), p. 243)

Step 3: more revisions which 'resulted from **feedback** obtained from the **use of the VERA with convicted terrorists** in a high-risk correctional setting in Australia.' ([Pressman & Flockton, 2012](#), p. 243)

Step 4: VERA 2: modified thanks to '**consultation with experts** with both operational knowledge and empirical experience with terrorists' ([Pressman & Flockton, 2014](#), p. 123)

Step 5: Next version : VERA2R (no public description of how this was achieved)



Literature Review

EXPERT REVIEW



How were both tools developed?

1) ERG 22+: (Lloyd & Dean, 2016)

Step 1: Part 1 from the 'bottom up' by relying both on the **international literature**, but also on the casework and interviews of **20 real offenders** gradually increasing to 50 cases (Lloyd & Dean, 2015).

Step 1 – part 2: this first version of ERG is **cross-referenced** with an **independent researcher** & youth leader commissioned by London Probation to identify the influences in the backgrounds of another **12 offenders** convicted under the Terrorist Act and on license in the community (Karmani, 2009).

Step 2: work **reviewed by renowned & independent specialist experts:** Stephen Hart, David Cook, Andrew Silke, Caroline Logan, Hazel Kemshall, Jackie Bates-Gaston, and Karl Roberts (Lloyd & Dean, 2015) who recommended case formulation.

Step 3: A21-item tool is built

Step 4: First part **An independent evaluation of this original ERG** was conducted by the **National Centre for Social Research**, which focused on its content, delivery, and implementation (Webster, Kerr, & Tompkins, 2010).

Step 4: Second part **First roll out of ERG + feedback from 35 probation officers with experience with extremist offenders + OASys analysis of the subjects**

Step 5: Development of ERG 22+ (one item added; several others modified)

Step 6: ERG 22+: **peer-reviewed within NOMS** and by **two international experts** from the original advisory group: Stephen Hart and David Cook

Step 7: **ERG 22+ is mainstreamed by NOMS in 2011**

By 2015, 150 offenders had been assessed with ERG 22+.

ROLLOUT

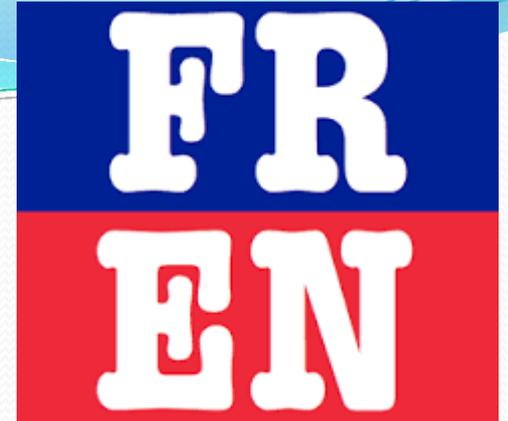
Conclusion on development

**ERG22+: More external review and more testing
in real *local* context**

**Raises the question of VERA and ERG 22+
transferability : both in general and in France**



General and structural differences



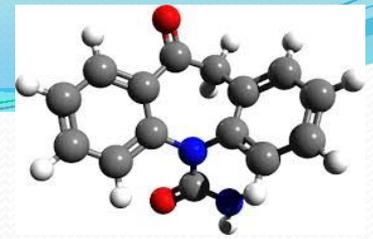
1) Language

VERA 2: in both Canadian French (with back translation) and English

VERA 2R : only in English (upcoming Belgian French translation)

ERG22+: only in English

H-Evans: a (France) French translation for RIVE = *very* easy to translate– tested in the field in the aforementioned study (but no back translation)



General and structural differences

2) Items' dimensions – table © H-Evans, 2017

- great overlap
- ERG22+ perhaps less confusing (e.g. motivation, commitment/intent)
- only VERA includes protective items

| ERG 22+ | VERA 2-R |
|---|---|
| Engagement | Beliefs |
| Intent (included in intent and engagement) | Context-Intent Commitment and motivation |
| Capability (considered as being the positive side of risk factors) | History and capacity Protective items |

Independent outside evaluation



Not during their development, but after.

VERA: Beardsley and Beech's, 2013 (published) – but

- Clinical (N5) **serious** (ie reaching VERA and Canadian threshold) historic terrorists from different countries- open source - with different motivations and ideologies, and with or without religious motivations.=> found it easy to use.
- Dutch initiative in Europe to collect data. At this point, the focus of the evaluation and its methodology are unknown.

ERG 22+:

- Webster et al. (2010) – reputable independent experts, but... not published – no access.
- H-Evans (completed): Tested a French version and found:
 - a) on 40 pre 2012 and 20 post 2012 cases and found= it's easy to use even with open sources;
 - b) on two students: easy to understand / supervisor did not find mistakes and good 'interrater agreement'
 - c) as mentioned previously: easy to translate due to very clear-cut language and concepts.

Goals

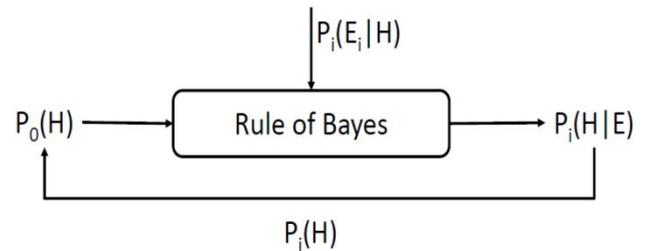
Both tools have confusing goals

VERA:

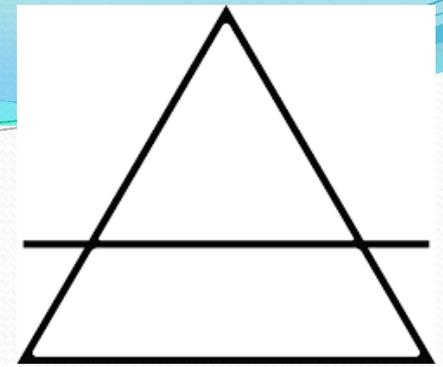
- 'should evaluate risk, inform treatment, and support disengagement' & the 'propensity of that individual to engage in acts of violent extremism' (Pressman & Flockton, 2012, p. 239)
- Is an SPJ tool, but, (Barbieri & Pressman, 2015): VERA does not provide 'mathematical probabilities' but then suggest that the information thus obtained can be mathematically via a 'Bayesian Framework, & the algorithm can be implemented by means of a computer program'

ERG 22+: developers have stated

- that their goal is **not to predict** but to 'manage risk' (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, pp. 6-8) and is a SPJ tool.
- - but added that the question is: 'what is the likelihood of an individual committing an extremist offence?'



Populations which VERA & ERG can measure



ERG 22+: 'Any offence committed in association with a group, cause or ideology that propagates extremist views and justifies the use of violence and other illegal conduct in pursuit of its objectives' (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, p. 11).

But also higher risk – tested on Al Qaeda extremists, 'extreme right wing, animal rights, environmentalism, and other politically motivated single issues' (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, p. 23).

Not mere vulnerable people for whom there are simply 'vague concerns about vulnerability where evidence of engagement remains ambiguous or lacks credibility' (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, p. 25).

VERA : higher level acts of 'classic' terrorism= US Department of Defense's definition of Terrorism (Pressman & Flockton, 2012, pp. 239-240)

Both tools claims they are utilisable on female offenders. We don't know....

=> ERG closer to French context & legal system. lower threshold offences e.g. funding, habitually consulting violent extremist material, even non-dangerous destruction with links to terrorist endeavours (Crim. 10 January 2017, applic. n° 16-84.596)....

Required competence & background



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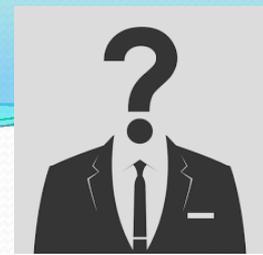
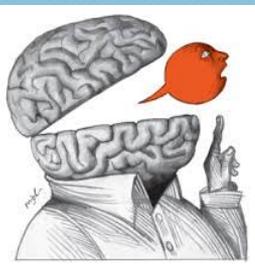
ERG 22+: only_very experienced assessors (qualified forensic psychologists or experienced POs with experience in using structured professional guidelines.) should use ERG 22+ (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, p. 22) although H-Evans (completed) found it fairly easy to administer.

Preferably : several assessors (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, p. 24) .

VERA: no such warning from the developers. Our experience with RIVE is that it's not an easy tool to administer, even after training (lots of mistakes)

⇒ pb: French practitioners have no such background





Items comparison: in common

What the tools have in common: a lot (Lloyd & Dean, 2015; Silke, 2014). Both tools:

- **comprise situational items** (networks, personal ties, etc.),
- **draw extensively on social-political and social psychology literature**, with factors such as grievance (or injustice or perceived threat), dehumanisation of the enemy, harmful means to an end, political or moral motivation or imperative.
- refer to **adventure and excitement**, as in criminology literature (e.g. Bonta & Andrews, 2017).
- share a reference to Kruglanski et al.'s (2013, 2014) **significance quest**.
- understand that **followers will be susceptible to indoctrination or coercion**
- have an item pertaining to **criminal history** (very relevant in the French context)
- Refer to **ideology**, although it's **more central in VERA**
- Refer to **identity**, although it is **more central in ERG 22+** because it is coupled with a treatment programme called the Healthy Identity Intervention (Dean, 2014).
- H-Evans (completed) found that **identity is indeed more relevant than ideology in the recent period**.



Items comparison : differences

1) **VERA has N5 items** which require access to **classified data** (*seeker, consumer or developer of violent extremist material; active personal contact with violent extremists; tactical, paramilitary or explosive training; extremist ideological training; access to funds and resources*), **ERG 22+ has N2 such items** (*individual knowledge, skills and competencies; access to network, funding and equipment*).

⇒ **France: little to no access to classified data**

2) Less psychological factors in VERA, - more in ERG 22+, and particularly:

- **need for the domination of others** (see literature on authoritarianism and Need for Closure)
- **evaluated psychopathology – big debate** (see e.g. [Corner & Gill, 2017](#))... ([Merari, 2010](#); [Merari and al., 2010](#)) found a lot of Cluster B in leaders and C in suicide attackers – [H-Evans, ongoing](#): found that close to 60% French pre and a little over 80% post 2012 extremists had AS traits.
- EBP consensus: the yes/no debate is pointless and misinformed.

⇒ **Whether in France or elsewhere, these items are solidly supported by the literature**

3) A situational factor (**transitional periods** and the inability to deal with them) is **only found in ERG 22+**

⇒ **Can also be correlated to the Need for Closure (need for certainty)**

Items comparison: protective factors



Only VERA contains protective factors (N6)

However, there are questions pertaining to their relevance:

- 1) **No** such factor has been **empirically supported** (see [Sarma, 2017](#))
- 2) Unknown whether or **how much they compensate** for risk factors
- 3) Many of these factors are **inverted risk factors** (measured twice?)
- 4) One still **knows very little** about protective factors in general ([Serin, Chadwick, & Lloyd, 2016](#))
- 5) **Unsure when to measure** for protective factors: initially, to measure change? (confusion in their formulation)
- 6) Unsure **why only these 6 items** were chosen and not the inverse of all the risk factors

What both tools
perhaps lack

inflexibility

= **cognitive inflexibility** item (as in authoritarian traits or in NFC)-
probably relevant before the identity fusion process has occurred (**Swann et al., 2012**).

How are the items measured?



VERA

- **Although it is a SPJ tool, it works as an actuarial tool** : one must score whether an item is present on the basis of the data collected in the files and through interviews: an objective exercise, based on facts, with some level of professional discretion.
- - recommends **general criminology measurement** but denies that violence tools are in any way useful (Pressman, 2009; Pressman & Flockton, 2014)
- **Not linked to a treatment programme**

ERG 22+

- Developers **recommend a case formulation (forensic psychology) approach** (Lloyd & Dean, 2011, p. 26) – recommended by many experts (Dernevik, et al., 2009; Gudjonsson, 2009; Roberts & Horgan, 2008)
- Completed with **3 other assessments with validated tools**: general RNR tool (OASys) + personality disorder + violence risk and that one pays attention to **Offence Paralleling Behaviours**
- **Linked to a treatment programme**: Healthy Identity Intervention (HII) – but not exported (but similar approach developed for RIVE)
- Nota: in practice ERG is simpler to code even if in depth assessment is recommended.
- Also note that the debate on violence as an important measurement is rife – **H-Evans. completed found more than post 2012 offenders 52% had known violence priors (versus 17% before 2012)**

Conclusion

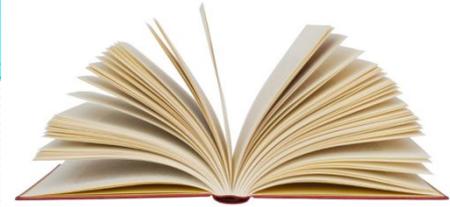
Very similar tools

ERG+ stands out however because:

- Solid and more **transparent** development
- **Lower threshold** (as in France)
- **Simpler**, less confusing dimensions and items
- **Less** items dependent on **classified** intelligence
- consider that **psychopathology** and priors are relevant issues (as is the case in France)
- **Identity central** – relevant in the current context

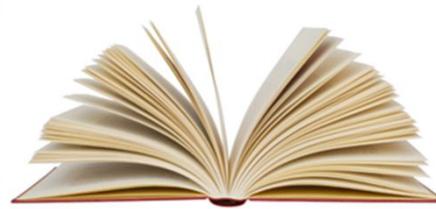
Now **comparative validation** is needed





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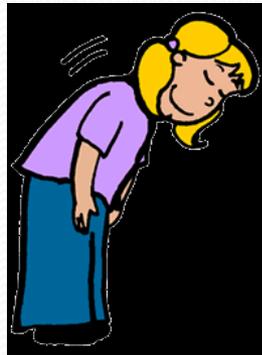
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Merci! *Thank you!*



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