

A Survey of Risk and Threat Assessors: Processes, Skills, and Characteristics in Terrorism Risk Assessment



Nadine Salman and Paul Gill¹

Theory

Increasingly, structured professional judgment (SPJ) protocols are being used for the individual assessment of terrorism risk. Tools based on these protocols feature lists of relevant risk factors, where the final judgment relies on the risk formulation and discretion of a professional assessor. These tools are often used to inform risk management interventions and are currently applied in a variety of contexts, including prisoner detention and release, as well as in the pre-crime space. However, despite their heavy reliance on professional judgment, limited research has focused on the assessors using these tools. Insights derived from current professional threat and risk assessors can provide valuable insights into how these risk assessments are conducted in practice, recommendations for their training and use, and desirable assessor characteristics and experience. These insights and recommendations can help to inform current practice and training, as well as future research into the reliability of terrorism risk assessments.

Method

Forty-one professional threat and risk assessors recruited from four global associations of threat assessment professionals (AETAP, APATAP, ATAP, and CATAP) participated in an online survey in which they were asked about their experiences and opinions of terrorism risk assessment tools. Quantitative and qualitative responses from this survey were compiled to provide insights into perceptions of these tools, as well as insights into the training, experience, and characteristics expected of those that use them.

Findings

Conducting terrorism risk assessments

The most widely recognised tools were the TRAP-18 (Meloy et al., 2015) and the VERA (Pressman, 2009). Assessors particularly valued tools' ease of use and availability, as well as the usefulness of the risk and protective factors they contained. Although most assessors recommended that these assessments should be conducted in person, those who had experience with them did so remotely. There was also disagreement as to the exact number of assessors that should evaluate each case, with assessors favouring a panel of at least two. These findings could suggest a

¹ nadine.salman@ucl.ac.uk / paul.gill@ucl.ac.uk

potential mismatch in what is perceived to be best practice, compared with actual practice.

Training and experience

While tertiary education, professional training and experience were deemed important, it was less clear what this training or experience should involve. Recommendations included training in specific tools/SPJ protocols, general principles of threat and risk assessment, and psychology/mental health, while a variety of different professional backgrounds were suggested. These findings highlight the importance of the different contexts in which terrorism risk assessment takes place, and the value of a multidisciplinary approach.

Assessor abilities and personality characteristics

Finally, the most cited desirable intellectual abilities for risk assessors were analytical skills, objectivity, and curiosity, while the most cited personality characteristics were conscientiousness and openness. It is suggested that possessing these abilities and characteristics could improve the quality of professional judgment in the terrorism risk assessment context, however, further research will be needed to evaluate their impact.