

A survey of risk and threat assessors:

Processes, skills, and characteristics in terrorism risk assessment

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The materials, data and analysis are available at <https://osf.io/8vm9e/>

Abstract

Threat and risk assessment are increasingly an integral part of counterterrorism. This process currently relies heavily on the judgment of professionals, who play a vital role in a potentially high-stakes environment. However, thus far, little research focuses on the professionals themselves. This study provides insight into the experiences and opinions of professional threat and risk assessors, particularly regarding how they conduct terrorism assessments, their expectations for training, and the experience and characteristics of those that conduct them. An online survey solicited quantitative and qualitative responses from a sample of 41 professional threat assessors. The findings highlight the training and experience required differs greatly across different disciplines involved, and the importance of considering the context in which threat and risk assessments takes place. These findings also highlight cognitive abilities and personality characteristics that may be desirable for risk assessors in this context and provide avenues for further research to examine the role of these factors in risk assessment.

Keywords: terrorism, extremism, risk assessment, threat assessment, risk assessor

Public Significance Statement

This research article provides an insight into the experiences and opinions of professional threat and risk assessors in the context of counterterrorism. This study highlights the importance of considering the different multidisciplinary contexts in which terrorism risk assessments are conducted and provides avenues for further research in the evaluation of terrorism risk assessment.

A survey of terrorism risk and threat assessors: Processes, skills & characteristics

Assessing the risk posed by potential violent extremists is a vital component of global counter-terrorism strategies (Monahan, 2012, 2016). Based on existing risk assessment tools used in other contexts such as violence (e.g. Douglas, Hart, Webster, & Belfrage, 2013), structured professional judgment (SPJ) protocols have been widely adopted for terrorism threat and risk assessment. These protocols feature lists of relevant risk factors, where the final judgment relies on the risk formulation and discretion of a professional assessor, without a prescribed method for weighting and combining risk factors (Logan & Lloyd, 2018).

Lloyd (2019) describes six of the most widely used (and publicly disclosable) terrorism risk assessment tools. Whilst similarities exist in their approach, they differ substantially in terms of their training requirements, contexts in which they are applied, and the depth of guidance used depending on these contexts (Lloyd, 2019; Logan & Lloyd, 2018). Whereas violence risk assessment primarily takes place in the context of detention and release of charged and convicted offenders (Monahan, 2012), terrorism risk assessment can take place in several different contexts, including prisoner detention and release, employment decisions (Monahan, 2012, 2016), and in the pre-crime space, such as in the United Kingdom's Channel programme (HM Government, 2015). Consequently, there is no standard process. It can vary in the number of assessors used for each case, whether it is conducted in person with the subject or remotely, and by whom. Similarly, there is no universal "profile" or standard set of requirements for terrorism risk assessors, who can range from forensic psychologists to police officers to social workers, depending on the context in which the assessment takes place (Logan & Lloyd, 2018).

Despite these tools' heavy reliance on professional judgment, limited research focuses on the assessors themselves. Where it exists, it typically examines inter-rater reliability (e.g.

Beardsley & Beech, 2013; Brugh, 2019; Challacombe & Lucas, 2018; Cook, 2014; Egan et al., 2016; Hart, Cook, Pressman, Strang, & Lim, 2017; Powis, Randhawa-Horne, Elliott, & Woodhams, 2019; Pressman, Duits, Rinne, & Flockton, 2016). While most studies focus on reliability between a small number of matched raters (usually researchers or tool developers), Powis et al.'s (2019) examination of the ERG22+ using “typical users” indicates there may be more variation between ratings when these tools are applied in the field. This alludes to the presence and effects of individual differences in assessors, and the importance of understanding how they interact with these tools – both in terms of their perceptions of them, and of factors that may influence assessors’ ability and judgment, such as experience, background and characteristics.

To date, Powis et al.'s (2019) study is the only analysis that explicitly examined the effect of experience in terrorism risk assessment, defining an “experienced” assessor as “having authored four or more ERG22+ assessments and worked closely with the related population of extremist offenders for a minimum of three years” (p.9). The findings indicate experienced assessors did not always outperform inexperienced assessors but were more consistent across cases. This echoes Geurts, Granhag, Ask, and Vrij's (2017) findings in the field of violence risk assessment. They found that while professional assessors did not outperform laypersons, they showed higher agreement with each other, and attended to more relevant cues.

Beyond training and expertise, the relevance of other individual differences on the reliability of assessors remains unexamined in the context of terrorism risk assessment. Arguably, the variation between assessors with the same training and level of experience (e.g. Powis et al., 2019) indicates that other differences between assessors can also be influential. However, some insights exist elsewhere, particularly in sex offender risk assessment. For example, Boccaccini, Turner, and Murrie (2008) found that differences between assessors

accounted for 30% of the variability in their Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) ratings. Moreover, some assessors gave consistently different ratings from others, despite having the same experience and qualification requirements. Hanson, Harris, Scott, and Helmus (2007) alluded to a potential mechanism that could produce differences between assessors. More “conscientious” probation officers (defined as those “who completed the full assessment package”) showed higher inter-rater agreement and predictive accuracy when assessing sexual offenders’ risk of recidivism across several different tools.

In the absence of any clear guidelines or requirements for terrorism risk assessors, this study aims to explore what training, experience and characteristics may be desirable, according to professional threat and risk assessors themselves. It also seeks to gain a snapshot of current assessors’ perceptions of existing terrorism risk assessment tools, and how they believe they should be conducted.

Method

Participants

Forty-five participants took part in an online survey. Participants were recruited via emails circulated in July and August 2018 to four global associations of threat assessment professionals (AETAP, APATAP, ATAP and CATAP), as well as circulation on social media. We specified the survey was aimed at those with experience in threat or risk assessment. This group was specified as they are likely to have experience or knowledge of structured professional judgment tools in terrorism or other similar domains. This group may therefore be best placed to comment on existing terrorism risk assessment tools, and desirable skills and characteristics for risk assessors. This study was declared exempt from research ethics committee approval.

Four participants were excluded; one for identifying themselves as a developer of a tool, and three who did not have experience in risk or threat assessment. All 41 remaining participants had previous experience in carrying out threat or risk assessments in a professional context as shown in Table 1. These participants were further asked to specify their area of work, as shown in Table 2.

---Table 1. Approximate position---

---Table 2. Approximate position---

Materials and Procedure

The survey was administered through Qualtrics survey software. After reading an information sheet and providing informed consent, participants first responded to questions about their experience in threat and risk assessment, followed by questions about their experience and opinions of terrorism risk assessment tools specifically. Finally, they were asked for their opinions on training, experience and characteristics expected of terrorism risk assessors. The questions included a mix of multiple choice and short open (free text entry) questions.

Analysis

Participants' responses for multiple choice questions were analysed as quantitative frequency data in R, while qualitative responses to open questions were post-coded using a quantitative content analysis approach in R's package for qualitative data analysis (RQDA; Huang, 2018). We identified recurring similar words and phrases in participants' responses, which were then compiled by frequency (the number of participants who mentioned the

words/phrases). Where a participant mentioned similar words/phrases more than once, this was only coded once.

Results

Opinions and Experience of Terrorism Risk Assessment Tools

Of the 41 participants, 16 had used terrorism risk assessment tools, and 21 had previously encountered (seen or heard of) them. These participants ($n = 37$) were asked further questions on their experience and opinions on terrorism risk assessment tools. Table 3 shows the terrorism risk assessment tools these participants had previously used or encountered.

---Table 3. Approximate position---

Of the 22 participants who indicated that they had encountered more than one tool, one indicated that they preferred the VERA, while seven preferred the TRAP-18, and 14 had no preference. The eight participants who specified a preference were further asked what influenced their choice. The most cited factor was the ease of use and availability of the tool (4 participants), followed by the usefulness of indicators in the tool (3), the empirical basis of the tool (2) and its applicability to specific contexts (2). Finally, one participant highlighted the importance of predictive reliability.

The 16 participants who stated that they had previously used terrorism risk assessment tools were asked how they conducted them. Ten participants had conducted them remotely, while five had conducted them in person (one participant did not respond).

Opinions on Risk Assessors and Training

Education and training. All participants ($N = 41$) were asked what level of education and training risk assessors should have. The majority (35 participants; 85%) believed risk assessors should have completed formal university education, with 19 (46%) specifying at least a bachelor's degree, 14 (34%) requiring a master's degree, and two (5%) specifying a doctorate. Only one participant (3%) stated that a high school qualification was sufficient, while 5 (12%) specified other requirements, particularly noting the importance of professional training.

All 41 participants (100%) agreed that professional training should be a requirement for risk assessors. They were further asked to specify what training they believe assessors should receive; Table 4 summarises their responses.

---Table 4. Approximate position---

Experience. Participants were then asked about previous professional experience they expect for risk assessors. Thirty-four (83%) participants specified risk assessors should be required to have some previous professional experience. These participants were asked to further specify how much experience. Twenty participants responded with numeric values, with a mean of 3.68 years (range = 1-10 years). The remaining respondents expressed uncertainty, and that it depends on the context. Participants were then asked to describe what experience they would expect risk assessors to have (see Table 5).

---Table 5. Approximate position---

Characteristics. All participants were asked to write which intellectual abilities, personality characteristics, and any other characteristics they believed that a good risk assessor should have. As there was overlap between their responses to these individual questions, the responses were combined for analysis, and coded. The codes were then recategorised according to the best fit of two primary categories: intellectual or cognitive abilities, and personality characteristics. Tables 6 and 7 summarise the characteristics participants mentioned.

---Table 6. Approximate position---

---Table 7. Approximate position---

Conducting terrorism risk assessments. Participants were asked four questions relating to how they believe terrorism risk assessments should be conducted, and by whom.

First, they were asked how many assessors should assess each case. Responses varied between one and five assessors, where 25 participants (61%) stated that there should be two assessors, while 10 (24%) specified three assessors. The remaining five participants specified that there should be one assessor (1), four assessors (1), five assessors (2), or did not respond (2).

Participants were then asked who should carry out terrorism risk assessments. Table 8 summarises these responses. Those who specified “Other” highlighted the importance of theoretical and practical expertise, and one participant noted that this could also include nurses and social workers. Conversely, one participant highlighted a scepticism in involving psychiatrists due to their tendency to “pathologise” behaviour.

---Table 8. Approximate position---

Finally, participants were asked whether terrorism risk assessments should be conducted in person or remotely. The majority (24 participants, 59%) agreed that it should be in person, while five participants (12%) said it should be done remotely. The remaining 12 participants (29%) stated that they were unsure, or that it would depend on the context.

Seventeen participants provided additional comments at the end of the survey, clarifying some of their responses or providing additional detail. Of note, six highlighted the importance of multi-disciplinary approaches to risk assessment, and four clarified that assessment can be conducted either in-person, remotely, or both.

Discussion

The results of this exploratory survey form an initial insight into professionals' perspectives on terrorism risk assessment tools, and the training, experience and characteristics expected of those that use them. The findings of this study bear implications for both current practice and future research.

Based on this survey, it appears that the TRAP-18 (Meloy et al., 2015) and the VERA (Pressman, 2009) are currently the most widely recognised terrorism risk assessment tools amongst the international threat assessor community. These are followed by the ERG22+ (Lloyd & Dean, 2015), which although widely used within the United Kingdom, is not commonly used elsewhere. While the results do not provide enough information to adequately compare these tools, it is relevant to note the reasons participants valued specific

tools, particularly a tool's ease of use. This has been somewhat addressed in Scarcella, Page and Furtado's (2016) systematic review, which considered the "readability" and "respondent burden" of a tool's guidance. However, this largely does not appear to have been examined from the perspective of users of the tool. This may have been tested during the development of individual tools (as noted for the MLG; Cook, 2014), however, it could warrant further examination, particularly in comparative evaluations of tools.

Most participants agreed assessors should have at least attended tertiary education but appeared to value professional training over academic education. However, while all participants agreed that assessors should have some professional training, it was less clear what this training should involve. Training in specific tools or SPJ protocols, in general principles of threat and risk assessment, and in psychology or mental health were the most popular suggestions. While the former two are already standard practice in the training for individual tools, the latter could depend on the context and the assessors' background (Logan & Lloyd, 2018). For example, forensic psychologists will, by definition, have had such training, while police officers conducting risk assessments will have had training from a law enforcement perspective – another potential area of training identified by participants. Understanding the different contexts in which terrorism risk assessment takes place, and the background of assessors in those contexts, could therefore bear important implications for training practices and how these are tailored to different contexts and assessors of different backgrounds.

Similarly, while most participants agreed that some previous professional experience would be desirable, there was no clear consensus on the length or type of experience, or which professions would be most suitable. The participants mostly favoured the use of human risk assessors, as opposed to automated methods. These findings, taken with participants' additional comments at the end of the survey, could highlight the perceived importance of

using a multidisciplinary team of risk assessors, and again allude to differences in requirements depending on the context in which risk assessment takes place.

Additionally, participants highlighted a range of intellectual/cognitive abilities and personality characteristics desirable for terrorism risk assessors. While many were suggested, the most cited intellectual abilities were analytical skills, objectivity and curiosity, and the most cited personality characteristics were conscientiousness and openness. This echoes Hanson et al.'s (2007) suggestion that more conscientious assessors may be more accurate. However, as they did not measure “conscientiousness” as a construct, it is not necessarily indicative of the influence of conscientiousness on risk assessment accuracy. Further research would therefore be needed to test whether these factors can affect judgment in terrorism risk assessment, and whether it could be feasible to use and test for them as selection criteria for assessors.

Finally, of note is that although most participants thought that terrorism risk assessments should be conducted in person, the majority of those who had conducted them did so remotely. However, some participants also specified that both methods can be used, depending on the context and practicability. Participants also favoured the use of a panel of at least two assessors, but there was some disagreement as to the exact number. These findings could suggest a potential mismatch in what is perceived to be best practice, compared to actual practice.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study can provide some important insights, there are some limitations. Importantly, the small sample size and the most participants' lack of direct experience specifically in the terrorism domain limit the inferences that can be made from these results.

These should therefore be used as indicators for future avenues of research, and considerations for evaluations of current practices.

It is also important to note that while these findings are indicative of the experiences and opinions of professional threat and risk assessors, these may not necessarily reflect the most effective or desirable training, experience or characteristics for terrorism risk assessment. Indeed, as indicated by previous research, experience does not necessarily lead to more accurate judgments (Geurts et al., 2017; Powis et al., 2019). Additionally, given that the participants used in the sample were professional threat assessors themselves, it is possible that they emphasised their own experience, training and characteristics, which may not provide objective insights. Further research would therefore be needed to empirically test the influence of these factors on the quality of terrorism risk assessments and judgments.

Conclusion

This study has described results of a survey with professional threat and risk assessors, focusing on their opinions and experiences on terrorism risk assessment. As well as providing an insight into professionals' experiences with terrorism risk assessment tools, it provides preliminary considerations for the training and application of these tools, as well as the experience and characteristics that may be desirable for terrorism risk assessors. These findings highlight the importance of the different contexts in which terrorism risk assessment takes place, and its multidisciplinary nature. This study also provides the first steps in future avenues of research on terrorism risk assessment.

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Table 1*Participants' years of experience in threat or risk assessment.*

Years of experience	n	%
Less than 1 year	1	2
1-5 years	12	29
5-10 years	10	24
10+ years	18	44
Total	41	100

Table 2*Participants' area of work (N = 41)*

Area of work	n	%
Public sector		
Law enforcement	10	24
Intelligence/security	3	7
Government	1	2
Private sector		
Intelligence/security	7	17
Other	4	10
Mental health/forensic psychology	17	41
Education	2	5
Prefer not to answer	1	2

Note: some participants specified more than one area of work.

Table 3*Terrorism risk assessment tools used or encountered (n = 37)¹*

Tool name	Acronym	n	%
Terrorism Risk Assessment Protocol 18	TRAP-18	23	62
Violent Extremist Risk Assessment	VERA	23	62
Extremist Risk Guidance 22+	ERG22+	10	27
Multi-Level Guidelines	MLG	6	16
Identifying Vulnerable People	IVP	1	3
Islamic Radicalisation 46	IR-46	1	3
RADAR	RADAR	1	3
Dynamic Risk Assessment Systems	DyRiAS	1	3
GRAM	GRAM	1	3
Unable to disclose		1	3
Not sure/can't remember		2	5

Note: 22 participants indicated that they had encountered more than one tool.

¹ Tool authors: Barrelle (2015); Cole, Alison, Cole, & Alison (2010); Cook, Hart, & Kropp (2013); Elzinga, Poelmans, Viaene, Dedene, & Morsing (2010); Hoffmann, Roshdi, & Allwinn (2013); Lloyd & Dean (2015); Meloy, Roshdi, Glaz-Ocik, & Hoffmann (2015); Pressman (2009)

Table 4*Training expected for risk assessors (N = 41)*

Training	n	%
Specific tools/SPJ protocols	19	46
General threat/risk assessment principles	12	29
Psychology/mental health	10	24
Practical experience/focus	7	17
Understanding of terrorism, risk/protective factors	6	15
Legal/policing/security	6	15
Supervision	5	12
Continuing professional development and membership	4	10
Interview techniques	3	7
Intelligence gathering	2	5

Table 5*Professional experience expected for risk assessors (n = 34)*

Experience	n	%
Psychology/clinical	14	41
Law enforcement/security	13	38
Risk assessment/management	11	32
Nonspecific practical experience	6	18
Knowledge/experience of the subject/field	4	12
Interacting/working with people	4	12
Interviewing	3	9
Working with terrorists/criminals	2	6

Table 6*Intellectual and cognitive abilities of a good risk assessor (N = 41)*

Intellectual/cognitive ability	n	%
Analytical skills	21	51
Objectivity	20	49
Curiosity	16	39
Critical thinking	9	22
Flexibility	9	22
Insightfulness/Perceptiveness	8	20
Knowledge/experience	7	17
Good memory	6	15
Creativity/innovation	5	12
Willingness/ability to learn	5	12
Abstract reasoning	3	7
Problem solving ability	3	7
General intelligence	2	5

Table 7*Personality characteristics of a good risk assessor (N = 41)*

Personality characteristic	n	%
Conscientiousness	23	56
Openness	13	32
Collegiality	8	20
Agreeableness	8	20
Calmness	7	17
Compassion/empathy	7	17
Communication skills	6	15
Humility	6	15
Ethicality	5	12
Pragmatism	5	12
Interest/passion	5	12
Patience	4	10
Maturity/Sophistication	3	7
Resilience	3	7
Confidence	2	5
Persistence	2	5

Table 8*Who should carry out terrorism risk assessments? (N = 41)*

Risk assessor	n	%
Specialist Threat/Risk Assessors	38	93
Mental health professionals	34	83
Law enforcement officers	27	66
Intelligence analysts	21	51
AI/algorithm	7	17
Other	6	15