

## **1.2: TRYING TO TALK TO TERRORISTS: ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN CANADA**

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### ***Executive Summary***

For some time now assessments of the research literature on terrorism have noted the lack of studies based on primary data. For obvious reasons those engaged in studying terrorism have been either reluctant or unable to spend much time “talking to terrorists.” and such studies remain rare. It is imperative, however, that we gain more access to the feelings, perceptions, and thoughts of terrorists. With the emergence and spread of “homegrown terrorism” the reasons for doing so have never been stronger. If we are to understand how and why someone becomes a terrorist, especially youth growing up in the relative privilege of the West, then we need a better grasp of what sociologists call their “definition of the situation.” Admittedly, the information we might acquire from talking to the terrorists is subject to distortion, in both systematic and unsystematic ways, consciously and unconsciously, and the small number of individuals we are able to interview poses problems for generalizing our findings. But if we wish to increase the validity of our insights there can be no substitute for talking to the terrorists. Researchers must simply exercise special care in doing so.

Gaining access to the terrorists or just those who know them can be a laborious and precarious undertaking. The methodological hurdles are substantial. But even seeking to talk to terrorists can carry a price. In many circles, including academia, merely expressing the desire to talk to terrorists is interpreted as tantamount to sympathizing with them, when moral and legal condemnation is sufficient (Horgan 2005: 38). In the Canadian context, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper was first asked about the plot to attack a VIA Rail passenger train, he said this is not the time to “commit sociology” since “I don’t think we want to convey any view to the Canadian public other than our utter condemnation of this kind of violence”. In addition, social scientists wishing to talk to terrorists can find themselves chastised, quite remarkably, for falling prey to any or all of the following failings: either they are on a fool’s errand, given the methodological hurdles involved in the research, they are egoists indulging in sensationalistic work to get attention, or they are naïve or willing lackeys of government and engaging in actions that pose a threat to civil liberties. If these considerations were not enough to discourage efforts to talk to terrorists, then there are the dangers, real and imagined, physical and legal, of harm to themselves or others. These are some of the deterrents met by those seeking primary data from terrorists.

Another formidable barrier encountered is the regime of ethical scrutiny institutionalized for research dealing with human subjects in most Western countries. Scholars engaged in forms of field research often experience difficulties gaining the necessary clearance from university research ethics boards (REBs). These REBs continue to be dominated by research models from the natural sciences and they tend to display a marked preoccupation with the legal liabilities of their institutions. In launching our research into the lives of Canadian terrorists, research that combined the use of open documentary sources (e.g., reports in the news media, court records, biographic and autobiographic accounts, and other academic studies) and qualitative interviews of terrorists, their friends, families, and associates (both before and after individuals became terrorists), the researchers anticipated significant challenges in securing the necessary ethical clearance. But in the end the journey proved to be even more

complex and eventful than anticipated. Ultimately the researchers were successful and their efforts may have set certain precedents that others will find beneficial, though each case stands on its own merits.

In the report the researchers have chosen to provide the following: (1) a brief description of the circumstances of the study, in terms of the researchers' activity and the research ethics regime in Canada; (2) a sense of the many stages by which researchers succeeded in negotiating the certification required to begin qualitative research; and (3) a survey of the key issues raised by the REBs and how they were resolved. Of necessity, the report can provide only a cursory record of the lengthy discussions required to secure the necessary approval. In recounting the researchers' experience, due regard must be given to the confidential nature of the proceedings. The researchers are limited to describing the broad parameters of the process, the views exchanged, and the legal advice given. In the end, however, the REBs recognized the potential public benefit of this work and allowed this significance to offset some of their concerns and conventional expectations.

In the end, the researchers would encourage others to persevere and seek to gain the permissions necessary to do similar research, recognizing that most REBs will have to be educated about pertinent aspects of terrorism studies. But this is a politically charged topic and one which is subject to many misconceptions and disputes. That said, in the end there are a few key points to take away from this experience:

The entire process hinged on striking the right balance between pursuing a risky research project that has a high value in terms of larger public interests and holding strictly to the TCPS 2 guidelines and conventional practices of the REBs. The TCPS 2 allows for this possibility but the researchers suspect it is not something most REBs are familiar with. Consequently the onus falls on the researchers to argue the case and educate the REBs on this point.

Ways are available for making this kind of research less risky for all the parties involved, and the most important measures are ones to assure the confidentiality of the process and the data.

To secure the kinds of primary data necessary to make advances in terrorism studies researchers must continue to try to talk to terrorists, and this always will be a high risk endeavour and all of the safeguards put in place cannot fully circumvent the potential liabilities. Researchers and their universities must acknowledge this fact, yet find the courage to take up and support this important work.

The researchers hope that their efforts will not be scuttled in the end by a more short-sighted effort to use the data to augment the investigation or prosecution of an individual or group suspected of terrorism. They have sought to avoid touching on any of the operational details that are usually most pertinent to such criminal investigations. The focus of the project is the perceptions and thoughts of the interviewees with regard to their experiences and situation, and once the interviews have been transcribed and stripped of identifiers the researchers are not be able to link the data with specific individuals. They are seeking to develop a more generic picture based on the synthesis of aggregate data, with due consideration to distinguishable variations, and are very cognizant of the obligation to defend the confidentiality of the data for ethical reasons and to defend the feasibility of more research involving talking to terrorists.