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A Concurrent Evaluation of Threat Assessment Tools for the Individual Assessment of Terrorism

Threat Assessment/Management

- A cornerstone of effective counter-terrorism
 - AKA violence risk assessment/management
- Comprises two distinct but related phases
 - Evaluate potential for future terrorism
 - Develop plans to disrupt or reduce that potential

Decision Support Tools

- Decision support tools for analysis of groups have been used for some time, but until recently there was a lack of tools intended for assessment of individuals
- Since 2009, three Structured Professional Judgement decision support tools relevant to the “individual assessment of risk for terrorism” have been developed
 - Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA and VERA 2)
 - Multi-Level Guidelines (MLG)
 - Extremism Risk Guidelines (ERG 22+)

VERA/VERA 2

- Focus is on risk for terrorism motivated by extremist ideology, that
 - Beliefs, attitudes, and views that justify the use of violence as a political act
- Intended to be used with a wide spectrum of extremism
 - Emphasis was originally on extremism associated with radical Islam
- Intended for use with people who have “already been convicted of a violence extremist or terrorist-designated offence”
- VERA is open access/use, but VERA 2 is restricted access/use

VERA: Content

- 28 risk and protective factors reflect the characteristics of people that are considered important in radicalization and terrorism
- Factors grouped in five conceptual domains
 - Attitude
 - Contextual
 - Historical
 - Protective
 - Demographic
- Evaluators rate presence of risk factors, overall risk

VERA 2: Content

- 31 risk and protective factors that reflect the narratives and networks of people which are considered important in radicalization and terrorism
- Factor grouped into five conceptual domains:
 - Beliefs and Attitudes
 - Context and Intent
 - History and Capability
 - Commitment and Motivation
 - Protective factors
- Evaluators rate presence and relevance of risk factors, overall risk

BA1 Commitment to ideology justifying violence
BA2 Victim of injustice and grievances
BA3 Dehumanization/demonization of identified targets of injustice
BA4 Rejection of democratic society and values
BA5 Feelings of hate, frustration, persecution, alienation
BA6 Hostility to national collective identity
BA7 Lack of empathy, understanding outside own group
CI1 Seeker, consumer, developer of violent extremist materials
CI2 Identification of target (person, place, group) in response to perceived injustice
CI3 Personal contact with violent extremists
CI4 Anger and expressed intent to act violently
CI5 Expressed desire to die for cause or martyrdom
CI6 Expressed intent to plan, prepare violent action
CI7 Susceptible to influence, authority, indoctrination
HC1 Early exposure to pro-violence militant ideology
HC2 Network (family, friends) involved in violent action

HC3 Prior criminal history of violence
HC4 Tactical, paramilitary, explosives training
HC5 Extremist ideological training
HC6 Access to funds, resources, organizational skills
CM1 Glorification of violent action
CM2 Driven by criminal opportunism
CM3 Commitment to group, group ideology
CM4 Driven by moral imperative, moral superiority
CM5 Driven by excitement, adventure
P1 Re-interpretation of ideology less rigid, absolute
P2 Rejection of violence to obtain goals
P3 Change of vision of enemy
P4 Involvement with non-violent, de-radicalization, offence-related programs
P5 Community support for non-violence
P6 Family support for non-violence

MLG

- Focus is on risk for group-based violence, which includes most terrorism (except some lone actor terrorism)
- Intended for use with known, suspected, or potential terrorists to determine extent to which risk is attributable to individual and group dynamics that influence each
 - May also be used to analyze the extent to which terrorist violence was group-based versus individual (lone actor)
- Open access/use; administration by multi-disciplinary teams is encouraged

MLG: Content

- 16 basic risk factors that reflect concerns at different levels in the ecological model of violence
- Factors grouped into four domains
 - Individual
 - Individual-in-Group
 - Group
 - Group-in-Society
- Evaluators rate presence and relevance of risk factors; develop case formulation and scenario of future violence; and rate risk for future violence, serious physical harm, and imminent violence

Individual

- I1. Conduct problems
- I2. Attitude problems
- I3. Social adjustment problems
- I4. Mental health problems

Individual-in-Group

- IG1. Strong group-based identity
- IG2. Violent role or status in group
- IG3. Strong commitment to group
- IG4. Negative attitude toward outgroup members

Group

- G1. History of violence
- G2. Violent norms or goals
- G3. Strong cohesion
- G4. Strong leadership/power structure

Group-in-Society

- GS1. Large in size/scope
- GS2. Socially isolated/isolative
- GS3. Operating in an unstable context/environment
- GS4. Threatened by or in conflict with other groups

ERG 22+

- Focus is on “pathway influences” that drove people to engage in terrorism-related offences and that may be targeted by intervention to facilitate disengagement or desistance
- Intended to be used with a wide spectrum of extremism
 - Emphasis was originally on extremism associated with radical Islam
- Intended for use with people who have been convicted of terrorism-related to assist in correctional management and rehabilitation within NOMS
- Restricted access/use

ERG 22+: Content

- 22 basic risk factors that reflect contextual circumstances , personal attributes, and actual or perceived benefits that contributed to past offending, as well as the contextual circumstances or personal attributes that might promote desistence from future offending
- Factors grouped into three domains
 - Engagement
 - Intent
 - Capability
- Evaluators consider (but do not necessarily code) presence and relevance of risk factors and develop an integrative case formulation

Evaluative Research

- Few studies to date
- Most based on small case series
- Most evaluated only one or two tools
- Most were conducted by tool developers

Research Plan

- Original plan was for authors of two tools to collaborate on concurrent evaluation in a sample of known terrorism cases from RCMP files
- Due to problems accessing VERA 2 and RCMP case files, revised plan was to analyze overlap in content between tools in two studies
 - Study One: Empirical analysis of MLG versus HCR-20 V₃, VERA
 - Study Two: Conceptual analysis of MLG versus VERA 2

Study One: Method

- Case series used by Beardsley & Beech (2013)
 - 5 well-known terrorists (Andreas Baader, Ikuo Hayashi, Theodore Kaczynski, Patrick Magee, and Timothy McVeigh)
 - Open-source information
- MLG and HCR-20 V₃ each coded by two independent raters
 - Consensus ratings made afterward
- VERA ratings obtained from original report

Study One: Results

- No evidence of interrater reliability problems with MLG ratings
- Association between the MLG and HCR-20 V3 summary risk ratings was consistent with expectations
 - Correlations among the summary risk ratings made using the two tools were large and positive
- Association between MLG and HCR-20 V3 domain scores was consistent with expectations in some respects but not in others
 - MLG Individual domain had positive correlations with the HCR-20 V3 total and domain ratings, and other MLG domains had negative or near-zero correlations with the with the HCR-20 V3 total and domain ratings
 - None of the correlations was statistically significant

Study One: Results (cont.)

- Association between the MLG and VERA domain scores was consistent with expectations only in limited respects
 - MLG Individual domain was not significantly correlated with any of the VERA domain scores, although the correlations varied in direction and magnitude
 - Only the VERA Contextual domain scores had large, positive, and statistically significant correlations with the MLG Individual-in-Group, Group, and Group-in-Society domain scores

Study Two: Method

- Three researchers rated the content overlap risk factors on the MLG and VERA 2 using a multi-step procedure
 - Working independently, Researcher A considered the VERA 2 risk factors one at a time and rated whether it overlapped in content with each of the MLG risk factors, and Researcher B considered the MLG risk factors one at a time and rated whether it overlapped in content with each of the VERA 2 risk factors
 - After completing their individual ratings, Researchers A and B broke the blind, discussed their ratings, and made a set of final consensus ratings of overlap among the risk factors
 - Researcher C took each pair of overlapping items identified by Researchers A and B and made a judgment of the *degree* of overlap based on the extent to which the names, definitions, and descriptions risk factors were similar from intensional, extensional, and ostensional perspectives

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Study 2: Results (Overall)

- There was at least *low* overlap among relatively few pairs of risk factors
- Degree of overlap was small

Study 2: Results (VERA 2)

- All VERA 2 risk factors overlapped to some degree with at least one MLG risk factor
 - Degree of overlap for the VERA 2 risk factors was similar across the 5 domains
- Three VERA 2 risk factors accounted for most of the overlap with the MLG
 - P₄ (Involvement with non-violent, de-radicalization, offence-related programs), BA₅ (Feelings of hate, frustration, persecution, alienation) and CI₆ (Expressed intent to plan, prepare violent action)

Study 2: Results (MLG)

- Only 12 of the 16 MLG risk factors overlapped to some degree with the VERA 2 risk factors
 - The overlap was limited almost entirely to risk factors from the Individual and Individual-in-Group domains
- Three MLG risk factors accounted for most of the overlap with the VERA 2 risk factors
 - I2 (Attitude problems), IG4 (Negative attitude toward people outside the group), and IG3 (Strong commitment to group)

Conclusion: HCR-20 V₃

- HCR-20 V₃ provides a comprehensive framework for evaluation of individual-level risk factors for violence, an essential consideration in all terrorism risk assessments
 - As terrorism is a specific form of violence, risk factors for general violence are likely to have some relevance
 - Motives and goals other than furthering social or political change may also be present in terrorism, and may be personal or idiosyncratic (as opposed to shared) desires, beliefs, attitudes, pathology, and activity
 - Many or even most people who commit violence are not specialists, engaging in only a single type of violence and for the same motive or goal, but rather engage in violence that is diverse in nature

Conclusion: VERA/VERA 2

- Provide a detailed analysis of “extremist” desires, belief, and attitudes
- Overlap with the HCR-20 V₃ is minimal, but overlap with the MLG is considerable
 - Although overlap with MLG limited to two domains (Individual and Individual-in-Group)
- Content reflects distinct facets of extremism rather than distinct risk factors *per se*, which may make the VERA 2 particularly useful (or even essential) for the detailed assessment of extremism that are assessed only in general terms by the HCR-20 V₃ or MLG

Conclusion: MLG

- Provides a satisfactory, if general, assessment of individual-level risk factors and extremist desires, belief, and attitudes, but also uniquely assesses higher-level risk factors not captured by the HCR-20 V₃ or VERA/VERA 2
- MLG may be particularly useful (or even essential) in evaluating cases in which the terrorism was truly group-based (i.e., the person was acting in concert with and supported by others)

Recommendations: Research

- Clear need for studies that directly compare tools
 - HCR-20 V3, VERA 2, and MLG, as well as the ERG 22+ and TRAP-18
- Studies should be based on a series of routine case files and comprise at least 25 cases to permit appropriate statistical analyses of interrater reliability and concurrent validity
 - Especially multiple members of the same terrorist group, lone actor terrorists
- Evaluators who administer the tools should be trained and experienced
 - Different evaluators should administer each tool to prevent contamination of ratings
 - There should be multiple independent evaluators for each tool to permit evaluation of interrater reliability and subsequent generation of consensus ratings for evaluation of concurrent validity

Recommendations: Practice

- Comprehensive terrorism risk assessments should routinely incorporate multiple tools
 - HCR-20 V3 provides good information concerning individual-level risk factors relevant to assessment of risk for terrorism and general violence
 - VERA 2 provides good information concerning extremist desires, beliefs, and attitudes relevant to assessment of risk for terrorism
 - MLG provides good information concerning individual-within-group dynamics relevant to assessment of risk for terrorism and other group-based violence
- Using multiple tools does not increase the time necessary to conduct a risk assessment, as the clear majority of assessment time is spent gathering information
 - Once information has been gathered, analyzing it within multiple frameworks (i.e., different tools) requires minimal cost in terms of time and effort

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