RESEARCH NOTE

Abstract

As Counter-Insider Threat (C-InT) programs begin to include concerns about workplace violence, they must be equipped to effectively assess and manage the associated risks. The current gold standard is structured professional judgment (SPJ), an evidence-based approach that combines empirically validated tools with professional judgment. The objective of this project was to produce a Reference Guide to educate C-InT professionals about the use of SPJ tools in violence risk assessment (VRA) and threat assessment (TA).

the ThreatLab
Integrating Research Into Practice

About The Threat Lab

The Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC) founded The Threat Lab in 2018 to realize the Department of Defense (DoD) Counter-Insider Threat Program Director's vision to incorporate the social and behavioral sciences into the mission space. Our team is headquartered in Seaside, California, and includes psychologists, sociologists, policy analysts, computer scientists, and other subject matter experts committed to workforce protection.

A Reference Guide for Counter-Insider Threat Professionals: Structured Professional Judgment Tools

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Introduction

As Government Counter-Insider Threat (C-InT) programs widen their scope to address workplace violence, they must have the capability and expertise to carefully assess and effectively manage the associated risks. The current gold standard for assessing and managing violence risk is structured professional judgment (SPJ), an evidence-based approach that combines empirically grounded tools with professional judgment. Over the past two decades, numerous SPJ tools for assessing and managing violence risk have been developed and validated. Although SPJ tools are not yet common in Government C-InT programs, they have the potential to significantly improve both violence risk assessment (VRA) and threat assessment (TA) and management. The National Insider Threat Task Force (NITTF) funded the current project with the goal to produce an SPJ tool Reference Guide to complement ongoing professionalization efforts and to educate C-InT professionals on the specific SPJ tools that may help facilitate effective VRA and TA in a C-InT inquiry.

The Reference Guide is not intended to fully train or equip competent violence risk or threat assessors, but rather to provide C-InT professionals with background information and context about the current standards and procedures that assessors should follow.

Method

The research team for this project included five clinical psychologists, three of whom are Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in developing, applying, and evaluating SPJ tools. The research team began by conducting a literature review that included a search of databases such as PsychInfo, Google Scholar, and ProQuest for unclassified literature on VRA, TA, and SPJ tools. The review identified books, reports, scholarly articles, conference papers, theses and dissertations, Government publications, and online materials. The research team then gathered information regarding current and historical methods of assessing risk in VRA and TA, as well as the use and prevalence of SPJ tools. The team focused on the

psychometric properties of specific SPJ tools, which included reviewing their reliability (the measure of a tool's precision and consistency) and validity (how well a tool measures what it purports to measure) to ensure that the SPJs selected for inclusion in the Reference Guide are psychometrically sound.

Using data gathered from this literature review, the research team selected six SPJ tools to include in the Reference Guide. The team selected three SPJ tools for inclusion because they are the best-validated in peer-reviewed scientific studies and have the most significant evidence base. The research team also opted to review three additional promising SPJ tools that have been supported by preliminary studies but are still undergoing further validation. Although not yet as thoroughly researched, these newer instruments focus on specific issues that sometimes emerge in C-InT inquiries, such as workplace violence, radicalization, and intimate partner violence.

The first three tools reviewed are evidence-based tools that have been built upon the best available empirical research and validated in peer-reviewed scientific studies:

- Historical Clinical Risk Management-20, Version 3 (HCR-20^{V3}; Douglas et al., 2013),

- Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability (START; Webster et al., 2004), and

- Spousal Assault Risk Assessment Guide, Version 3 (SARA-V3; Kropp & Hart, 2015).

Also reviewed are three tools that have been supported by preliminary studies but are still undergoing further validation:

- Workplace Assessment of Violence Risk, Version 3 (WAVR-21 V3; White & Meloy, 2016),

- Terrorism Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18; Meloy, 2017), and

- Brief Spousal Assault Form for the Evaluation of Risk (B-SAFER; Kropp et al., 2010).

Once the research team selected these six tools, they purchased the SPJ tools and associated materials, including manuals and accompanying worksheets and documentation forms. The research team reviewed these materials and extracted key information to include in the Reference Guide.

Our SMEs drafted and reviewed chapters of the Reference Guide using an iterative process. Supporting team members, including the instructional designer and technical editor, provided editorial revisions to improve readability and cohesion.

Results

The open-source SPJ Reference Guide provides a thorough overview of VRA and TA, describes the use of SPJ in VRA and TA, and reviews six SPJ tools in detail. The Guide is designed to inform C-InT professionals. As such, it does not advocate for any single tool, nor does it provide the reader with the user qualifications (e.g., certification, credentials, or relevant expertise) needed to use the tools in an operational setting.

Section 1: Overview of Violence Risk and Threat Assessment
The first section of the Reference Guide provides an overview of VRA and TA, as well as their key characteristics and distinctions. It also explores the contexts in which the potential for violence may emerge in a C-InT inquiry.

Section 2: The Evolution of Violence Risk Assessment and Emergence of Threat Assessment
The second section explores the evolution of VRA and the emergence of TA. The purpose of this section is to provide context for C-InT Hub personnel around the current standards and procedures that violence risk and threat assessors should follow.

Section 3: Selecting and Integrating SPJ Tools
The third section discusses user qualifications, as well as how best to select and integrate SPJ tools for VRA and TA in C-InT contexts.

Section 4: SPJ Tool Reviews
The fourth section provides a detailed review of six SPJ tools that might be used in VRA and TA. Each tool review includes publication information, a description of the tool, the tool's user/assessor qualifications, an explanation of the appropriate circumstances for using the tool, and an overview of the tool's empirical evidence base. For each of the six SPJ tools reviewed, a case example is also provided to demonstrate application of the tool.

The Reference Guide closes with a set of scenarios that highlight why certain behaviors matter and how those behaviors might lead to the selection of a particular SPJ tool in a C-InT inquiry.

Next Steps

The next step in this project is to distribute and introduce the SPJ Reference Guide to professionals at C-InT Hubs. To ensure that these professionals are aware of and understand how to leverage the information contained in the Reference Guide, it may be helpful to develop and disseminate a brief introduction and orientation with the Guide. This introduction and orientation could be delivered to groups or to individuals, in person or remotely, using a live presenter or a self-paced slide deck or video presentation. Each of these potential modalities offers unique advantages:

- Group presentations facilitate dissemination to large numbers of people and encourage discussion.

- Live presentations (in-person or remote) provide C-InT professionals an opportunity to ask questions about the development and use of the SPJ Reference Guide.

- Slide decks and video presentations allow standardization, ensuring that each user is presented with the same information.

Regardless of the format, an introduction and orientation to the Reference Guide will help to ensure that C-InT professionals are aware of this new resource and know how to use it.

Future Directions

Future research into SPJ tools may include an evaluation of the Reference Guide's impact, an update to the Reference Guide as additional empirical research on SPJ tools is published, or even the development of a new SPJ tool. An SPJ tool designed to address technology-assisted violence, in C-InT cases of cyber-stalking and cyber-bullying, may prove valuable, for instance. The Government may benefit significantly from developing its own SPJ tool(s) that it can own and scale, although any tool developed would need to be evaluated and scientifically validated through peer-reviewed research studies before it can be deployed.

To understand where gaps exist and what type of SPJ tool might be needed, it would be helpful to begin by assessing:

- The number and types of cases encountered by C-InT professionals,

- The nature and extent of education and training among C-InT professionals,

- The assessment tools C-InT professionals use most frequently and the types of cases they routinely encounter for which no SPJ tool currently exists, and

- The usability features of tools that would make them most useful to C-InT professionals.

Future research may also focus on developing a method to apply the general contours of an SPJ approach to the earlier stages of C-InT inquiries. C-InT Hub personnel may benefit from having a structured operational process for collecting, organizing, and analyzing information early in an inquiry. This structured process could be modeled on the SPJ approach, and should be systematic, empirically grounded, reliable, transparent, and intervention oriented. Developing a structured process for the early phases of a case based on the SPJ approach could transform the standard of practice for C-InT teams.

References

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