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The promise of social science

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What can social science offer our understanding of security problems? CREST Director Paul Taylor outlines some of the successes and challenges.

From understanding what drives a terrorist to cataloguing the behaviours of a loyal employee, the security world is littered with 'human' problems. Yet not everybody is convinced that a 'science of us' is needed to solve such problems and such arguments are not without merit; what has social science given us beyond common sense?

That social science often feels like common sense stems from the fact that we all are, to some extent, social scientists. It is the science of our everyday experience. It dissects the things we know a thing or two about. Answering even a simple social science question can involve painstaking work, as anyone who's attempted ethnography or the tireless coding of case material will attest. But answers can confirm our preconceptions, and so are perceived as obvious. And when results don't conform to our intuitions? It's tempting to dismiss findings rather than embrace their novelty and change our worldview.

Many of the successes of social science are characterized by fights against intuition. It took several decades of evidence to dispel the widespread perception that terrorists were 'crazy' and somehow 'different in the head' to others. Now we understand such behaviour to be the result of social pressures and personal motivations, which are as idiosyncratic as the reasons people give for joining government and police organisations that tackle the threat. There are still those who seek a checklist, an 'extremism thermometer,' an automated online identifier, and other one-stop solutions that whittle the complexity of extremism down to a few variables and ignore the false positives. But at least the evidence has the upper hand in most circles.

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Other fights still continue. One covered in this issue of *CSR*, which continues to beget conversations in North America and elsewhere, is the role of 'enhanced interrogation.' Despite evidence suggesting that the best way to elicit information is to build rapport and engage in good questioning, there are some who still see a place for torture. It took several decades of the last century for UK police interviewing practice to adopt the investigative interviewing model that is so engrained, and so effective, today. It will similarly take time for the evidence against coercive or harsh techniques to gain full acceptance. How much time depends on open-minded practitioners and policy makers being willing to weigh the evidence against their intuition.

One promise of social science is developing methods that are grounded in rich empirical evidence. The investigative interview described on page 22 is an example of that. A second, recent example that is developing rapidly in the security field is at the interface of the digital and human. Behavioural and social scientists can access data in new ways thanks to technological advancements. Assessments of personality, interpersonal dynamics, and social moderators of behaviour have become measurable and testable.

On other occasions social science adds value not by discovering something new, but by packaging it up in a digestible way. A tool taught to crisis negotiators and interviewers across the world, known as the cylinder model, is a simple articulation of the different goals that speakers pursue when talking. At its heart is a distinction between speaking about a want or desire (e.g., "What is your name?"), speaking to manage affiliation and trust (e.g., "It's nice to see you"), and speaking to address identity ("Wow you look great"). A quick introspection will confirm that we do use language in these ways; so nothing new here. But the systematic representations of this in the cylinder model has proven useful for training, for planning difficult conversations, and for debriefing incidents once they have happened. If nothing else, the model gives everybody involved a common language for describing what has gone on.

Packaging common sense in a deliverable, repeatable, way – like the cylinder model; measuring and testing our common sense; dispelling myths and folk knowledge where necessary are all examples amongst many that the promise of social science is being delivered now. In the complex mix of human problems that are so central to questions of security – these gains, even if small, are essential.