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TRUST THY ENEMY:

TRUST AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING BETWEEN SOURCE HANDLERS AND INFORMANTS

To elicit intelligence from informants, source handlers have to first gain their trust. This takes time and is likely to change as the relationship moves through different stages.

In 2018, informants helped safeguard over 200 people by disrupting terrorism and organised crime (Home Office, 2021). Studies show that effectively eliciting information from informants relies on the development of rapport, trust, effective questioning, and deception detection. Often these studies focus on single-episode interactions (initial encounters between two parties). Less common is for research to consider the ebb and flow of elicitation processes across the life-cycle of the relationship. The importance of considering these changes can be illustrated with trust. Trust sits at the heart of a source-handler-informant relationship as each accepts a level of vulnerability by sharing sensitive information and relying on each other to make decisions that may critically affect them. Having neither oversight nor control of each other's behaviour makes trust crucial. We know that trust is neither uni-dimensional nor static, that it can take different forms and change over-time. An awareness of this is especially important to source handler-informant relationships as these are conceived at the outset as being longer-term partnerships (compared to, say, a police interviewer and witness).

THE LIFE-CYCLE OF A SOURCE HANDLER-INFORMANT RELATIONSHIP: A STAGE MODEL

One way to understand the life-cycle of a source handler-informant relationship is through Knapp's (1978) Staircase Model. This model maps the development, maintenance and dissolution of relationships over ten stages. The first five stages map the coming together of the relationship, and the final five stages map the termination of the relationship.

Let's consider the first 5 stages to understand how trust may play out. Here the relationship progresses through:

1. The Initiating stage: where the source handler and informant have just met and spend time scanning each other, proceeding with caution when interacting;

2. The Experimenting stage: where the pair try to gather information about the other, searching for commonalities and engaging in small talk;
3. The Intensifying stage: where information disclosure has more depth and the source handler and informant develop shared meanings and where possible, experiences;
4. The Integrating stage: where the pair become more synchronised in behaviours and speech patterns, and become increasingly similar (perceptually or actually); and
5. The Bonding stage: an extension of a previous stage, representing a legal commitment in the relationship.

The model predicts that with each stage comes a greater level of self-disclosure. Simply put, a better relationship will result in more actionable information.

WHAT DETERMINES MOVEMENT BETWEEN STAGES?

The source handler and informant can move forwards through the stages but they can also move backwards, or skip stages entirely. Three processes that are proposed to drive these movements are trust, similarity, and empathy. An increase in these processes moves the relationship to a more advanced stage and increases information disclosure. Conversely, a reduction in these processes can move a relationship backwards, or in the case of a severe violation to a party's expectations, can move the relationship to the termination stages.

Trust develops slowly across time. It is informed by multiple inputs as indicated by other articles in this issue. Related research has emphasised the importance of integrity; an officer who fulfils their promises will foster trust and subsequently promote information disclosure. At the Initiating stage, beliefs regarding another's integrity will be relatively under-developed as there is

minimal information on which to evaluate the other's honesty, consistency or ethical values. At this stage, we might expect trust to be driven by factors such as a person's disposition, or general expectations/ beliefs about source handlers' ability to deliver on their promises if information is shared. These bases allow the relationship to develop, but do not necessarily result in rich information-sharing.

In contrast to trust, similarities (e.g., personal interests) are often used by source handlers as 'hooks' to build a connection. Similarity is influential from early on in a relationship – judgements regarding similarity within the very first interaction can guide later decisions about a relationship. Empathy is emphasised by source handlers as it creates a comfortable atmosphere and rapport. The cognitive, perspective-taking aspect of empathy is expected to contribute to intelligence gathering as a non-coercive tactic. Like similarity, empathy can also occur early on (e.g., source handler showing understanding of the informant's situation). Similarity and empathy could drive relationship progression in the early stages, but trust may take over as small trust exchanges are fulfilled and larger exchanges (or dependencies) develop. Although it takes time to develop, trust may be the most influential process in enabling information disclosure, by decreasing risk perception.

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PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Applying the Staircase Model to source handler-informant relationships provides a framework to identify effective strategies for relationship development. It maps out processes likely to impact information disclosure at different points and allows us to consider how these processes interact and co-exist over time.

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