



THE PROTECTIVE POWER OF BEHAVIOURAL THREAT ASSESSMENT (& MANAGEMENT) (BTAM)

Date: August 20, 2020

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented throughout the evening and does not exclusively represent the views of the speaker or the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On August 20th, 2020, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS) Vancouver hosted its fourth digital roundtable event of the year, *The Protective Power of Behavioural Threat Assessment (& Management) (BTAM)*. The presentation was conducted by guest speaker Andrea Ringrose, Director of Campus Public Safety at Simon Fraser University, who is also on the Board of Directors at Canadian Association of Threat Assessment Professionals. Ringrose's presentation gave an overview on behavioural threat assessment and management, and how public safety and caring for persons of concern are interconnected when assessing threats and risks. Subsequently, Ringrose answered questions submitted by the audience, which focused on the assessment of different offender types, the handling bias during the BTAM process, the role of artificial intelligence, and the possibility of echo chambers accelerating behaviour.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

BTAM is an important concept that is likely considered in all disciplines, and therefore should be well understood in order to better prepare for assessing and managing threats at all levels, including national security in Canada. Threat assessment and management fall under the overall concept of BTAM. Ringrose states the importance of not only focusing on possible victims when assessing and managing threats, but also persons of concern in order to try and mitigate the threat they may pose. Additionally, the mental health continuum was presented and the possible influence of mental health on an individual's behaviour. Thus,

it may be in everybody's interest to learn the process for threat assessment and management in order to better prepare for threatening situations and/or persons at all levels, while keeping in mind threat enhancers and the implications that might ensue because of them.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Behavioural threat assessment encompasses different concepts that are significant in understanding its overall role in public safety and security. Threat assessment looks at what threats are present, the severity of the threat, and violent risk assessment of the subject of concern. Violent risk assessment estimates the probability of general violent behaviour. In addition to threat assessment, threat management is the next step after threat assessment. Through the accumulation of information during threat assessment, a determination of whether the subject of concern poses a potential safety threat is established when looking to manage the threat. Therefore, threat management focuses on diminishing dangerous and concerning behaviour.

The process for threat assessment and management begins when the concern is reported. This initial step can involve the person of concern or be communicated by an unknown individual. Once the concern is reported, a triage determines whether there is validity behind the referral and the urgency level the concern requires, which will assist in assembling a team that can best assess and deal with the threat. This may include deciding immediate protective measures and the next steps that need to be investigated further for a thorough assessment.

During the assessment phase, the results of the inquiry will lead the analysis of the threat. The analysis involves detecting threat enhancers, as well as threat mitigators. Threat enhancers are existing realities, such as history of violence, exposure to violence, and mental health that exist within the subject of concern and may affect their behaviour. Threat enhancers can possibly be evident through the display of warning behaviours. These behaviours represent changes in patterns of behaviour that may accelerate risk. Ringrose mentioned eight warning behaviours written by Meloy et al. (2012): Pathway, fixation, identification, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, directly communicated threat, and last resort warning behaviours.

Following the assessment stage is management, which involves the protection of all persons and property involved, and also developing strategies to treat and

manage the threat posed. Management can alter the trajectory of the course of life for not only future victims, but also the subject of concern. Therefore, these strategies should involve continuous monitoring of behaviour to track any change(s) that have occurred or may occur.

Reassessment of the situation or person is an ongoing process to ensure BTAM's accuracy, but also to find out if any strategies need to be altered to better suit the current situation and/or subject of concern. Further, Ringrose mentions the mental health continuum and the effect mental health can have on an individual's behaviour. The continuum contains maximum mental health and minimal mental disorder and describes where there may be a mental illness and whether it may have a positive or poor impact on the mental health of the subject of concern.

With the prevalence of the internet, social media and other online sources may be used to gather data when conducting a behavioural threat assessment on a situation or subject of concern. Open-source intelligence can be goldmines and a great tool for information, but they can also be landmines and dangerous if the assessor is not careful when accessing websites and forums. It is important that one is aware of what they are viewing and whether they may be monitored by others, such as problematic individuals. Ringrose defines two problematic individuals, hunters and howlers.

Hunters hunt for their victims and actually intend violence. Their behaviour remains the focus and they engage in attack-related behaviour. On the other hand, howlers draw attention to themselves and want to frighten victims, but do not intend violence. Identification markers of howlers include inappropriate behaviour (written or telephone), veiled subject, defer harm, conditional harm, make habitual or chronic threats.

It is important to reassess howlers and their behaviour because it is possible for them to be 'pushed' into becoming a hunter. These exceptions include interpersonal relationships in which the howler will continue to spew threats as long as it continues to do its job. But, as soon as the howler begins to realize the threat is no longer obtaining the goal it was set out to achieve, their behaviour may worsen and become violent and in return their behaviour may begin mirroring a hunting style. This is one of the reasons as to why it is vital for threat managers to continuously reassess the subject of concern and is similar to what national security sectors should also do because it is easy for offenders to adapt, but also remain 'hidden' in this age of technology.

Question Period

The discussion centered around the intricacies addressed by BTAM and the role of assessors in mitigating bias.

- BTAM is a field that looks to focus on both victims and subjects of concern. Media outlets have the ability to glorify attackers but should avoid it and instead divert most of the attention to the victim(s). This is an area where the media needs to improve to ensure the portrayal of offenders and attackers are not magnified.
- Moreover, BTAM requires humans to play a primary role in the assessment and management process because of the many nuances involved. Therefore, at this point, humans are better detectors and evaluators than artificial intelligence programs for behavioural threat assessment.
- Due to human involvement, there is always a likelihood of bias. In order to mitigate the risk of bias, organizing a multidisciplinary team can assist in mitigating the risk because it allows for different perspectives and diverse opinions. Also, the addition of a ‘clean viewer’, a viewer who has no knowledge of the file and having them view the file and provide a perspective is another way to minimize the risk of bias.
- Further, there is always a possibility of subjects of concern increasing their behaviour, which changes their threat level. For example, echo chambers can enhance behavioural factors, but they can also be protective factors for certain individuals. Thus, this speaks to the point that a threat assessment is an individual process that assesses each person independently because each subject has experienced different situations in their lives that contribute to and are important during the assessment and management process.
- Differences between different offenders require the use of different models. For example, pedophiles offend differently from violent offenders.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- There are four main steps in the process for threat assessment and management: (1) Concern is reported, (2) Triage, (3) Assess, and (4) Management.
- Mental health has a likelihood of affecting an individual’s behaviour, but it may not be the only factor and the only reason contributing to the behaviour.

- Eight dynamic warning behaviours that can possibly act as threat enhancers: Pathway, fixation, identification, novel aggression, energy burst, leakage, directly communicated threat, and last resort warning behaviours.
- Open-source intelligence is a great tool for data but should be used with caution.
- Two types of problematic individuals are howlers and hunters. The intent of violence is one of the main differences between the two groups.
- BTAM requires an understanding of emotional intelligence, so that all perspectives are considered, and bias is limited.
- Assembling diverse and multidisciplinary teams is important for different viewpoints and allows for a more well-rounded assessment and management of a file.



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