The Psychology of small groups: Implications for counter terrorism investigations

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Aims

• Psychology of small groups
• Explore how small terror/criminal groups develop
• Implications for counter terrorism investigations

• implications for
  – Risk assessment
  – Information collection and analysis
How do groups form?

- Model of group formation (Bruce Tuckman, 1965; 1977)
- Four processes of formation
  - Forming
  - Storming
  - Norming
  - Performing
- One stage after destruction of group
  - Mourning
- Generally
  - Groups face inward at first then progressively more outward facing
  - Group coherence moves from low to high
Forming

• When a group first comes together
  – Uncertainty amongst member
  – Shyness if strangers
  – Extraverts may rapidly assume leadership role

• Maintaining group is major concern
• Inward facing
• No group identity set up

• New Groups vulnerable to collapse at this stage
Storming

- Inward looking, group main concern
- Most uncomfortable phase
- Disagreements
- Jockeying for
  - Position
  - Authority
  - Influence

- Roles eventually allocated
- Initial leaders may not survive this
- Group may fragment
  - Breakaway factions
Norming

• Group inward and outward looking
• What
  – does the group stand for?
  – Is expected of members?
  – Do members need to contribute?

• Begin to form group identity

• Strong group coherence makes performing most likely

• May slip back to storming i.e. disagreements
  – E.g. AQ Azzam and Bin Laden; Breakaway factions

• Again group may break up
High group coherence

• *Greatest when: norming successful*
  
  – Group members close to each other in time and space
  – Meet regularly
  – Perceive other group members as similar to self
  – Prior beliefs consistent with the group’s beliefs
  – If group is important to members
  – Group perceived to be different from others
  – Perceived threat to group
  – Group is separated from others
  – Directive leadership

  – Includes on-line interaction
Group think

- Highest group coherence
- Performance most likely
Groupthink Symptoms

- A feeling of invulnerability creates excessive optimism and encourages risk taking.
- Discounting warnings that might challenge assumptions.
- An unquestioned belief in the group’s morality, causing members to ignore the consequences of their actions.
- Stereotyped views of outsiders.
- Pressure to conform against members of the group who disagree.
- Shutting down of ideas that deviate from the apparent group consensus.
- An illusion of unanimity with regards to going along with the group.
- Mindguards — self-appointed members who shield the group from dissenting opinions
Performing

- Outward looking
- Group begins to act out
- Acts may be reviewed
- i.e. consider performance
  - did it work?
  - did someone fail? If so who?
  - who’s fault was failure?
  - Is the leader good enough?
  - Are our goals valid

- Can slip back to storming or re-norming

- Performing also way of creating and maintaining group coherence
Mourning

- If the group breaks up
- Feelings of distress
- Desire to be back with the group
- Attempts to recreate the group or similar

- Red Army Faction - at least 3 incarnations
- 21/7 bombers phone calls
Relationship

Mourning
Implications for CT Investigations

• Identifying group stages
  – Possible weak points of group
  – Points of intervention/disruption

• Evidence for behaviours showing
  – group coherence
  – Group think

• Risk
  – When is a group greatest and least threat?
  – Targeted and types of intervention

• Mourning –
  – Behaviours after arrest
  – after arrest - separate members/minimize contact?
Conclusions

• Application of behavioural science model to investigation

• Tuckman’s model
  – Simplistic and applicable
  – Makes predictions
  – Allows reasoned judgements

• Some success in use in UK CT
Any Questions?

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