RESEARCHING TERRORISM AND SECURITY: ASKING THE RIGHT (FOLLOW-UP) QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

While survey research is useful for providing a clear sense of the characteristics of large groups of people, it is less helpful for the study of terrorism and society. With such a method, individual contexts are sacrificed in favour of comparability and *generalizability*. As scholars have noted, surveys are strong on *reliability* but weak on *validity*, because accurately researching topics such as terrorism *depend* on taking individual contexts seriously.

RÉSUMÉ

Alors que la recherche par sondages est utile dans la description de caractéristiques générales de certains grands groupes d'individus, ce genre de méthode est moins efficace dans l'étude du terrorisme et de la société. Dans la méthode par sondage, les contextes individuels sont souvent sacrifiés en faveur de l'aspect de comparaison et de généralisation. Comme plusieurs spécialistes l'ont déjà noté, la force des sondages est dans leur *fiabilité* et leur faiblesse est dans leur *validité*; une recherche précise de sujets tels que le terrorisme *dépend* d'une prise en compte sérieuse des contextes individuels.

While the academic and policy literature on terrorist movements around the world seemingly grows by the week, what is relatively less studied is how individuals conceive of, understand, and think about terrorism in their everyday lives. Bombs do not explode every day on Canadian streets, but individuals on a daily basis move in and out of a national security apparatus, characterized by identification cards, airport security, and the like. However, their *perception* of the existence of such an apparatus and its effectiveness is less well understood. Needless to say, how Canadians define terrorism, understand its prevalence, and see it directly affecting their lives, may determine the kinds of policies they support or reject. It is vitally important, then, to have a clear gauge of how Canadians think about these issues. The Association of Canadian Studies' (ACS) Kaniska-funded project, *Canadian Perspectives on Security, Terrorism, and Counter-Terrorism*, begins to fill some of these gaps in the academic literature. The first round of national surveys undertaken by ACS, while producing many important insights, reveals quite clearly that important follow-up questions need to be asked.

The importance of the right follow-up question during interviews or surveys became evident during field research for both of our doctoral dissertations. Amarasingam's dissertation probed identity formation, tensions, and affinities within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada, particularly since the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009. He argued that members of the diaspora community, through demonstrations, newly formed organizations, and changes in individual identity, are adopting new strategies aimed at disassociating Tamil

nationalism from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), re-branding it in the language of human rights, and marketing it as a transnational political movement. In addition to asking questions about activism and ethnic identity, he also inquired about the role of religion in their lives and the significance it had for interpreting political developments in Sri Lanka. One particular interviewee's response is noteworthy because it highlights not only some of the limitations of survey research, but also the importance of being able to dig deeper into the initial answers provided by participants. When asked about his religious identity, one Tamil man in Toronto responded: "If I had to *fill out a form or something* I would put down Roman Catholic, but I guess my own religious belief is — I would like to call it universal."

Such an answer creates many problems for academics that are equally relevant for research involving large-scale surveys. When they have to "fill out a form or something," individuals will often select: (1) options that they do not understand or do not understand very well, (2) options that they believe other participants may have selected, or, as in the case of the interviewee mentioned above, (3) options that allow them to remain identified with their culture and upbringing even if their *current* beliefs are radically different. Because this was a one-on-one interview, Amarasingam was able to ask the necessary follow-up questions, inquiring about how he defined Roman Catholicism, what he meant by "universal" and how it differed from his Roman Catholic upbringing, and why he still felt the need to select Roman Catholicism on a survey questionnaire. While it is unfair to argue that *initial* answers given by research participants, whether in face-to-face interviews or large-scale surveys, can rarely be taken at face value, it is true that they often invite further questions and call for clarification.

Similarly, Adam Stewart, in his doctoral research on the transformation of religious identity among Canadian Pentecostals, detected as much as a 19% variation between the responses that participants provided to the exact same questions presented to them in both a self-administered survey and a follow-up interview. When either: (1) given the opportunity to ask a clarifying question during the follow-up interview or, alternatively, (2) having the opportunity to subsequently investigate the language contained in a particular question on the survey instrument on their own, participants often changed their responses to the same question during the follow-up interview.

When Stewart, for instance, asked one interviewee attending a Canadian Pentecostal congregation if he believed that receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit after conversion was an important part of the Christian life — historically the single most important indicator of religious identity within the Pentecostal tradition — the interviewee responded by saying: "Now, you might need to elaborate a bit more on the baptism of the Holy Spirit." After the interviewer clarified how the term Spirit baptism was being used in the study, the interviewee replied: "Then I am going to answer that with a 'no,'" reversing the way that he answered the same question on the survey. When asked the same question, another interviewee responded: "See, on the survey, I answered 'yes' and then I found out what that actually means… I just assumed that it meant that the Spirit came and lived inside of you. I didn't realize it meant that you developed the other stuff, like the gifts of the Spirit." This interviewee, who previously answered in the affirmative when asked this question on the survey instrument, similarly reversed her answer during a follow-up interview, demonstrating how crucial the use of both mixed-methods research and, particularly, follow-up interviews are for conducting social research.

Some preliminary survey results provided by the Association for Canadian Studies show that participants, when asked how they would define terrorism, gave answers that were quite scattered. Indeed, 21% of respondents selected "I don't know," with another 12% refusing to answer. It is evident, however, that participants carried with them some notion of "terrorism" gleaned from news sources and popular culture when answering subsequent questions. When asked whether terrorism had declined in the world over the last decade, 66% answered in the negative. One is left to wonder what exactly they believe to have declined. Similarly, organizers of the survey inquired about what people see as the root causes of terrorism. For this particular question, the respondent is forced to make a choice between poverty and economic inequality, religious fundamentalism, and Western foreign policy (military intervention in overseas conflicts). The fact that 52% chose "religious fundamentalism" provides some clues about the general perception of terrorism that people carry with them even when answering other questions in the survey.

While we are somewhat critical of survey research in general, we do recognize its strengths. Surveys are most useful for giving researchers a broad sense of the characteristics of a large group of people (i.e., generalizability), whether students at a university or citizens of a state. Standardized questions enable clear measurement of the results, which can easily be compared with results from other groups who have also completed the survey. In survey research, then, "observer subjectivity" is all but eliminated. In other words, *individual context* is sacrificed in favour of comparability. As many scholars have pointed out, survey research is strong on *reliability* but fairly weak on *validity*. This is because accurately researching topics such as terrorism and counter-terrorism *depend* on taking individual contexts seriously. We may discover that 40% of Canadians support Al-Qaeda, but further in-depth probing is necessary to adequately understand the varied reasons that inform such support. Approximate indicators such as "agree/disagree" often fail to capture nuance, complexity, and emotion. While some of these weaknesses can be fixed within the area of survey design, more fruitful results could be obtained through follow-up interviews during which more contextual questions are asked.