
National Security Education in Canada

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Introduction

This project asked the question: How are police officers trained in national security in Canada? What can the process of studying national security education in Canada tell us about national security itself? We conclude that national security education in Canada takes care to avoid racial profiling and stay within the confines of law, there are still issues related to the use of indicators, confusion over audience, and problematic pedagogies. Further, research in this field is hampered by secrecy and gatekeeping, which makes drawing conclusions particularly challenging.

Why Study National Security Education?

Shifts in how we understand national security, as well as the threats faced by Canada, means that police officers are commonly understood to be on the front lines of national security, and notably of any campaign against terrorism or violent extremism. From a preventive perspective, police officers may receive calls from community members concerned about family members, friends, or community members they fear are in danger of committing a terrorist act.¹ From the perspective of response, police officers are nearly always instigators of the now-prevalent 'Hubs' or 'Situation Tables' that bring together various community agencies in order to intervene in cases where individuals are deemed to be at high risk of harming themselves or others. From the perspective of counter-terrorism, police officers are substantial generators of intelligence, and, particularly in the case of the RCMP, have primary responsibility for intervention in many issue areas that are widely considered to be national security (for instance, tracking and intervening in right wing extremism). Even local police are often first on the scene, responsible for maintaining control and preserving evidence in the immediate aftermath of any incident that might be construed as having a national security nexus. What front-line police officers know about security shapes both efficiency and effectiveness of policing, but also equity, diversity, and inclusiveness.

Scholars in the field of critical security studies have pointed to the study of bureaucracy, and, in particular, education and training, as important to understand how threats to national security are conceptualized and addressed (Bigo 1996). The language, images, graphics, and organizing principles used in policies, education and training materials, and regulations can have permissive or constraining effects because of the images, interests, and worldviews they create and reproduce. For instance, a police review board after-action review of the G20 in Toronto, Ontario in 2010 argued that police violence against civilians could be directly related to the fact that police had been primed, through stories and photographs about previous Summits, to expect violence, and had not been given any training in peaceful conflict resolution (McNeilly 2012). In another example, Monaghan and Molnar (2016), found that RCMP training documents on radicalization tended to reify and reproduce a simplistic narrative of Islamist extremism as a disproportionate threat to Canada, despite efforts in the academic community to promote a more nuanced reading of inclusivity and calls to avoid focusing on one particular terrorist threat.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, terrorist activity includes travelling for the purposes of joining a terrorist group or planning a terrorist attack, planning and / or executing a terrorist act, and joining a terrorist group.

Police Training in Canada

In Canada, police training is not centrally organized. Most recruits are required to have a university degree or college diploma. On recruitment, they complete a cadet training course of several weeks to a few months, for example at the Ontario Police College or the École de Police du Québec. In Canada, the RCMP is responsible for federal policing, national security policing, and for providing policing services on a contract basis in all provinces except Ontario and Québec. Recruits to the RCMP are trained at the RCMP Training Academy in Regina, Saskatchewan. The RCMP also runs two core courses that form the national security curriculum in Canada: the National Security Criminal Investigations Course (NSCI) and the Counter-Terrorism Information Officer Course (CTIO). Police officers also complete in-service continuing education courses offered by individual forces, police colleges, and the online training organization “Canadian Police Knowledge Network.” Only a few of these courses, outside of those the RCMP provides, concern national security explicitly. Police forces will also run ad-hoc seminars and trainings that are likely to be more responsive to current events. This project studied more formalized curriculum and education materials because they are more likely to reflect institutionalized knowledge and the values of the police department rather than who was available to give a seminar at a particular time.

Method

After making repeated, formal and informal requests to 25 organizations with a mandate to train in-service police officers, we were granted access to six courses that were suitable for analysis.² These courses are not directly analogous, as they are aimed at different audiences. From there, we conducted a thematic analysis of the course materials that were available.³ This means that we do not treat the course materials as a record of knowledge transmitted from instructor to student, but rather as a set of choices about rhetoric, framing, politics, and power dynamics (Da Silva 1999). The way the curriculum is framed can shape how learners think. Through the choices made in constructing the curriculum, including the readings chosen, assignments given, the topic and the order they are presented in, the examples and images used, learners are encouraged to think about the topics in particular ways.

High Level Findings

Logics of Security

- The courses we studied fit into one of several *logics of security* as identified in the literature on counter-terrorism and critical security studies. A *logic of situational awareness* acknowledges that terrorist attacks emerge out of everyday situations (a streetscape, for instance) and police must respond in a way that is not simply temporally anticipatory, but shows an embodied awareness of space. Terrorism must be responded

² These requests were made, and the data was collected, primarily between May 2019 and May 2020.

³ There are substantial limits to this kind of analysis: written curriculum is only a partial representation of the instructor’s intentions, and of the classroom experience.

to as it happens, and will only be fully understood in hindsight (Krasmann and Hentschel 2019). A *logic of pre-emption* is anticipatory and focuses on strategies that attempt to determine the risk that someone will become a terrorist threat in the future. It relies on acting in the present to mitigate unknowable future threats (Stockdale 2013). Finally, a *logic of public health* focuses on public services, but rather than having as its primary focus intervention for individuals suspected of being vulnerable to radicalization, the primary logic is to improve societal determinants of health for everyone. It implies targeting population-level determinants of health that seem to be correlated with a number of poor outcomes that include, but are not limited to, vulnerability to committing an act of terrorism. These include youth, social isolation, marginalization, and discrimination, lack of social capital, and trauma (Bhui et al. 2012; Alcalá, Sharif, and Samari 2017). As described below, we found that there were clear relationships between the logics that shaped the course structures, and the content of the courses.

Rhetorical commitments to law & equality

Each course we studied shared a strong rhetorical commitment to upholding national security law, avoiding racial profiling, and upholding principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). While this commitment is admirable and expected, this is a case where the study of curricular materials cannot show the whole picture. Principles of EDI will be transmitted more broadly through cadet training courses and on the job mentorship, not simply through courses related to national security. Further, rhetorical commitments to EDI transmitted through curricular materials may not translate to improved practices in the field, as outlined in the July, 2021 Report of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security on Systemic Racism in Policing in Canada.

Confusion over indicators

The use of indicators—specific behaviours that are supposed to point towards a higher risk of violence—has become widespread as a counter to the practice of racial profiling in national security policing. We saw this explicit use of indicators in three of the courses we studied. In some instances, there was some confusion in the pedagogical materials between the use of indicators that a terrorist attack is imminent, and indicators of radicalization. This confusion emerges from a conflation of the logic of situational awareness—which is about understanding how everyday tools and behaviours might transform into terrorist attacks—with the logic of pre-emption, which tries to predict events that actually will occur. Lists of indicators also tended to group together almost always innocuous behaviours with almost always problematic ones. Indeed, the use of lists itself as a pedagogical tool lends itself to a ‘check the boxes’ approach where learners perceive that the more indicators that are present, the more likely an individual is involved in terrorism. This is counter to the idea of viewing indicators in context. The result may be hasty action where it is unwarranted, and ultimately even the profiling of groups or individuals (Monaghan and Molnar 2016). Training that implicitly relies on checklists may also lead to assumption that this model is more scientifically accurate, trustworthy, and legitimate as a way of doing national security than it actually is. It is notable that one course

that operated through the logic of public health used language of risk factors paired with protective factors, and also focused on presenting risk factors as risks of harmful behaviour more generally, rather than on behavioural indicators of potential violent extremism more specifically (See Corner, Bouhana, and Gill 2019 for more on the dangers of approaching indicators or risk factors as a checklist.) Disambiguating how police are trained about behavioural indicators has the potential to improve operational effectiveness and decrease the chances that innocent people are caught up in national security investigations.

Confusion over audience

There was wide variation in the courses about the intended audience. In some cases, the courses are explicitly public-facing—aimed at parents, caregivers, and members of the general public who would expect to come into contact with individuals susceptible to radicalization only on an incidental basis. Others are aimed at police officers. In some of the courses we examined, there was confusion over the audience: some course materials seemed to be aimed at police, and some at the general public. This becomes problematic for pedagogy, because different audiences have different needs. For instance, a parent may rightly become extremely concerned if their child accesses extremist material on the internet, but for a police officer, any individual young person’s internet history is of only marginal interest absent anything else that suggests they should investigate further. A better approach would be to tailor training courses to quite specific audiences, and follow through with actions that are appropriate for each.

Problematic pedagogies

Of course, any course, but particularly a professional development course, must keep the learner’s interest in order to convey information effectively. The courses we studied were varied in their pedagogies. Most used a combination of video and text. In some cases, interactive activities were built into the course materials. What concerned us about some courses was the use of pedagogical techniques that seemed designed to belittle learners or question their judgement. For instance, a learner might be asked to choose one answer from a list—where all turned out to be correct. Such techniques can make learners suspicious of the knowledge presented in the course, or lead to demoralization as they consistently get things wrong.

Gatekeeping and secrecy

At every step in this project, the researchers faced challenges in obtaining access to the data required to answer our research question. Originally, this was supposed to be a comparative project, studying Australian and Canadian approaches to national security education and training. Ultimately, we were not able to conclude agreements with any Australian police forces that would simultaneously adhere to University policy and so they are not included in the dataset. These research challenges persisted whether we used informal approaches, formal applications through prescribed research committees, or access to information requests. A large percentage of researcher time was spent trying to obtain course materials, and simply figuring out the appropriate process to use. We contacted 25 law enforcement organizations. In

many cases, we simply received no response from law enforcement organizations, or we were referred back to the RCMP, after being told no courses in national security were offered (in a couple of cases this was demonstrably not true, but did not change our success rate). In many others, it was very difficult to figure out who the right person to speak to was—and our interlocutors on the law enforcement side often did not know either. In two cases, we spent months in negotiations with our university research offices and law enforcement organizations, only to be unable to reach agreements to access information over what seemed to be fairly minor issues. Relying on Access-to-Information requests as an additional method for data collection was similarly challenging. Our requests, now made over two and a half years ago, have still not been processed at time of publication. This left us feeling frustrated and wondering about how these experiences might look different for researchers with different positionalities. Following de Goede, Bosma, and Pallister-Williams (2019), we asked ourselves what we might learn about national security by “mapping the contours of secrecy and obfuscation” we faced. Ultimately, it was not clear whether the challenges we faced were a result of tradecraft—that the courses we wished to access would genuinely compromise national security—or gatekeeping—that there was some other bureaucratic reason not to allow researchers access.

Conclusion

This research, by virtue of lack of access to information, only touches on a few courses. This limits our conclusions. So, too, does studying only course materials, outside the context of the classroom experience, or how education and training fit into a larger constellation of influences on police behaviour in the field of national security. However, we can still conclude that national security education and training is both formally and informally governed by the power of the RCMP as the LEO responsible for national security, despite the fact that police officers at all levels are widely considered to be on the front lines of national security. We can see that there is no consistent approach to how courses commonly taken as professional development by police forces present information, leading to a wide range of learner experiences. Finally, further research in this area would be valuable, but may continue to be hampered by the culture of secrecy surrounding national security education and training.

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