The promise of social science

What can social science offer our understanding of security problems? CREST Director Paul Taylor outlines some of the successes and challenges.

From understanding what drives a terrorist to cataloguing the behaviours of a loyal employee, the security world is littered with `human' problems. Yet not everybody is convinced that a `science of us' is needed to solve such problems and such arguments are not without merit; what has social science given us beyond common sense?

That social science often feels like common sense stems from the fact that we all are, to some extent, social scientists. It is the science of our everyday experience. It disconnects the things we know a thing or two about. Answering even a simple social science question can involve painstaking work, as anyone who's attempted ethnography will attest. But answers can confirm our preconceptions, and so are perceived as obvious. And when results don't conform to our intuitions? It's tempting to dismiss them.

That social science is being measured and tested. Assessments of personality, interpersonal dynamics, and social moderators of behaviour have become measurable and testable. Advances in technology have expanded the number of variables that can be observed and measured. Social scientists can access data in rich empirical evidence. The packaging common sense in a deliverable, repeatable, way – like the cylinder model, is a simple articulation of the different goals that speakers pursue when talking. At its heart is a distinction between speaking about a want or desire (e.g., `It's nice to see you'), and speaking to address identity (`Wow you look great'). A quick introspection will confirm that we do use language in these ways, so nothing new here. But the systematic representations of this in the cylinder model has proven useful for training, for planning difficult conversations, and for debriefing incidents once they have happened. If nothing else, the model gives everybody involved a common language for describing what has gone on.

The promise of social science is being delivered now. In the complex mix of human problems that are so central to questions of security – these gains, even if small, are essential.

You can read more about the cognitive interview, mentioned in this article, on the CREST website at www.crestresearch.ac.uk.