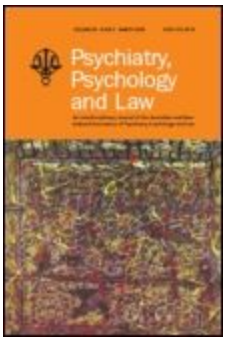

Inside the Shadows: A survey of UK HUMINT practitioners examining their considerations when handling a Covert Human Intelligence Source (CHIS).

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Law enforcement agencies in the UK are embracing evidence-based policing and recognise the importance of human source intelligence (HUMINT), in the decision-making process. A review of the literature identified six categories likely to impact the handling of a Covert Human Intelligence Source (CHIS), or an informant: (i) handler personality traits; (ii) informant motivation; (iii) rapport; (iv) gaining cooperation; (v) obtaining information, and; (vi) detecting deception. This study sought to identify which of these categories current HUMINT practitioners considered the most when planning and conducting a meeting with an informant. A bespoke online survey was designed and disseminated to 34 practitioners using purposive and snowball sampling. Directed Content Analysis and Thematic Content Analysis were conducted. Results indicate that practitioners appear most concerned with gaining co-operation (iv) and detecting deception (vi). Results also found an inter-connectivity between the six categories, with informant handlers often having to balance competing requirements. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: CHIS; HUMINT; intelligence; informant; handler; law enforcement; practitioner; survey; content analysis; evidence-based policing

A Survey of UK HUMINT Practitioners

In January 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) government's Home Office updated the Covert Human Intelligence Sources Bill Factsheet, outlining the efficacy of Covert Human Intelligence Source's (CHIS; henceforth referred to as informants) to UK law enforcement and national security (Home Office, 2021). As part of this factsheet, the UK Home Office noted that not only had informants helped to identify and disrupt a number of terrorist plots, but in 2018, they had been used by the UK's National Crime Agency to

disrupt at least 30 threats to life and the safeguarding of over 200 people. In addition, the use of informants in the Metropolitan Police Service, resulted in 3,500 arrests together with the seizure of over 100 firearms and 400 other weapons in the space of a single year (Home Office, 2021). The Home Office factsheet highlights the importance of informants to the prevention and detection of serious crime in the UK, however, the use and conduct of informants remains an under-researched area (Billingsley, 2009; Nunan et al., 2020a).

With the existing trend towards evidenced based policing (Heaton & Tong, 2015; Sherman, 2013; College of Policing, 2020), it is foreseeable that practitioners who handle informants will increasingly turn to the academic community for empirical solutions to operational problems. Therefore, the current study seeks to build upon previous studies (ie. Birkett & Pike, 2017; Nunan et al., 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; Nunan, Stanier, Milne, Shawyer, Walsh & May, 2020) by establishing a clear framework for future research, informed by the views and concerns of experienced practitioners. To achieve this, a bespoke survey was designed to identify current and active informant handlers' main concerns. The design of the survey was informed by previous research examining the views of practitioners experienced in the collection of human source intelligence (HUMINT) in the United States (US; i.e., Redlich et al., 2014; Russano, Narchet, & Kleinman, 2014; Russano, Narchet, Kleinman, & Meissner, 2014). Although much of the extant research has been conducted in the US, predominantly in relation to terrorist detainees, a number of thematic categories were identified which appeared to be generalisable to the UK, and which were used to inform the design and analysis of the current study. These categories were: (i) handler personality traits; (ii) informant motivation; (iii) rapport; (iv) gaining cooperation; (v) obtaining information, and; (vi) detecting deception.

Intelligence-led Policing

The traditional image of criminal justice is one in which crimes are investigated and prosecuted reactively (Dixon, 2009). However, Dixon observes that although this model still exists, it is being supplemented by a proactive model, which places an emphasis on public safety by seeking to identify and prevent serious crime before it occurs. This is perhaps best exemplified in the UK by counter-terrorism legislation which, following attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, USA, in 2001, evolved to create a raft of preparatory offences designed to enable the prosecution of terrorists before they committed an attack (Pearse, 2009). However, proactive intervention requires timely and accurate intelligence (Dixon, 2009; Pearse, 2009) and it is arguable that the emphasis on community safety and proactive investigation, hastened by the global threat of Islamist terrorism, led to the widespread implementation of intelligence-led policing (Ratcliffe, 2002).

In the UK, the foundations of an intelligence-led approach were laid out in a 1997 report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. They argued that intelligence-led policing was a cost-effective means of reducing and preventing crime, and its principles were quickly adopted (Ratcliffe, 2002). In the UK, this led to the implementation of the National Intelligence Model that introduced an "intelligence-led approach to policing" (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2005, p. 8). Although this model is now somewhat dated, the pre-eminence of an intelligence-led approach can still be seen in the National Decision Model (2014) which highlights the importance of gathering information as the initial stage of the decision-making process. The Association of Chief Police Officers (2007) list 20 potential sources of information, including Closed Circuit Television and forensic science, but specifically highlight the importance of identifying and managing informants.

HUMINT can therefore be seen to be a cornerstone of an intelligence-led approach to criminal justice which seeks to minimise risk and maximise public safety; furthermore, with the recent emergence of evidence-based policing (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017; Heaton & Tong, 2015; Sherman, 2013), it is foreseeable that HUMINT practitioners in the UK (and elsewhere) will increasingly turn to academic research for evidence-based solutions to human source management. It is thus imperative to understand firstly, how the legislative and operational environment in the UK is likely to impact HUMINT practitioners, and secondly, to which areas of human source management academic research might reasonably contribute.

The HUMINT Environment in the UK

Coulam (2006) describes HUMINT as "information gained from people" (p. 8). Nunan, et al. (2020a) adopt a similarly broad view, defining HUMINT as, "…the discipline charged with eliciting intelligence through interactions with human sources" (p. 1). However, such a definition, when applied to a forensic or law enforcement context, encompasses so many conceivable situations, such as a witness statement, a suspect interview, or even a passer-by directing a police officer towards the scene of a crime, that it is rendered almost meaningless. Consequently, many researchers examining HUMINT have conceptualised an interview situation, and have drawn distinctions based upon the objectives of the interviewer; specifically, interviews conducted for the purpose of gaining evidence in a criminal investigation, and those conducted for the purpose of gathering intelligence (Intelligence Science Board Study on Educing Information, 2006; Evans et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2013; Vrij & Granhag, 2014).

Even with this distinction, the term HUMINT encapsulates a broad range of intelligence collection activities, and researchers often refer, almost interchangeably, to prisoners of war, defectors, detainees, volunteers who walk into an embassy or police

station to provide information, people subjected to a stop at ports, and standard confidential informants (Borum, 2006; Brandon, 2014; Drogin, 2007; Hazlett, 2006; Vrij & Granhag, 2014). Whilst the objectives of the interviewer across each of these situations may be identical (i.e., to gather intelligence), the situational dilemma of the human source is often very different. For example, Kleinman (2006) observed that two apparently similar activities (i.e., the interrogation of a detained combatant and debriefing a tasked informant) are actually different in terms of psychological mindset and physical environment. According to Kleinman, a tasked source shares their handler's objective, and is in a cooperative relationship with them, whereas a detainee is more likely to view their interrogator as an enemy, and will often seek to withhold known information. In relation to the physical environment, Kleinman notes that a source being debriefed engages with their handler voluntarily and is free to leave at any time. However, a detained source is in a custodial setting, and their physical situation is within the control of the interrogating officer. Thus, a human source could be considered to exist in one of four possible categories along a 2 (physical situation: incarcerated or community) x 2 (access to information: active [actively acquired information having been tasked to do so] or passive [passively obtained target information without the expectation of having to later divulge it to an interviewer]) matrix.

Much of the research conducted to date has been driven by the mistreatment of terrorist detainees in military detention centres, such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay (Alison & Alison, 2017; Brandon, 2014; Otis, 2006). Consequently, much of the extant research envisages a human source who is incarcerated and has passive access to information. However, in the UK, there is a legislative definition of an informant, known as a CHIS. Whilst this definition applies to both undercover police officers and

informants, the current article will consider how this definition impacts informants and informant handlers. A CHIS is defined as any person who:

a) establishes or maintains a personal or other relationship with another person for the covert purpose of facilitating the doing of anything falling within paragraph (b) or (c);

b) covertly uses such a relationship to obtain information or to provide access to any information to another person; or

c) covertly discloses information obtained by the use of such a relationship or as a consequence of the existence of such a relationship.

(Home Office, 2018)

Three key features of a CHIS can be discerned from this definition: (i) they are used to obtain information, meaning an informant can be tasked to actively gather information on behalf of their handlers (Home Office, 2018); (ii) information obtained is from, or about, another person, meaning, the information does not pertain to the actions or intentions of the informant themselves, and; (iii) the information is passed covertly, or, put another way, with the expectation of confidentiality (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2007). By their very defintion, an informant (in a UK context) is an active source of information, and it can be assumed that many informants are not incarcerated (Kleinman, 2006). To date, this specific situational dilemma has largely been neglected by the scientific community. Consequently, HUMINT practitioners handling informants in the UK are left with a scant evidence-base to inform their practice.

Areas of Relevant Scientific Research

There is a growing body of research examining HUMINT practices in the UK, including recent practitioner surveys. The first was a study commissioned by the UK's National Crime Agency which conducted semi-structured interviews with their informant handlers

(N=5) (Birkett & Pike, 2017). They wanted to establish which methods of communication, ranging from traditional face-to-face meetings to modern internet-based technologies, handlers use with their informants, and specifically explored how this impacted upon rapport. This was followed by Nunan et al. (2020a; 2020b) who conducted structured interviews on source handlers (N=24) within England and Wales, focussing on those engaged in counter terrorism investigations. Their first study (2020a) consisted of eight directed questions relating to rapport, and found that source handlers recognise the importance of establishing and maintaining rapport with their informants. Additionally, handlers reported using a variety of rapport buildng techniques. Their second study (2020b) focused on interviewing techniques designed for the elicitation of information, with source handlers reporting that they utilise elicitation techniques when de-briefing informants. These surveys were followed by Nunan et al. (2020c) and Nunan, Stanier, Milne, Shawyer, Walsh and May (2020) who examined real-life telephone conversations (N=105) between seven handler and informant pairs. Again, these studies focussed on the use of rapport (Nunan et al., 2020c) and elicitation techniques (Nunan, Stanier, Milne, Shawyer, Walsh & May, 2020). The importance of rapport and elicitation techniques to the HUMINT practitioner was initially established through research conducted in the US (Nunan et al., 2020a; 2020b), however, there are other areas of potential research which have not yet been explored and which may also be of importance to UK informant handlers.

US-based research was prompted primarily by events at military detention centres, and has consequently sought to understand and improve how HUMINT practitioners can elicit information from a human source in a humane manner (Brandon, 2014). This process was begun by a review of potentially relevant scientific knowledge by the Intelligence Science Board on behalf of the US National Defense Intelligence

College (2006) and was followed by a number of practitioner surveys (Redlich et al., 2014; Russano, Narchet, & Kleinman, 2014; Russano, Narchet, Kleinman, & Meissner, 2014). Whilst this research focusses on human sources who could be categorised as being incarcerated passive sources of information, it was reviewed as part of the current study to identify thematic categories affecting HUMINT professionals which are likely to impact upon practitioners in the UK. The authors identified several thematic categories which could be generalised to UK informant handling. For example, respondents to the Redlich et al. (2014) survey reported a reliance on "rapport and relationship building" (p. 817) during intelligence interviews, whilst also highlighting a number of personality traits which were deemed to improve the capability of HUMINT professionals to elicit information. Russano, Narchet and Kleinman (2014) and Russano, Narchet, Kleinman, and Meissner (2014) asked both practitioners and support workers (interpreters and analysts) a series of questions focussing on practitioner personality traits, information elicitation, establishing rapport and detecting deception, and found support for the importance of each of these factors. Observational studies of active community-based sources conducted in Israel (Hess & Amir, 2002) and the US (Dabney & Tewksbury, 2016) also evidence the importance of these thematic categories. In addition, understanding source motivation and gaining their cooperation were also observed as being important to practitioners in contexts featuring a non-incarcerated source. Here, gaining co-operation relates to an active human source who is prepared to undertake tasking on behalf of their handler, rather than referring to a co-operative interviewee who is prepared to provide information in response to questions posed (Hess & Amir, 2002). Two further studies, one in the US (Miller, 2011), and on in the UK (Billingsley, 2001), also acknowledge the importance of understanding source motivation, and specifically explored this topic by surveying actual human sources. Thus, in sum, six thematic

categories can be identified from the literature as being of concern to HUMINT practitioners: (i) handler personality traits; (ii) source motivation; (iii) gaining co-operation; (iv) eliciting information; (v) establishing rapport, and; (vi) detecting deception.

Current Study

The aim of the current study was to conduct a survey of current and former UK-based informant handlers to identify the comparative importance of the six identified thematic categories. This presents a unique contribution to the current research area. Although the thematic categories were identified from previous research, much of this research was conducted outside of the UK and focussed on incarcerated passive sources of information. Although recent studies have previously sought the views of UK informant handlers (Birkett & Pike, 2017; Nunan et al, 2020a; Nunan et al., 2020b), in none of these studies were the six identified categories explicitly presented to participants, nor were participants asked to rate their relative importance. Consequently, whilst research on each of the individual categories is likely to be beneficial, there is a danger that areas of potential research which are most important to handlers of active community-based informants in the UK will be neglected in favour of those areas which are of most importance to US operatives seeking to humanely elicit information from incarcerated passive sources of information.

Given the current study is exploratory in nature and in a relatively under-studied field (Billingsley, 2009), we anticipate that our results could be used to inform future (and much-needed) academic research leading to the development of an applicable evidence-based approach to informant handling in the UK (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017; Heaton & Tong, 2015).

Method

Participants

An initial purposive sample was established through senior police officers known to the first and second authors across five force areas in England and Wales. Snowball sampling was then used, with the initial purposive sample being asked to forward the survey on to specialist individuals and/or units who would be qualified to complete the survey. Participants who completed the survey were also invited to share it with other current or former informant handlers.

To maximise the likelihood that the data analysed was from an eligible sample, a conservative approach was adopted to data inclusion, specifically, partially completed surveys (*N=15*) were discounted from further analysis. The final sample (*N=34, male = 27, female = 7*) appears to be a mature and experienced sample, with the most frequently selected age range being between 50-54 years (*N=10*) and the most frequently selected length of service as an informant handler being between 6-10 years (*N=14*).

Procedure

Following full ethical clearance, and given the sensitive nature of handling informants (Home Office, 2018), a pilot study was conducted on a sample of three current practitioners. These practitioners were asked to review the content of the survey to ensure that questions were not deemed too intrusive and did not breach expected levels of confidentiality. This is especially important given that law enforcement agencies have an ongoing duty of care to their sources (ACPO, 2007). Having conducted this pilot/consultation phase, an electronic version of the survey was created using Qualtrics software and a link was disseminated to the initial purposive sample via email. Information contained within the introductory email informed participants of the purpose

of the survey and assured participants that they were not obliged to participate in the study, nor would they be required to leave their demographic details or any other information if they felt that this would breach the confidential nature of their role. Participants completed the survey by clicking on the electronic link. They were first required to provide informed consent before answering a series of 10 questions.

The first three questions were automatically randomised word association questions. Participants were asked to list as many words that they could think of which they associate with: (i) the word *CHIS*; (ii) the phrase *CHIS handler*, and; (iii) the phrase *CHIS meeting*. These words and phrases were taken from the CHIS Code of Practice (Home Office, 2018) and were specifically designed to trigger associations to actual informant meetings and the dynamic that exists between handler and informant during these meetings. The fourth question was open-ended, asking participants what their main considerations were when handling informants. Question 5 then presented participants with the six thematic categories (handler personality traits, rapport, informant motivation, gaining cooperation, obtaining information and detecting deception) and they were asked to rate the relative importance of each one on a continuous visual analogue scale (0 = low importance, 10 = high importance). The same thematic categories were presented for question 6 and participants were asked to select which one they believed required more scientific / psychological research to improve working practices. This question included the option to indicate *other*, and an opportunity to expand on *other* if this was selected. In questions 7-9, participants were asked to provide demographic details (age, gender, length of service as an informant handler). Finally, participants were provided with an opportunity to add any further comments which they believed may be relevant to this research, or to elaborate on any of the answers they provided.

The survey produced both quantitative and qualitative data, consequently, results were analysed using three methods of analysis: descriptive statistics, directed content analysis and thematic content analysis. This triangulation of analysis provides the data with greater depth and breadth, allowing more nuanced conclusions to be drawn.

Following feedback from the pilot study it was agreed that all responses would be anonymised and that raw data would be stored securely and only reproduced as part of this research in a sanitised version.

Analyses Conducted

Directed Content Analysis

Content analysis is a means of taking qualitative data and imposing a quantitative structure upon it (Youngs, 2013). This is particularly the case with directed content analysis, which can be applied when a theoretical framework consisting of defined thematic categories already exists (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Given the aim of the current research was to establish the relative importance of a variety of pre-determined categories, this analysis was deemed as the most suitable for questions 1 to 4. Directed content analysis involves the coding of free narrative text into recognised categories before using this data to create a hierarchical table of results (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This can then be used to compare the frequency occurrence of each coded category, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the relative importance of each individual theme, and how the abstract categories identified in the literature translate into practical considerations.

Despite having pre-determined categories, coding of responses into one of these thematic categories evolved inductively with reference to the entire dataset often providing context for ambiguous phraseology. For example, where one participant might

simply record the word "access" as a consideration when handling informants, another may expand upon this idea by referring to "access to information", thereby assisting with the codification of the single word, "access" as being a consideration of obtaining information. Consequently, through reference to the literature and an inductive interpretation of the data set, an operationalised definition of each category was developed, as outlined below:

Handler personality traits: Selection of this category was based on reports in the literature of current, historical or recommended personality profiling of intelligence practitioners (Kleinman, 2006; Redlich et al., 2014; Russano, Narchet, & Kleinman, 2014; Russano, Narchet, Kleinman, & Meissner, 2014) as well as the practice of specifically pairing the handler and informant (Birkett & Pike, 2017) – this has the potential to be an area of future research which psychologists are likely able to contribute. Therefore, words or phrases describing handler characteristics were placed in this category; frequent ones included "confident", "introvert", "outlier" and "good judge of character", but also included longer descriptions such as, "never emotionally invest". One respondent used the phrase, "you are still a copper", highlighting the importance of their job to the handler's personal identity. Thus, words or phrases relating to their role or employment such as, "officer", or anything which might impact upon their work, such as "personal reputation", were also included here.

Rapport: Recent research has been undertaken to operationalise the definition of rapport (e.g., Alison et al., 2013; Alison & Alison, 2017; Alison et al., 2014; Nunan, Stanier, Milne, Shawyer, Walsh & May, 2020). Rather than a series of prescriptive techniques, Alison et al. see rapport as an approach or mindset based upon non-accusatory and respectful interpersonal responses. Nunan et al. (2020a) also emphasise the interpersonal

nature of rapport. Therefore, words or phrases demonstrating a consideration of a respectful interpersonal interaction, such as, "active listening" and "empathy", were included in this category. Nunan et al. (2020a) also note that sales techniques, such as those identified by Cialdini (2009), are often used by handlers to establish rapport with their informants. These techniques involve things such as emphasising similarities and demonstrating affection for the other person (Cialdini, 2009). Consequently, words or phrases emphasising presumed similarities, such as "humane", or affection, such as "friendly" or "brilliant", were also included in this category. Additionally, Nunan et al. (2020a) observe that rapport, at least within the context of a relationship between informant and handler, could often be fluid and evolving but ought to be based on, "Managing their motivations and welfare" (Nunan et al., 2020a, p.3). Given the reported importance of welfare to rapport (Nunan, et al., 2020a; Stanier & Nunan, 2021), anything pertaining to the informants' wellbeing such as "mental health" or "physical wellbeing" were also included in this category. The importance of these two linked concepts (i.e., rapport and welfare) was demostrated by the fact that both words frequently occurred throughout the dataset.

Informant motivation: Some previous observational studies have recorded the importance of understanding source motivation to practitioners (see Dabney & Tewksbury, 2016; Hess & Amir, 2002) and studies have been conducted in both the US and the UK examining the motives of a covert human source (Billingsley, 2001; Miller, 2011). These studies identified a number of motivations, including leniency in the criminal justice system, financial reward, revenge or removing criminal competitors, and even moral or interpersonal motivations. Consequently, any word or phrase relating to one of these potential motives (e.g., "greedy", "vindictive" and "concerned citizen") were included in this category. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the findings of previous observational

studies, there were a number of words or phrases simply expressing a direct concern for understanding informant motivation such as, "understanding the CHIS – motivation", or more simply, "Motive, motive, motive!", these too were included in this category.

Gaining co-operation: Gaining co-operation has often been studied in a forensic context in terms of forensic interviewing and is often associated to either (or both) information elicitation and rapport (see e.g., Alison et al., 2013). However, an informant is not simply an interviewee with passive access to information, rather, they are an active participant in the gathering and disclosure of target information (Billingsley, 2009; Home Office, 2018; Kleinman, 2006; Storm et al., 2015; Schirman, 2014; Yousef & Brackin, 2010). Therefore, gaining the co-operation of an active human source is not simply about accessing information which is already in their possession, but is more concerned with tasking them to obatin that information in the first place (Schirman, 2014). Despite being seen as an important part of the source handling process, this is an under-studied area of research, leaving practitioners to rely on intuition and the experience of their predecessors to try to recruit and gain the co-operation of a potential human source (Dabney & Tewksbury, 2016). Given the emphasis of tasking contained within the definition of a CHIS (Home Office, 2018), any words relating to the tasking of an informant, such as "direction and tasking", or techniques used to persuade an informant to cooperate with law enforcement, such as "make them think you like them" were included in this category. Additionally, any words or phrases relating to concepts which might facilitate or ensure the success of informant tasking were included in this category (i.e., "CHIS safety", "protection", "tradecraft" and "covert methodology"). A further sub-category of phrases included in this category pertain to risk, namely the risk from a non-cooperative informant. This is exemplified by phrases such as, "ensure compliant" and "who's

running who?", and includes words which might impact upon their compliance, such as those describing the informant as "sneaky", "unpredicatable" or as a "manipulator".

Obtaining information: Information elicitation, including how it is done and how it can be improved, has perhaps received the most attention from academic research seeking to inform HUMINT practice (see Brandon, 2014; Vrij & Granhag, 2014; Nunan et al., 2020b; Nunan et al., 2020c) and the requirement to obtain information is encapsulated in the definition of a CHIS (Home Office, 2018). Consequently, any words or phrases mentioning "intelligence" or "information" were included in this category, including words relating to "access" to information or the "dissemination" of information, as well as those referring to the "value" or "reliability" of information. Synonyms describing the informants role as an intellgience gatherer, such as "agent" were also included in this category, as were descriptions which emphasised the handlers function as a gatherer of information, such as "debriefer".

Detecting deception: Deception is described as, "A successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue" (Vrij, 2008, p.15). Consequently, any word or phrase placing an emphasis on "truth" or "lies" were included in this category. However, perhaps in response to the Butler Report (2005) and its emphasis on validating intelligence (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 2005), there were a number of words or phrases that mentioned "validation", "evaluation" or "corroboration" which were also included in this category. A number of participants also questioned the integrity of their informants, with several asking, "can they be trusted?", or "are they just telling you what you want to hear?". Such phrases clearly represented a consideration of

deception and the handler's requirement to detect it, therefore, they too were included in this category.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Responses to questions five and six were analysed using descriptive data. Specifically, in relation to question five, where participants were asked to rate the relative importance of each thematic category along a continuous visual analogue scale, mean scores and standard deviations were obtained, whilst frequency data were obtained to identify which thematic category participants believed required further research (question six). The categories were then ranked accordingly. The frequency data obtained following directed content analysis was also subjected to descriptive data analysis, to provide a percentage of how many words or phrases used related to each thematic category.

Thematic Content Analysis

Question 10 was far less directed than others and allowed participants to reflect on the topic of the questionnaire. Consequently, the responses to this question were subjected to Thematic Content Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009). Specifically, each clause was analysed for an occurrence of a new thematic category not previously considered as part of the directed content analysis. It was envisaged that this form of analysis would permit an expansion of the research area if responses indicated it was necessary.

Results

Directed Content Analysis

Analysis of questions 1 to 4 (word association and *main considerations*) involved the categorisation of each word or phrase into one of the pre-determined thematic categories

where it was perceived to represent a consideration of that category. This process resulted in frequency data for each pre-determined category which was then subjected to descriptive data analysis. Results found that words or phrases relating to gaining co-operation were referenced most frequently with 41.90% of all words used being in this category. Words relating to handler personality occurred with the least amount of frequency with only 2.97% of all words used being in this category. The total and average number of words or phrases referenced for each category across questions subjected to directed content analysis can be found in Table 1.

------- Table 1 about here -------

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive data analysis conducted on responses to question five (relative importance of each category) found that all categories received an average score above the midpoint (Range = 7.21 - 9.08) with detecting deception receiving the highest score. All scores (with SDs) are outlined in table 2.

------- Table 2 about here -------

Descriptive data was also used to analyse responses to question six (which category requires more research). Again, the thematic category *detecting deception* was ranked highest by 42.42% of participants. Of note, all participants selected a category extrapolated from the extant research, with none of them selecting the *other* option. Full results are shown in table 3, one participant chose not to make a selection, so the results shown are from the 33 participants who answered this question.

------- Table 3 about here -------

Thematic Content Analysis

The final question which allowed participants to add any further comments or to elaborate

on their previous answers was subjected to thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009). The main objective was to identify any new thematic areas which had not been extrapolated from the literature review or explored as part of previous analyses. In total, 18 participants left a comment to the final question. Four new themes emerged as part of this process: (i) the importance of informants; (ii) matching informants and handler; (iii) training and support, and; (iv) interconnectivity of thematic categories.

The importance of informants

A number of participants identified the importance of informants, with one participant stating that, "CHIS is a vital element in any conflict whether a battle against a foreign power or an organised crime group" (#3), whilst another commented that informants were, "Integral and vital to good policing" (#13). The same respondent (#13) continued to identify what they believed made a good informant so unique, "No-one can get to the root of a problem quicker than someone who is linked in with the community or a certain demographic", before summarising, "…they are an invaluable resource" (#13). Another participant expanded this theme, observing that informants and their handling are undervalued, blaming this on, "Populist politics and a desire to give the public a visible police presence which, whilst reassuring, has little genuine impact" (#33).

Matching informants and handler

One participant noted that whilst the survey asked about handler personality traits, "the personality of the CHIS is also critical" (#6). Where similar views were expressed, participants often linked these back to the importance of handler personality traits, or advice on how best to handle an informant such as treating them with "empathy and showing interest in their own personal everyday life" (#31) or, "be open, honest and professional from the outset" (#9). Another participant advocated matching the handler

to the informant, observing that, "often the wrong handlers are put with the wrong CHIS" (#2), whilst another believed that successful informant handling, "needs a more psychological approach by the handler" (#6).

Training and support

The need for a "psychological approach" was also identified by participants who commented on their training. They noted that during their training there was often an emphasis on the practical elements of informant handling such as "tradecraft" and "writing the subsequent report" (#12) rather than psychological skills, such as establishing the kind of rapport that is "built-up over the period that you handle a CHIS" (#9), or detecting deception. As well as commenting on their training, participants also observed that once in their role, they often felt insufficiently supported. One participant commented that the handler's role, "is rarely understood by senior ranks" and went on to note that there, "is little or no recognition of the stressful working conditions and the impact on family life" (#33). The theme of "stress" was repeated by other participants with one commenting that the "potential dangers are very real" (#27), whilst others advocated for, "periodic counselling/psychological debrief for handlers" (#23) or, "more psychological support of persons undertaking the role" (#14).

Inter-connectivity of thematic categories

It was especially noteworthy that many of those who responded to the final question used this opportunity to re-emphasise the importance of the thematic categories identified from the literature, with one participant noting that, "you asked which was the foremost consideration relating to a CHIS. The true answer should have been 'all of the above'" (#30). However, what became evident from the responses to the final question was the inter-connectivity of the thematic categories. For example, one participant observed that,

"recruiting and handling of CHIS is a difficult task requiring special skills" (#3), before noting that an important element in achieving this is human intuition. The same participant expands on this by explaining, "I knew when they were lying but I didn't know why I knew" (#3). This answer tends to indicate that handler personality traits – or "human intuition" – can be a key contributor to both gaining co-operation and detecting deception. Another added support to the belief that personality traits were vital in gaining co-operation, stating that informants "would not exist without their initial successful recruitment" noting that "chance and circumstances will always play a part in this process [but] it cannot be denied that some handlers are more successful than others. Why is this?" (#10). Another highlighted the importance of understanding informant motivation to gaining cooperation, observing that, "If you don't understand the motivation you don't have a CHIS" (#5). Another respondent linked an understanding of motivation to detecting deception, stating that, "understanding motivation for providing information [is] of paramount important [sic] to gauge [whether] info provided is real and true" (#27). There would also appear to be conflict between some of the thematic categories, with some handlers perhaps having to balance competing requirements. Of particular concern seemed to be the difficulty of maintaining rapport whilst managing other obligations. For example, one respondent commented on the requirement for handlers "to complete effective dynamic risk assessments … whilst retaining rapport" (#16). Another made a similar observation, stating that, "Detecting deceit is a key skill which needs to be achieved without the aid of polygraphs as that destroys any trust [and] rapport that has been built over the length of the relationship" (#12).

Discussion

Despite an increasing interest in HUMINT over the last two decades, there is a dearth of research that has examined the domestic situation within the UK. Previous studies seeking

the views of dedicated informant handlers have tended to emphasise the importance of a single concept in isolation, such as rapport (Birkett & Pike, 2017; Nunan et al., 2020a) or information elicitation (Nunan et al., 2020b). The current study was able to utilise previous research to focus upon the specific legal and operational situation within the UK and to seek a broader range of practitioner perceptions.

Thematic Categories: Importance and Inter-connectivity

The current study identified six thematic categories which previous researchers have noted as being important considerations to HUMINT practitioners. Our results provide support for the importance of these categories. When asked to rate the importance of each one on a continuous scale, the average score for each category was well above the mid-point. Thematic content analysis of the final question validated this finding with several participants re-affirming the importance of one or more of the thematic categories identified. This finding provides researchers with a clear framework for future research seeking to develop an applicable evidence-base for informant handlers in the UK (and perhaps wider afield).

However, the thematic content analysis of the final question provides a strong indication that participants struggled to identify a single category as being the most important because they are, in fact, all inter-dependent. Participants indicated that handler personality and understanding informant motivations were both crucial when trying to gain the co-operation of the informant, or detect deceit. Participants also highlighted potential conflict between different categories, due to handlers having to maintain rapport and obtain information whilst simultaneously attempting to assess risk and detect deception.

Detecting Deception and Gaining Co-operation

When presented with pre-determined categories, practitioners selected *detecting deception* as both the most important consideration and the one requiring further research. However, directed content analysis found that most words or phrases provided in response to the word association prompts and the free text response related to the concept of gaining cooperation. There are various possible explanations for this discrepancy. One could be that participants were expressing a difference between strategic and tactical considerations. The word association questions were specifically designed to prompt recollections of actual informant meetings involving handlers and informants, whereas a question asking about future research in particular, is likely to elicit a more strategic consideration of the issues affecting informant management. Consequently, it could be argued that the tactical considerations which most occupy a handler during a meeting, such as gaining co-operation and obtaining information, are very different from those which perhaps occupy their thoughts pre- and post- meeting such as detecting deceit and understanding informant motivation.

However, a further explanation is perhaps related to the concept of *deceit*. Detecting deception research, including that aimed at assisting HUMINT practitioners, has generally focussed on identifying a misrepresentation of fact, often pertaining to the specific actions of the interviewee themselves (for a review see, Vrij & Granhag, 2014). It was this concept of deceit which informed the categorisation of words or phrases subjected to directed content analysis, and undoubtedly this form of deception is of concern to practitioners, as almost 10% of all words or phrases recorded related to this category. However, content analysis identified another form of possible deception, namely, deceptive intent. This is exemplified by phrases such as "who's running who?", references to "danger" and "risk" and descriptions of informants as being "sneaky" and

"unpredictable". Given their association to informant compliance, these words and phrases were categorised as considerations of gaining co-operation, however, they could also be interpreted as considerations of deceptive intent. An example of a human source with deceptive intent is provided by Hassan Yousef (Schirman, 2014; Yousef & Brackin, 2010). Yousef, a human source who reported on the activities of Hamas to the Israeli domestic intelligence agency, Shin Bet, states that the reason he originally began meeting with his handlers was to identify opportunities to murder them. In these circumstances, Yousef is not providing false information or actively lying to his handlers, but he is misrepresenting his intentions, posing as a co-operative source when he in fact harboured malicious intent. As one of our participants commented in the final question, even if such situations are relatively rare, "the potential dangers are very real" (#27).

This is further evidence of the inter-connectivity between the identified categories. Interpreted this way, there is no discrepancy between participants' desire for more research into detecting deception and the dominance of words associated to *gaining co-operation* in the free text responses. They represent the same thing: a requirement to take a potentially hostile source, such as Youssef, and turn them into a co-operative one. When interpreting deception as including malicious intent, the threat posed by a deceptive source would explain why practitioners rate detecting deception as the most important thematic consideration, and why they desire more research on the subject.

Evidence-based versus Craft Policing

The UK's College of Policing is committed to promoting evidence-based policing (College of Policing, 2020). The College's concept of evidence is a broad one, with the aim of incorporating the "best available" (College of Policing, 2020) evidence into practice. Whilst this phraseology strikes a pragmatic tone, it is clear that the best available evidence should still be based on empirical research (Heaton & Tong, 2015; Sherman,

2013; College of Policing, 2020). However, as exemplified by references to human intuition (#3), and the observation that "some handlers are more successful than others" (#10), informant handling as a specialisation could be seen as a craft. Fleming and Rhodes (2017) observe that police officers often describe their profession in terms of a craft, which they define as "practical beliefs and practices" or "contextual knowledge" (pp.9-10). This is often evidenced by officers relying on experience as a means of making judgements. This can be observed in our own sample where participant #3 states: "I knew when they were lying but I didn't know why I knew".

There are limitations to relying on craft or experiential knowledge (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017); as the quote above from our own sample exemplifies, relying on experience may lead to decisions based on feeling rather than logic (Dresser, 2019). Additionally, maintaining a culture of craft knowledge is at odds with the impetus towards an evidence-based policing model (Dresser, 2019), and there is a risk that informant handlers relying on their experience to make decisions could come in to conflict with colleagues and senior leaders who are increasingly educated in the benefits of an evidence-based approach (Palmer et al., 2019; Sherman, 2013). The drive towards evidence-based policing was partly prompted by a governmental desire for greater accountability from a public institution (Palmer et al., 2019; Sherman, 2013), and it could be argued that the covert nature of informant handling has insulated it from the incursions of an evidence-based culture (Billingsley, 2009). However, the ongoing Undercover Policing Inquiry (2021) demonstrates that once covert policing crafts are coming under increasing public scrutiny, and it can be anticipated that there will be a growing expectation for senior leaders to legitimise their decisions on the grounds of an extant evidence-base (Sherman, 2013).

Gathering information and intelligence is the formative phase in the UK's National Decision Model (The National Decision Model, 2014), and informants are a critical source of intelligence (Association of Chief Police Officers, 2007). High consequence operational and political decisions are made in response to HUMINT (Drogin, 2007; Intelligence Science Board Study on Educing Information, 2006; Jervis, 2006; Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 2005), and senior decision makers are unlikely to be comfortable basing such decisions on the individual craftsmanship of a particular handler. It is foreseeable then, that the organisational desire for evidence-based practice will increasingly influence informant handling.

Strengths and Limitations

As with all research, there are strengths and limitations. Whilst the total size of the population of UK-based informant handlers cannot be ascertained, a sample size of 34 participants provides a demonstrable increase from previous research, and is undoubtedly a strength of this study.

There are limitations to the sampling method employed. In particular, there is a risk that participants recruited as part of a snowball sample will be selected on the basis of sharing similar views and characteristics. To some degree this is perhaps unavoidable, after all informant handlers have self-selected for a specialist role within law enforcement and are likely to share some characteristics (Billingsley, 2009; Henry, et al., 2019). Furthermore, given the covert nature of informant handling it was essential that participant anonymity was guaranteed as far as possible. Clearly, participants were likely aware of colleagues who also completed the survey (i.e. whoever forwarded the survey to them), however, use of a snowball sample meant that participants identities were protected from the experimenters. Consequently, this method of sampling was deemed

most appropriate and efficacious for the authors to gain access to a population which is necessarily covert.

Given that the study was conducted online and identifying details were purposely excluded, it could be argued that not all the participants were qualified to respond, therefore a stringent inclusion/exclusion criteria was employed, with partially completed surveys being excluded from the dataset. Additionally, our dataset provides some evidence that participants represented an experienced sample of informant handlers; only 14.71% of participants stated that they had 5 or fewer years' experience as an informant handler, and whilst only 18 participants opted to *add any further comments* in the final question, those that did either directly referenced their own experience as an informant handler or demonstrated reflectivity of their own practical experience.

A particular strength of this research is that it introduces something new to the extant literature base. This is the first study to re-conceptualise a human source as being either active or passive and being either incarcerated or in the community, and to recognise the unique situational and legislative dilemma of a UK informant. The aim of this study was to develop a framework of practitioner considerations which could be used to inform future research. Three previous studies have sought the views of UK informant handlers; however, this is the first to explore the relative importance of specified thematic categories. Researchers will be able to utilise the insights gained from this study to further explore these categories, and their impact on informant handling.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The six thematic categories presented to participants as part of this study were taken from the extant literature on HUMINT. As such, many of them, in particular obtaining information and detecting deception (Brandon, 2014; Vrij & Granhag, 2014), have been subjected to empirical research. However, much of the research conducted to date has

focussed on a single thematic category in isolation. Based upon findings from the current study, future research should be cognisant of the interconnectivity of the various thematic categories and examine ways to balance the competing demands which are placed on practitioners.

The current study also identified a concept of deception which has not previously been considered within the HUMINT literature, namely, deceptive or malicious intent. This form of deceit appears to be an overriding concern for practitioners, dircetly influencing the results of this study. Therefore, understanding this form of deception and providing practical tools which could be applied by informant handlers to detect it, would be a potential area of future research.

Given the unique legislative and operational environment in the UK, as well as the inter-connectivity of potentially competing requirements (i.e. building rapport and detecting deception), the transferrability of tools and techniques designed to assist police officers in other forensic situations, such as suspect or witness interviews, cannot be assumed. One particular participant provided an example of this when they said, "Detecting deceit is a key skill which needs to be achieved without the aid of polygraphs as that destroys any trust and rapport" (#12). Polygraphs are already used as part of sex offender management (Gannon et al., 2012; Grubin, 2010; HMG, 2020) and it was announced in 2017 that informants engaged in counter-terrorism operations within the UK would also be subjected to polygraph examinations (Wilford, 2017). However, it is clear from the findings of the current study, that when considering informant handling at least, the assumtion of transferrability could be misleading.

What is clear however, is that a bespoke evidence-base ought to be developed to inform and assist informant handlers who may be tempted to view their specialisation as a craft. Fleming and Rhodes (2017) lament the rigid dichotomy of evidence-based versus

craft policing, and encourage the incorporation of experiential knowledge into the development of an effective and acceptable research-base. It is hoped that the current study provides a framework for this to develop in the future.

Conclusion

By focusing on the specific legislative and operational environment of HUMINT practitioners in the UK, this study re-conceptualised informants as active sources of information who are most likely operating within their communities. The situational dilemma of an active community based source and their handlers is likely to be very different from that of the incarcerated passive sources of information which have so far dominated the research area (Kleinman, 2006). What is clear from this study is that informant handlers in the UK are affected by the same practical considerations as their HUMINT counterparts in other jurisdictions, however, they are often required to balance the need to build rapport and obtain information against the risk of a deceptive informant harbouring malicious intent.

It is forseeable that the trend towards evidence-based policing in the UK will influence informant handling in the future, with practitioners and senior decision makers increasingly turning to the academic community for guidance, and results from this study provide a framework for future research. In particular, researchers should be cognisant of the inter-connectivity of sometimes competing considerations and requirements. However, as one respondent commented: "Any research into the CHIS arena is welcome" (#33).

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Disclosure and Ethics Statement

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of [INSTITUTION] and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

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Tables

Table 1

Total and average number of words or phrases referenced for each thematic category across questions subjected to directed content analysis.

Thematic Area	Total number of words	Average number of words per respondent	% of total words
Gaining informant cooperation	*564*	*16.59*	*41.90*
Obtaining information	*279*	*8.20*	*20.73*
Rapport Building	*231*	*6.79*	*17.16*
Detecting informant deception	*129*	*3.79*	*9.58*
Understanding informant Motivation	*103*	*3.03*	*7.65*
Handler Personality Traits	*40*	*1.18*	*2.97*

Themes have been listed in descending order; the most popular category is at the top.

Table 2

The average rated importance of individual thematic areas effecting informant handling

Thematic Area	Mean Score (0-10)	Standard Deviation
Detecting Informant Deception	9.08	1.93
Understanding Informant Motivation	8.67	1.60
Rapport Building	8.66	0.99
Gaining Informant Cooperation	8.51	1.93
Obtaining Information	8.22	2.37
Handler Personality Traits	7.21	2.02

Themes have been listed in descending order with the highest rated (most important) thematic area being shown at the top.

Table 3

Frequency data showing how often each thematic area was selected as requiring more scientific or psychological research to improve working practices

Thematic Area	Frequency	Percentage
Detecting Informant Deception	14	42.42
Understanding Informant Motivation	7	21.21
Handler Personality Traits	5	15.15
Gaining Informant Cooperation	4	12.12
Rapport Building	2	6.06
Obtaining Information	1	3.03
Other	0	0

Themes have been listed in descending order with the highest rated (most important) thematic area being shown at the top.

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