

Team and Peer Responses to Threats

People organise themselves into groups such as families, circles of friends and teams—both within and outside our human rights activism. When people feel anxious or frightened, these groups may change in ways which are at least partly predictable. Since achieving holistic security almost always involves other people, it is helpful to think about how groups change in times of increased danger: this will aid our planning process. Below, we explore a few examples of how group dynamics can be affected by threats such as harassment, marginalisation, physical and other forms of violence (such as economic, gender-based, institutional, or structural violence).

Harder group boundaries One predictable change that occurs to groups subjected to threat is that the boundaries that define the group become solidified: people within the group become more closely connected to each other and those outside the group become more distant. It also becomes more difficult for people to join or leave the group. While the protective functioning of such changes is important, there are also some potential difficulties with this. Harder boundaries may distance the group from existing and potential allies, leaving it more isolated than it might otherwise be. They also reduce the flow of information into and out of the group, resulting in members of the group being less informed than they might otherwise have been, and having fewer opportunities to check their perception of the world against that of others. Harder boundaries also make it difficult for people to leave groups. Members who wish to leave might be branded traitors or sell-outs in a way that is harmful both to that person and others perceived to be his or her allies. It is very helpful for groups to regularly discuss the ways in which people and information enter and leave the group, and how to manage this in a holistic way that truly promotes our security.

Fixed patterns

A second predictable change is that the patterns of behaviour become more fixed and harder to change. This makes it more difficult for a member of the group to question supposedly shared beliefs, or challenge the behaviour of other members. When we lose the ability to question each other's assumptions or point out potentially unhealthy behaviours, our ability to constructively and compassionately build group security is greatly compromised. For this reason, it is important that groups regularly revisit and discuss their shared values in an honest way.

Authoritarianism

A third predictable change relates to leadership and power dynamics within groups. When groups feel unsafe, group members tolerate greater authoritarianism from leaders or more powerful members of the group. This results in less information exchange within the group, and fewer opportunities for group members to check their perception of the world with other members of their team. In extreme cases, powerful members of the group may become abusive, and the increased rigidity of group boundaries may prevent victims from leaving. Again, it is important for groups to talk about power dynamics and leadership styles on a regular basis, and to make sure that every person has an opportunity to contribute.

Looking at the links between decision-making and security, we should not underestimate the positive effects of having fair and transparent decision-making processes. The danger of adversaries targeting leaders of a group is less pronounced if a group has shared responsibilities and knowledge.

Different groups can, however, respond in different ways: it is a good idea to consider how your group or organisation responds to the pressures of working under threat and the impact this has on each individual's well-being in the group. This demands an openness to the possibility of talking about security in the group, which we will explore in more detail in the next Chapter.

Mistrust and infiltration⁷

Suspicion and mistrust within and between groups of human rights defenders is common and may or may not be justified depending on the circumstances. Often, it has its roots in the tactics of infiltration and spying which are frequently used against human rights defenders, although merely creating suspicion and mistrust can also be a primary objective of our opponents.

In a context of oppression, people become informants for many reasons: they themselves are often victims too. Therefore while carrying out our work, we may occasionally be suspicious of others in our movement or organisation. There are many cultural, sub-cultural and interpersonal reasons for this mistrust, including observed 'suspicious' behaviour of the person in question, and our own perceptions and subjective criteria about whom we trust.

This suspicion comes at a price paid in mistrust and fear. The potential benefit of perhaps outing an informant in the group may not protect us from other informants present. Furthermore, the atmosphere created by a 'witch-hunt' mentality can drain the energy and motivation of the whole group. It may be due to this atmosphere, that we falsely accuse a colleague of spying, which could in turn prove more damaging than actually having an informant in the group.

It is often useful to create an open discussion within the group and agree on a transparent process for deciding on how sensitive information is to be treated, and how to deal with members of the group who may be disruptive. It might be helpful to review your decisions on secrecy or the transparency of your activities in light of the possibility that there are informers in your group. Creating space to talk about fears linked to the possibility of informers in the group, or group members being pressurised to become informers might prevent situations of witch-hunting or demonisation of informers.

Infiltration of human rights organisations and movements often has the ultimate aim of either documenting or – more often still – provoking illegal activities. In this regard, it is useful to ensure that the activities of the organisation or group in defence and promotion of human rights are explicitly of a non-violent nature, protected under international law and standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) among others. In this case, those in the group who push for illegal or violent methods of protest or civil disobedience should be treated with caution

⁷ Based on: Jessica Bell and Dan Spalding Security Culture for Activists. The Ruckus Society, www.ruckus.org/downloads/RuckusSecurityCultureForActivists.pdf

and their membership of the group reconsidered.

The question of infiltration is a complex one involving many different variables and much uncertainty. Many of the tools described in [Section II | Explore](#) of this manual are useful in helping human rights defenders carefully think through the problems of possible infiltration.

In the next Chapter, we will learn some helpful strategies for creating and implementing a regular space for talking about security within organisations.