Trends. Aviation Security I: Stopping Asking

Editor

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Abstract: This article discusses the inclusion or exclusion of questions during airport security procedures.

Two mandatory questions are becoming no longer mandatory in airport security procedure. One question often is worded as "Have any of your items been out of your immediate control since the time you packed them?" The other question often is worded as "Has anyone unknown to you asked you to carry an item on this flight?"

The most common response in public discourse about making the mandatory unmandatory is that the two questions were worthless. This worthlessness is founded on a combination of observations such as "No terrorist would admit to carrying weapons or explosives" [even if this observation is not literally relevant to the substance of the two questions] or "No one would let items out of their immediate control or carry an item for a stranger," or "No one would admit to letting items out of their control or carrying an item for a stranger," or "It is not physically possible not to let items out of one's immediate control." One could parse the worthlessness of these questions endlessly through noting that we are all at least partially unknown to each other based on conceptions of multiple selves, that we are never truly in control of anything, that there are an infinite amount of interpretive strategies in processing such questions, that suggestibility or reactance may contaminate the validity of how one would respond to such questions, and that there may be a host of mediating phenomena subverting any semblance of shared meaning related to these questions.

However, it may be simpler and more meaningful to note two positive features of the questions. First, it may well be that the questions increase the probability that one does indeed control one's items and is less likely to carry an item for a stranger. Second, it may well be that the questions increase a sense of responsibility and cooperation about aviation security as well as the added sense of security that there are security measures in operation, the last admittedly a double-edged weapon depending on the viability of such measures.

Thus, a strong case can be made that celebrations about the demise of mandatoriness may be neither a victory of a battle or of the war against aviation terrorism. On the other hand, we are taking back some of the immediate control of our security status from the time that we pack our items and will no longer be asked the two questions by anyone unknown to us. (See Airlines allowed to stop asking about luggage. (August 30, 2002). The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Ashworth, P.D. (2000). The descriptive adequacy of qualitative findings. Humanistic Psychologist, 28, 138-152; Whan, M. (2001). Case history, hermeneutics and suggestibility. European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counseling & Health, 4, 201-208; Zeddies, T.J. (2002). More than just words: A hermeneutic view of language in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic Psychology, 19, 3-23.) (Keyword: Aviation Security)