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# Psychology of Terrorism

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## Introduction

Terrorism is widely regarded as one of the most significant contemporary threats to global security.  There continues to be significant disagreement, however, about how to define it.  By the late 1980s, more than 100 definitions of terrorism had appeared in the professional literature.  Criteria have often diverged across nations but are even known to differ across agencies within a given government.  We will not resolve this debate here, but for purposes of this entry, the term "terrorism" refers to "acts of violence (as opposed to threats or more general coercion) intentionally perpetrated on civilian non-combatants with the goal of furthering some ideological, religious or political objective (Borum, 2004)."  The focus here is also on terrorist actors (particularly nonstate actors), rather than on the psychological effects or consequences of terrorism.

Terrorism emerged as a topic of interest in the field of psychology in the 1980s, at least among those who publish in academic journals . There was a dramatic surge of interest in the topic – including within psychology – after the

attacks on America of September 11, 2001.  More than 150 books were
published on terrorism in just the first year following those events.  Despite an
increase in attention and overall volume of publications, however, the empirical
foundation of knowledge on the causes, motivations and determinants of terrorist
behavior remains poorly developed.   Little has changed in the state of applied
knowledge over the past twenty years from when Schmid and Jongman (1988)
concluded: "There are probably few areas in the social science literature in which
so much is written on the basis of so little research.  Perhaps as much as 80
percent of the literature is not research-based in any rigorous sense."
Nevertheless, a couple of basic questions on the psychology of terrorism have
been fairly well settled and efforts are being made to move forward (Borum,
2004; Horgan, 2005; Victoroff & Kruglanski, 2009).    The remainder of this entry
briefly summarizes what is currently known about several key issues in the
psychology of terrorism.

**Is terrorism generally the product of a mental disorder or illness?**

Research on the relationship between psychopathology and terrorism has
been nearly unanimous in its conclusion that mental illness and abnormality are
typically not critical factors in explaining terrorist behavior (Borum, 2004; Horgan,
2005). Studies have found that the prevalence of mental illness among samples
of incarcerated terrorists is as low or lower than in the general population.
Moreover, although terrorists often commit heinous acts, they would rarely be

considered classic "psychopaths[1]." Terrorists typically have some connection to principles or ideology as well as to other people (including other terrorists) who share them. Psychopaths, however, do not form such connections, nor would they be likely to sacrifice themselves (including dying) for a cause.

## Is there a certain personality "type" or traits common among all terrorists?

Early writings on the psychology of terrorism were often rooted psychoanalytic theory, and tended to focus on narcissism and hostility toward parents as explanatory factors.  These hypotheses, however, were never supported by any rigorous empirical research.   Similarly, certain life experiences such as histories of childhood abuse and trauma are commonly found in terrorist biographies and personal histories, but none of these contribute much to a causal explanation of terrorism.

Studies looking for personality traits associated with terrorism have also fallen short.  They have neither found nor produced any favorable prospects of identifying either a "terrorist personality", or any accurate psychological "terrorist profile" (Horgan, 2005). As with most phenomena studied by psychological researchers, personality traits alone tend not to be very good predictors of behavior.  Researchers have concluded that a new understanding of radicalization is unlikely to be found  in static, 'trait-based' effects, but that

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[1]     Psychopaths are persons who possess both a pervasive and persistent history of antisocial behavior and severe,endogenous emotional/affective deficits such as callousness and lack of empathy and remorse.

viewing terrorism as a complex and dynamic "process" is much more promising (Horgan, 2005, 2009).

An alternative trend is to focus on possible "vulnerabilities" to terrorism and extremist ideologies. Vulnerabilities may be viewed as "factors that point to some people having a greater openness to increased engagement than others" (Horgan, 2005). Rather than being simple causes, these vulnerabilities may be leveraged as possible sources of motivation or as mechanisms for acquiring or hardening one's militant ideology. Three commonly occurring vulnerabilities are: (1) perceived injustice/humiliation; (2) need for identity; and (3) need for belonging (Borum, 2004).

**How do people become "radicalized" into violent extremism?**

McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) define political radicalization as "increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict," which they believe occurs through changes in one's "beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup" (p. 416). They identify key "mechanisms" of radicalization at individual, group, and mass-public levels, concluding that the following twelve are most prominent: Personal victimization; Political grievance; Joining a radical group—the slippery slope; Joining a radical group—the power of love; Extremity shift in like-minded groups; Extreme cohesion under isolation and threat; Competition for the same base of support; Competition with state power—

condensation; Within-group competition—fissioning; Jujitsu politics; Hate; and Martyrdom.

As a practical matter, the individual radicalization process often builds from the platform of a some grievance or unsatisfying event,- something regarded as being "not right." That grievance is framed as an injustice. Because people do not typically regard injustices as random or "no-fault" occurrences, it is not difficult to place blame on a certain target policy, person, or nation. The responsible party is then vilified – often demonized – which then sometimes drives an impetus for aggressive action to defend the aggrieved or remedy the wrong (Borum, 2004).

Fathali Moghaddam (2005) uses the metaphor of a "Staircase" to describe the process of becoming a terrorist. Like most theories, feelings of discontent and perceived adversity/deprivation are a platform for stepping initially onto the path to terrorism, though fewer people ascend to each successive level. In the beginning, according to his model, an individual's attempts to alleviate adversity and improve her/his situation have been unsuccessful, leading to feelings of frustration and aggression, which are displaced onto some perceived causal agent (who is then regarded as an enemy). As anger toward the enemy builds, some become increasingly sympathetic towards the justifications for violence and toward the terrorist groups that act against the enemy. Some of those sympathizers eventually join an extremist group, organization or movement that advocates for, and perhaps engages in, terrorist violence. At the "top" or final

level are those who have joined, overcome barriers to violent action, and actually commit a terrorist act (Moghaddam, 2005).

**How do people get into terrorism?**

Even people who develop radical beliefs tend not to wake up on a given morning and say to themselves:  "Today is the day I become a terrorist."  The pathway into terrorism typically proceeds through a recursive series of actions and commitments that occur over a period of time.  The pathways to, and motives for, terrorism are quite varied and diverse.   Different people connect with violent ideologies and groups for different reasons at different times. As researchers have examined reasons for joining, remaining in, and leaving terrorist organizations, they have found that motivations are often different at each stage, and not even necessarily related to each other.

**What is the role of ideology in terrorist behavior?**

Ideology is often defined as a common and broadly agreed upon set of rules to which an individual subscribes, and that help to regulate and determine her or his behavior.  It guides and controls behavior perhaps by providing a set of behavioral contingencies that link immediate behavior and actions to long-term positive outcomes and rewards, or it might alternatively be viewed as a form of rule-following behavior.

Ideologies that support terrorism, while quite diverse in their goals, rhetoric, and content, appear to share some common structural characteristics.

- Polarized: The essence of which is an "us vs them" mindset, or what some would regard as in-group – out-group conflict.

- Absolutist: The beliefs are regarded as truth in the absolute sense, sometimes supported by sacred authority. This squelches questioning, critical thinking, and dissent. It also adds moral authority to framing us vs. them as a competition between good and bad (or evil).

- Threat-Oriented: External threat causes in-groups to cohere. Good leaders know this intuitively, if not from reading social psychological research. They persistently remind adherents that the "us" is at risk from the "them." Because the "us" is seen as being good or right in the absolute sense, this works not only to promote internal cohesion but external opposition.

- Hateful: Hate energizes violent action. It allows principled opposition to impel direct action. It also facilitates various mechanisms of moral disengagement – such as dehumanization – which erode the social and psychological barriers to engaging in violence that one believes is "justified" (an important point, since many more people endorse the justification for extremist violence than actually commit such acts).

**What distinguishes extremists who act violently from those who do not?**

Not all extremist ideologies facilitate violence, nor are all extremists violent. Even among extremist groups that engage in subversive activity, some focus primarily on promoting a "cause," while others direct most of their energy

and resources to destroying those who oppose it. It usually takes more than ideology to compel violent action. Psychological and social influences must erode the powerful, naturally-occurring barriers that prevent people from regularly killing each other even though they may have the motive, means, opportunity and even desire to do so.   More people think about killing someone than actually do it.

The barriers to violence can be external-  such as the effects of the group or social environment- or internal – such as moral qualms or anticipatory guilt. Externally, the presence (or endorsement) of a group may diffuse a person's sense of individual responsibility and allow them to focus on the group, rather than self, as the agent of a particular action.   Alternatively, a person may fall prey to the social dynamics of obedience to a charismatic leader or perceived authority as happened in the famous Milgram experiments.  Internally, eroding psychological barriers to violence typically requires an individual to modify her or his self-appraisals in order to avoid feelings of self-condemnation.  Psychologist Albert Bandura describes this erosion of internal barriers as "moral disengagement."  These internal changes may involve re-interpreting or constructing the situation in one's mind to justify a violent act; to cast the victim/target as being "bad" or blameworthy; or even to dehumanize the victim/targets by appraising them as "evil" or using pejorative language such as "pigs" or "dogs" to increase psychological distance from the individual's own identity reference group.

**What are terrorist groups' functions and vulnerabilities?**

Terrorist groups must have motivated, loyal members and means to recruit new personnel to replenish losses and facilitate growth. Leadership can be an important factor in that regard. While the prototypical terrorist group leader is believed to capitalize on his or her charisma, in reality, extremist leaders operate in a variety of ways and sometimes change over time. Regardless of style, however, effective militant leaders will serve to guard the group's collective belief system to keep everyone on the same page; to remind them of the threat posed by outsiders; to keep them actively involved in meaningful tasks; to manage communication and information flow; and to create and deploy incentives, which increase motivation and facilitate organizational growth.

Terrorist groups, like all social collectives, also have certain vulnerabilities to their existence. Some come from within the organization, some operate from outside. Internal mistrust, for example, can be a disabling affliction for a group. It causes member for focus energy inward and not externally toward operations or goal directed activity; it potentiates interpersonal tensions and strains relationships. Periods of boredom and inactivity can also threaten group cohesion. Internal competitions and power struggles can undermine group unity and effectiveness. Substantive disagreements about tactics, strategy or leadership are also frequent sources of vulnerability, particularly when they lead to factioning. External vulnerabilities can include disruption in the support

network, disapproval from its constituencies and sympathizers, and conflicts with

other groups.

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**Additional Resources:**

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)

http://www.start.umd.edu/start/

Psychology of Terrorism:  Annotated Bibliography

http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208551.pdf

Social Science for Counterterrorism

http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG849/

Understanding the Terrorist Mindset

http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/fbi/terrorist_mindset.pdf

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- Terrorism
- Extremism
- Armed Groups
- Violence

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