

Psychological Reasons for Terrorism

- SRA-211, Threat of Terrorism and Crime
- Penn State Altoona
- Prof G

Stockholm Syndrome

- Psychological response found in some victims
- Hostages become dependent on their captors, and come to identify, sympathize and support their captors
- Named for a 1973 botched bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden, in which the hostages emerged from the situation very supportive of their captors

Stockholm Syndrome

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riwHaBHnTio>

Understanding terrorism

- Determining what drives people to terrorism is no easy task.
- For one thing, terrorists aren't likely to volunteer as experimental subjects, and examining their activities from afar can lead to erroneous conclusions.
- What's more, one group's terrorist is another group's freedom fighter, as the millions of Arabs who support Palestinian suicide bombers will attest.

Understanding terrorism

- Given these complexities, the psychology of terrorism is marked more by theory and opinion than by good science, researchers admit.
- But a number of psychologists are starting to put together reliable data.
- They're finding it is generally more useful to view terrorism in terms of political and group dynamics and processes than individual ones, and that universal psychological principles—such as our subconscious fear of death and our desire for meaning and personal significance—may help to explain some aspects of terrorist actions and our reactions to them.

Understanding terrorism

- Eventually, such information could help in the complex quest to prevent terrorism.
- Psychologists' findings suggest that assuaging people's fear of cultural annihilation, highlighting our common humanity or demonstrating the discrepancy between the dream and reality of terrorist involvement could keep would-be terrorists from turning to violence, for instance.

Understanding terrorism

- In fact, the notion that terrorists could be talked out of committing violence using peaceful dialogue and a helping hand is no longer an idealist's pipe dream, but actually the aim of a growing number of "de-radicalization" programs worldwide, says social psychologist Arie Kruglanski, PhD, co-director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, or START, one of several university-based Centers of Excellence established under the Homeland Security Act of 2002.

The lure of terror

- For years, psychologists examined terrorists' individual characteristics, mining for clues that could explain their willingness to engage in violence.
- While researchers now agree that most terrorists are not "pathological" in any traditional sense, several important insights have been gleaned through interviews with some 60 former terrorists conducted by psychologist John Horgan, PhD, who directs the Pennsylvania State University's International Center for the Study of Terrorism.

The lure of terror

- Horgan found that people who are more open to terrorist recruitment and radicalization tend to:
 - Feel angry, alienated or disenfranchised.
 - Believe that their current political involvement does not give them the power to effect real change.
 - Identify with perceived victims of the social injustice they are fighting.
 - Feel the need to take action rather than just talking about the problem.
 - Believe that engaging in violence against the state is not immoral.
 - Have friends or family sympathetic to the cause.
 - Believe that joining a movement offers social and psychological rewards such as adventure, camaraderie and a heightened sense of identity.

The lure of terror

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5EkSuPlmuA>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlwsQicJR_c

The lure of terror

- Beyond the individual characteristics of terrorists, Horgan has learned that it's more fruitful to investigate how people change as a result of terrorist involvement than to simply ask why they enter in the first place.
- That's because asking **why** tends to yield verbatim, ideological responses, while asking **how** reveals important information about the processes of entry, involvement and leaving organizations, he has found.
- Potential areas to tap include examining the myriad ways people join organizations, whether via recruitment or personal decision; how leaders influence people's decision to adopt certain roles, for example by glorifying the role of suicide bomber; and factors that motivate people to leave.

The lure of terror

- For instance, based on what he's gleaned about why people leave organizations, a particularly promising strategy may be:
- highlighting how the promised glamorous lifestyle never comes to pass—an experience emotionally recounted by a former terrorist now in hiding.
- A man told Horgan he was lured into a movement as a teen when recruiters romanticized the cause. But he soon discovered his comrades held religious values, not the idealistic ones he had, and he was horrified when he killed his first victim at point-blank range.

The lure of terror

- "The reality of involvement is not what these kids are led to believe," says Horgan. "Speaking with repentant former terrorists, many with blood on their hands, offers an extraordinary opportunity to use the terrorists' own words and deeds against them."

The lure of terror

- Some psychologists believe terrorism is most accurately viewed through a political lens.
- Psychologist Clark McCauley, PhD, a co-investigator at START and director of the Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict at Bryn Mawr College, **has come to see terrorism as "the warfare of the weak"—the means by which groups that lack material or political power to fight what they see as oppressive forces.**
- As such, **he believes that terrorist actions and government reactions to them represent a dynamic interplay, with the moves of one group influencing those of the other.**
- **As one example, if terrorists commit an attack and a state uses extreme force to send a punishing message back, the terrorists may use that action to drum up greater anti-state sentiment among citizens, lending justification to their next actions.**
- **Yet research focuses almost solely on terrorist actions and neglects the important other side of the equation, he contends. "If you can't keep track of what we're doing in response, how can you ever hope to figure out what works better or worse?" McCauley says.**

The lure of terror

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYuZLHkUDo4>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-MngZCOoOI>

The role of cultural values

- **Ironically, an unconscious fear of death may underlie much of the motivation behind terrorism and reactions to terrorism**, maintains psychologist Tom Pyszczynski, PhD, of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.
- Along with colleagues Jeff Greenberg, PhD, and Sheldon Solomon, PhD, Pyszczynski developed **"terror management theory,"** which holds that people use culture and religion to protect themselves from a fear of death that lies on the fringes of awareness.

The role of cultural values

- Across dozens of studies, the team has induced thoughts of death by subliminally presenting people with death-related stimuli or by inserting a delay-and-distraction task between a reminder of death and people's assessment of its effects.
- This subliminal prompting induces people to psychologically defend themselves against death in ways that bear little surface relationship to the problem of death, Pyszczynski's team has found.
- These include clinging to their cultural identities, working hard to live up to their culture's values and going to great lengths to defend those values. (Conversely, the investigators have shown that getting people to consciously contemplate their mortality increases their intention to engage in life-enhancing behaviors, such as exercise.)

The role of cultural values

- To test whether the theory applies to the conflict between the Middle East and the West, Pyszczynski's team conducted a set of studies in the United States, Iran and Israel.
- In all three countries, people who were subtly reminded of their mortality—and thus primed to cling more strongly to their group identities—were more likely to support violence against the out group.
- Iranians were more likely to support suicide bombing against Westerners.
- Americans were more likely to advocate military force to battle Islamic extremists, even if it meant killing thousands of civilians.
- Israelis were more likely to condone violence against Palestinians. The studies are summarized in an article in the journal *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism & Political Aggression* (Vol. 1, No. 1).

The role of cultural values

- Further research conducted by START co-director Kruglanski sheds light on the role a "collectivist mentality" may play in terrorism.
- His surveys of thousands of people in 15 Arab and other countries found that Muslims who have a more collectivistic mentality are more likely to support terrorist attacks against Americans than those with more individualistic leanings.
- The research, submitted to Political Psychology, also found that the lower people's reported personal success in life, the greater their tendency to endorse collectivistic ideas and to support attacks against Americans.
- The findings suggest that joining terrorist groups may confer a sense of security and meaning that people do not feel as individuals, Kruglanski says.
"Being part of a collectivist cause has always been a hallmark of people willing to undergo personal sacrifices," he says.

The role of cultural values

- **In a more global sense, a fear of cultural annihilation may help fuel terrorist sentiments**, says psychologist and terrorism expert Fathali Moghaddam, PhD, of Georgetown University's department of psychology.
- In "How Globalization Spurs Terrorism: The Lopsided Benefits of One World and Why That Fuels Violence" (Praeger, 2008), Moghaddam argues that **rapid globalization has forced disparate cultures into contact with one another and is threatening the domination or disappearance of some groups—a cultural version of "survival of the fittest."**
- "You can interpret Islamic terrorism as one form of reaction to the perception that the fundamentalist way of life is under attack and is about to become extinct," he says.

The role of cultural values

- Because of such beliefs, psychologists are tracking public attitudes to determine how best to promote peace. Pyszczynki, for example, has conducted as-yet-unpublished research showing that people's attitudes toward out-group violence can be changed if they are reminded of a common human problem.
- In two of his team's recent studies, Americans coping with the "war on terror" and Palestinians in the midst of Israeli bombings were primed to think either about a local catastrophe or global warming.
- Some also received reminders of their own mortality. In both studies, only those primed with thoughts of both death and global warming increased their support for peacemaking activities.
- **"The really encouraging note is that even in the height of a conflict going on with your own people, reminders of mortality and a common cause reduces support for war and increases support for peacemaking,"** Pyszczynki says.

Studying de-radicalization

- In the real world, psychologists also are exploring the effectiveness of initiatives taking place in countries including Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and the United Kingdom that are seeking to soften the hearts and minds of terrorist detainees. In preliminary research, Kruglanski and colleagues note that many of these programs share:

Studying de-radicalization

- An **intellectual component**, often involving moderate Muslim clerics who hold dialogues with imprisoned detainees about the Qu'ran's true teachings on violence and jihad.
- An **emotional component** that defuses detainees' anger and frustration by showing authentic concern for their families, through means such as funding their children's education or offering professional training for their wives. This aspect also capitalizes on the fact that detainees are weary from their lifestyles and imprisonment.
- A **social component** that addresses the reality that detainees often re-enter societies that may rekindle their radical beliefs. A program in Indonesia, for instance, uses former militants who are now law-abiding citizens to convince former terrorists that violence against civilians compromises the image of Islam.

Studying de-radicalization

- Five other such initiatives in Northern Ireland, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Colombia are being studied by Pennsylvania State University's Horgan.
- His not-yet-published research proposes a framework that policymakers can use to evaluate these programs, including examining how each effort conceptualizes and measures success, and evaluating the reality and practical significance of these success claims.

Studying de-radicalization

- Given his own experience talking with former terrorists, Horgan is cautious about how much to expect from these programs.
- In his recent study, he discovered that some of these efforts not only lack clear criteria for establishing what constitutes "success," but also that actual de-radicalization is rarely a feature of such programs—that former terrorists may rejoin society and keep from engaging in terrorist actions, but retain their radical beliefs.
- **"There is no evidence to suggest that disengaging from terrorism necessarily results in de-radicalization," he contends.**

Can Psychology Help with Terrorism?

- Expressive view
 - Terrorists are motivated largely by psychological reasons. They react without much thought
- Instrumental view
 - Acts of terrorism are deliberate, rational and guided by a calculated plan

Expressive View

- Terrorism is a result of psychological issues? Probably false
- Terrorists rationalize acts that they were psychologically compelled to commit anyway
- Terrorists are polarized. They are righteous freedom fighters; we are evil

Terrorists Are Not Abnormal?

- Studies of the IRA found no evidence of psychological abnormalities
- Terrorists who actually enjoy killing and violence tend to be unimportant figures within terrorist organizations and are followers rather than leaders
- Comparative studies of different terrorist groups do not show a particular psychological type or uniform terrorist mind

Splitting/Externalization

- A borderline personality disorder in which the individual ascribes all that is good to himself and projects or conveys all that is bad to others
- This thought process is bad and worrisome
- Splitting seems to be represented disproportionately among terrorists

Splitting – Hitler example

- Hitler had a borderline personality disorder he considered himself god like and a knight in shinning armor to the German people.
- He claimed all success his doing and failure to others, specifically Jews.
- Anyone who opposed him were unworthy.
- Thoughts? Probably not a good outlook.

A Terrorist's Family Background

- Come from broken homes
- Lost a father prior to age 14
- Severe conflicts with their parents
- Convicted in juvenile courts
- A pattern of life long failure

Other Psychological Factors

- Often not actually members of the societies they are protecting
- Seldom a well thought out program, usually an expressive outburst
- Chosen trauma-violent political behavior is the result of some selected historical experience that triggers a disproportionately violent reaction
- Temptation versus Intimidation

Typical Psychology of Terrorism, Criminals, and Crazies

- Crusaders commit terrorist acts to please God or the people they represent. They will not negotiate
- Criminals commit terrorism for personal gain. They are rational and will negotiate
- Crazies commit terrorist acts because they are mad. Note that crazy does not mean stupid

Instrumental View

- Opposite of the expressive view – psychology has nothing to do with terrorist
- The Instrumental view:
- Terrorism is a logical strategy based upon rational cost-benefit analysis
- Terrorists are usually normal people pursing a rational, deliberate strategy

Instrumental View of Psychology

- Psychological aspects of terrorist's behavior are important when analyzing the group's influence on individual behavior, but emphasizing psychological aspects is not helpful because there are too many reasons why people become terrorists
- Instead, consider the reasons for terrorism
 - Situations in places where terrorism exists
 - Reasons for terrorism
 - Role of the individual terrorists

Situation has two Aspects, Preconditions & precipitants

- **Preconditions** - Enabling causes of terrorism
- Poverty
- Society prone to violence
- Technology such as bombs
- Urbanization-densely populated areas make attacks easier and more effective
- Social habits and historical conditions such as Pakistan

Situation has two Aspects, Preconditions & precipitants

- **precipitant** - Reasons for terrorism, or what provides motivation and direction of terrorists
- If the police or army attacked a family member, that might motivate terrorists
- Black Friday in Iran in which the Shah's troops started shooting at people is widely considered to be a classical precipitant

Seven Terrorist Motives

- Publicize the cause – use the media
- Disrupt establishment's normal function – shows the government is inept
- Create public sympathy – for cause
- Provoke a harsh response from the government – to alienate the public (government is the bad)
- Add cohesion, boost morale of the group – to continue the struggle
- Counter the government's greater military power
- Capitalize on unique historical opportunities – this requires action

Role of the Individual

- The Instrumental view doesn't focus on psychological issues, but it also doesn't ignore them
- Things can be learned from individual terrorist's psychological makeup
- Common psychological characteristics are studied

Attributes Common to Terrorists

- High tolerance to risk
- Heavy reliance on the group
- Vengeance for jailed or killed comrades
- Sense of guilt used to justify their actions
- Dedication to a political belief or cause

More Common Attributes

- Willingness to self sacrifice – willing to die (or blow yourself up)
- Suppress normal emotions – if you are going to kill people, you need to be non-emotional
- Reasonably high intelligence – know how to deceive
- Education – reasonably smart to accomplish goals
- Access to resources – money, sanctuaries, support

