The Emotive & Psychological Context of Terrorism: Academic Status of Getting Into the Minds of Terrorists

MU MVZ 203 / 448
Spring 2010
Sonoma State University
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Class Meetings, Rest of the Semester

- Here's the schedule for the rest of the term:
  - 07 April: Psychology of Terrorism
  - 12 April: Release of Midterm Study Sheet & TWO Midterm Exam Prep Lectures on MU IS
  - 14 April: Terror Networks; Terrorism Funding

  - 21 April: **MIDTERM EXAM**
  - **NO CLASS: Wednesday, 28 April 2010**

  - 05 May: Suicide Terrorism; Case Study of Bombings
  - 12 May: Terrorism Symbols & Signs
  - 19 May: Trajectory of Terrorism / Al Qaeda / Final Exam Study Sheet released

Major Themes for This Section

- What do we know about the Psychology of Terrorism as an *Explanatory Variable* for action?

- How do we know this?

- Where should we be going in terms of research? (and how?)

- How to we use the resulting knowledge to affect national responses to terrorism?

"Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."
- Voltaire

The Emotive Quotient & the Psychology of Terrorism: Why focus on the fear factor?

The Scope of Study With Psychology of Terrorism

"There is a broad spectrum of terrorist groups and organizations, each of which has a different <u>psychology</u>, <u>motivation</u> and <u>decision making structure</u>. Indeed, one should not speak of terrorist psychology in the singular, but rather of terrorist psychologie<u>s</u>"

- Jerrold Post, 2001:2.

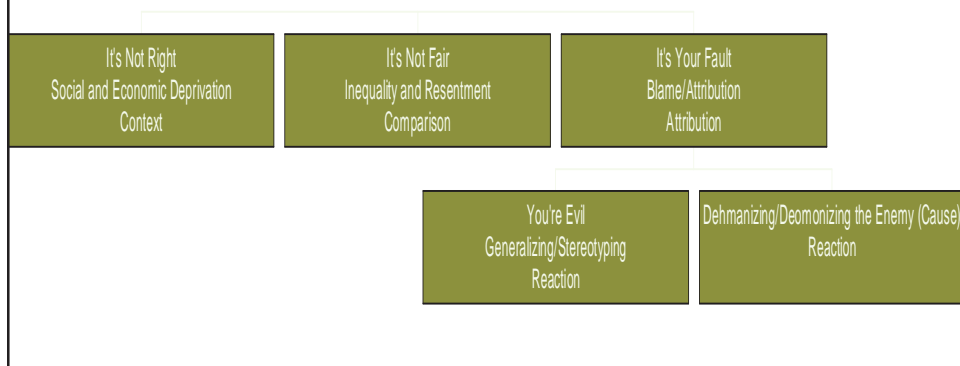## Popular Beliefs and Misconceptions about Terrorism

- There is a widespread, but misguided belief that:

  - Terrorists are psychotic or mentally ill
    - And/or that terrorists suffer personality disorders
    - Usually <u>not</u> the case. Why?

  - Terrorist violence is the result of poverty or ignorance

  - Terrorist violence is a reaction to personal grievances, including personal humiliation, anger, or shame

  - Terrorists are victims of physical or psychological coercion from mastermind recruiters ("brainwashing")

What We Do Know

Terrorists are:

- Not just narcissists, with hostility toward parents or authority figures.
- Not subject to mental illness as a critical factor ("necessary & sufficient" variable) -most not "psychopaths."
- No terrorist profile.
- Not all promote violence.
- Not much research on recruitment.
- Recent research on gender as well as "de-radicalization."
- Important qualifiers of 'state-support' versus 'state-sanctioning' as critical variables of activities & support.

The Process of Ideological Development of Radicalization (Borum)

It's Not Right Social and Economic Deprivation Context	It's Not Fair Inequality and Resentment Comparison	It's Your Fault Blame/Attribution Attribution

| You're Evil Generalizing/Stereotyping Reaction	Dehmanizing/Deomonizing the Enemy (Cause) Reaction

Individual Psychology & Cognition:
Trauma & Brain Activity, Function

The Fear System in the brain:

- **The Fear System in the brain – a "hostile takeover of consciousness by emotion"**

Common responses to fear:

- **Common responses to fear – fight or flight, freezing and numbing, submission**

- **Isolation, passivity, and disempowerment exacerbate fear**

- **Problem solving action, affiliative coping, and "tend and befriend" reduce fear**
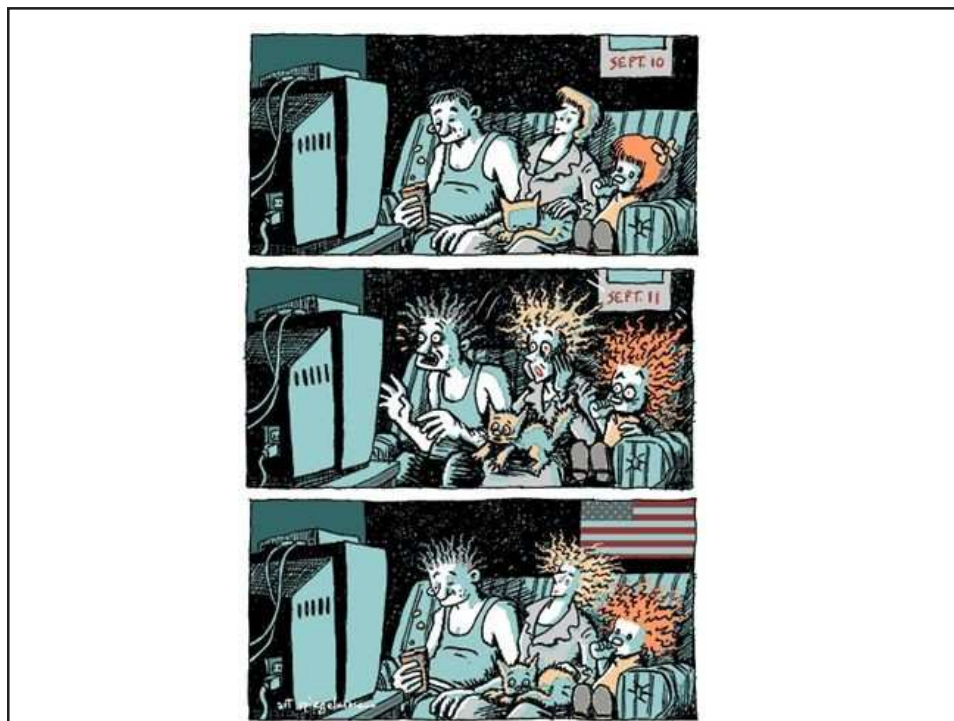
"The prefrontal cortex and amygdala are **reciprocally related**. In order for the amygdala to respond to fear reactions, the prefrontal region has to be shut down. By the same logic, when the prefrontal region is active, the amygdala would be inhibited…Treatment of pathologic fear may require that the patient learn to **increase activity in the prefrontal region**."

Joseph LeDoux, The Synaptic Self, 2001

Individual Psychology & Cognition:
Fear's Worldview

- **Narrowed lens**

- **Focus on dangerous intentions**

- **A world of "persons" - systems and institutions are "cognitively invisible"**

- **Threats are viewed in interpersonal and personal terms**

Post – 9/11 US Citizen Reaction:

"*I want to feel like I feel when I lock my doors and put on my security system at night. If I have to lose some of my civil liberties to get there, it is okay.*"

American Environics focus group participant, Chicago, 2002

Research on the Psychology of Terrorism is Making Real Progress

- The questions are evolving and improving in the field
  - Old question:
    - What is wrong with these people?
  - New Question:
    - Why do some people choose to engage in terrorism?
  - Newer Question:
    - Why don't other people make the same choice in similar circumstances?
  - Looming Present Day Question:
    - How and why do people move away from terrorism?

- Multiple methods of getting into the mind of terrorists

- Research on the psychology of terrorism points toward new ideas for dealing with terrorism

What do we Know About the Psychology of Terrorism?

There is no unique "psychology of terrorism" that explains the motivations and processes by which people come to engage in terrorist activity.

- The behavior of terrorists is governed by and explained by the same general processes and motivations as people in general.

- It is more important to understand why terrorist activity seems acceptable, necessary and even admirable to many individuals than it is to speculate about what is "wrong" with or "aberrant" about terrorists.

No common personality profiles or patterns of life-history have *yet* been found that define members of terrorist groups or that identify individuals willing to carry out terrorist attacks.

- Variables such as childhood abuse and trauma and themes of perceived injustice and humiliation are sometimes cited in terrorist biographies

- There is no evidence that these experiences are more common among terrorists than among others who do not engage in terrorism

Terrorism is usually a <u>group activity</u>, and the reliance of terrorists on social, logistical, financial and moral <u>support from others is a key vulnerability</u> that could be exploited in combating terrorism.

- Members of terrorist groups depend strongly upon other group members (especially when the group is isolated from the broader society), and social support and comradeship can be important in sustaining group membership.

- Breaking apart the social networks that make up and that support terrorist groups should be a high priority in combating terrorism

Risk factors that have been identified in terrorism research include <u>a range of motivational, ideological and social factors.</u>

- Perceptions of isolation or alienation from general society
- Perceptions of individual or group humiliation, injustice, shame or dishonor
- Social isolation
- Need for identity and the desire to belong
- Sense of disillusionment with the available alternatives
- Ideology that legitimizes terrorism
- Role models and heroes
- Sense of being or identifying with victims

**Conclusion is Thus:
Becoming a terrorist is a process that
unfolds over time**

- The process of becoming an active terrorist involves change in one's beliefs and attitudes that make it easier to attack civilian targets.

- Interventions that are targeted toward the individuals who are in the earlier parts of this trajectory are more likely to succeed than interventions targeted toward individuals who are farther along in this process

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Terrorist groups evolve, and changes in groups over time can influence attraction to these groups

- Terrorist groups have a well-defined life-cycle, and most eventually disperse or die out

- Providing alternatives to group members can accelerate this trajectory of decline

- The experience of members with a group will change as group develops and declines

- Attraction of new members is likely to change over this life cycle

Terrorism is goal-directed behavior

- Terrorism is usually goal-directed behavior, which means that understanding the political/social goals being pursued by individual terrorists and terror groups is central to understanding and reducing terrorism

- The links between the long-term goals of terrorist groups and specific actions of terrorists are sometimes unclear to external observers, but may appear very clear to the perpetrator

- Political, social and ideological goals are not the only ones that drive the decisions of individuals and groups. Both strategic and tactical decisions are influenced by organizational goals (to grow, continue) as well as individual and social goals (support your group, gain individual prestige, strike back at hated target)

Knowing the goals of terrorist organizations provides useful information

- Detailed knowledge of the political and social goals of these groups may not be sufficient for making specific tactical predictions

- Knowledge of these goals can, however, be useful to identifying alternatives to violent means that might achieve these goals

Understanding how terrorists think about their actions is important

- Few people engaged in terrorist attacks think of themselves as terrorists

- Understanding how terrorists think about their own behavior and actions is critical to influencing those actions

Terrorists regard their actions as necessary, honorable, and justifiable

- Terrorist regard themselves as fighters engaged in a legitimate and justifiable war

- One key to fighting terrorism is to change the perceptions of terrorists and the social groups that support them about the acceptability of terrorist attacks

Terrorism requires some plausible justification for targeting civilians

- Terrorist ideologies often provide a set of beliefs that justify attacks on civilians. These belief systems often justify terrorism on two bases, that such attacks are moral and that such attacks are effective

- Undermining these beliefs is likely to decrease the attractiveness of these groups

- **Terror groups seek:**

  - **Normative considerations (political objectives to secure attention to cause);**
  - **To maintain self-interests (in order to engage in goal-directed behavior; maintain movement / organization & grow organization);**
  - **To have an internal logic;**
  - **To grow and maintain legitimacy;**
  - **Organize accordingly given the previous variables.**

It is important for the success of terrorist groups that their goals and the means used to achieve these goals are seen as legitimate by their supporters

- The belief on the part of terrorists and the social groups that supports them that terrorists are waging a legitimate war helps to attract adherents to the terrorists' cause and to justify attacks

- Terrorism is most likely when the goals being pursued by terrorists are seen by the terrorist themselves and by the social groups with which they interact (e.g., family) as legitimate and praiseworthy

Using Knowledge About the Psychology of Terrorism to Influence Policymaking

- Understanding more about how terrorist groups <u>attract</u> new members, <u>retain</u> current members, and <u>deal with defections</u> opens up a number of new avenues for counterterrorism interventions

- Rigorous, non-political analyses of terrorist goals is essential
  - "They want to destroy our freedoms" thinking is counterproductive & self-perpetrating.

- Study public images and self-images of terrorists in order to undermine those images
  - Used in Iraq as AQIM & AQ-affiliated groups attacked native, sympathetic populace, turning locals against the terror orgs.
  - UK campaign against IRA and violent Loyalist groups in Northern Ireland

Using Knowledge About the Psychology of Terrorism to Influence Policymaking

- Change the rhetoric and imagery of public discussions of terrorism
  - Terrorist think of themselves as soldiers in a war that is well-justified
  - Terrorist groups benefit from being portrayed as powerful and dangerous
    - How do we change the discussion to undermine these images?

- Identify and target the right set of weaknesses, using the right set of approaches
  - Terrorists depend on large social networks of passive supporters
  - How do we attack terrorists without strengthening their support among the community of people not yet fully committed?

Conclusions

- The field of Psychology, informed by Political Science, & the tools of Social Science, has much to offer a comprehensive understanding of terrorism as well as inform counterterrorism initiatives at a variety of levels

- In addition, the value of this inter-disciplinary approach is that it places priority on empirical data-driven approaches to scientific enquiry

- Terrorism studies have traditionally lacked rigor and methodological soundness, but this inter-disciplinary approach increases the research relevance to policy-making…is that desirable?

- Terrorism can be understood as a series of psychological processes
  - However, the use of certain analytical socio-psychological frameworks is limited.

Conclusion - Tools for Understanding the Psychology of Terrorism

- Pay attention to what terrorists say
  - What they say to their enemies
  - What the say to the public, and their victims overall
  - What they say to members of their own groups
  - Via interviews, autobiographies, intercepted communications

- Don't uncritically accept what terrorists say
  - Virtually any self-report should be viewed with skepticism, especially when connected to violent, criminal activities
  - Triangulate - check against other known facts
  - Engage in empirical analysis via tried and tested methods to ascertain knowledge
  - Test knowledge; test veracity; engage in games that educate & move
- Analyze terrorists & their organizations for clues to motivations (Networks? Hierarchies? Loose organizations? Frustrations?)

Tools for Understanding
the Psychology of Terrorism

- Pay attention to what terrorists do

    - Use what we know about situations that have something in common with terrorist operations

    - Analyses of patterns and commonalities in terrorist events

- Learn their literature, constitutions, & creed; simulations, "red team" events; reconstructions / re-enactments; "act & think" like terrorists

- But in doing all of this, acknowledging the relative limitations and weaknesses to all of these sources of information

Most Important Tool - Know Your Target

- People become terrorists in different ways, occupy different roles, and for different reasons. Some people drift into terrorism in a series of small, seemingly inconsequential steps, whereas others make very explicit decisions to join terrorist groups

- Some members of terrorist organizations occupy mundane roles that keep them far removed from violence (e.g. fundraising) whereas others are directly involved in attacks.

- Groups involved in terrorism differ considerably in their focus, tactics, and even their involvement in activities other than terrorism.

- There are many pathways into and out of involvement in terrorism that do not involve direct action and/or violence.

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Suggested Readings

Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism – Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why? By Rex Hudson [Report by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress]

USMC MCRP 3-02E, The Individual's Guide for Understanding and Surviving Terrorism

Defeating Terrorism by Howard D. Russell, Reid Sawyer

Terrorism, an Introduction by Jonathan White, basic CCJ/CJA focused primer

Preparing for the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism: A Public Health Strategy [Board on Neuroscience and Behavioral Health]

Works Cited

- SWOTT reading list for "Psychology of Terrorism," including John Horgan's new book, *The Psychology of Terrorism*
- Aronson, Elliot, Wilson, Timothy D., Akert, Robin M. (2004). Group Processes. *Social Psychology 5th Edition.* Prentice Hall.
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