Psychology of Terrorism

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Suggested Citation:

Borum, R. (2004). *Psychology of terrorism.* Tampa: University of South Florida.

Printed in the United States of America

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Psychology of Terrorism

Executive Summary

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As part of the ongoing effort to better understand the causes, motivations and determinants of terrorist behavior, based on a comprehensive review of the scientific and professional literature, this report analyzes key findings on the "psychology of terrorism."

- Although early writings on the "psychology of terrorism" were based mostly in psychoanalytic theory (e.g., narcissism, hostility toward parents), most researchers have since moved on to other approaches.
- People become terrorists in different ways, in different roles, and for different reasons. It may be helpful to distinguish between reasons for joining, remaining in, and leaving terrorist organizations.
- Perceived injustice, need for identity and need for belonging are common vulnerabilities among potential terrorists.
- Mental illness is not a critical factor in explaining terrorist behavior. Also, most terrorists are not "psychopaths."
- There is no "terrorist personality", nor is there any accurate profile – psychologically or otherwise – of the terrorist.
- Histories of childhood abuse and trauma and themes of perceived injustice and humiliation often are prominent in terrorist biographies, but do not really help to explain terrorism.
- Terrorist ideologies tend to provide a set of beliefs that justify and mandate certain behaviors. Those beliefs are regarded as absolute, and the behaviors are seen as serving a meaningful cause.
- Not all extremist ideologies promote violence, nor are all extremists violent. One might ask whether the ideology is driven more by *promotion* of the "cause" or *destruction* of those who oppose it.
- The powerful, naturally-occurring barriers that inhibit human killing can be eroded either through outside social/environmental influences or by changing how one perceives the situation.
- Terrorist groups, like all social collectives, have certain internal (e.g., mistrust, competition) and external (e.g. support, inter-group conflict) vulnerabilities to their existence.
- Surprisingly little research or analysis has been conducted on terrorist recruitment. Recruitment efforts do appear concentrated in areas where people feel most deprived and dissatisfied. Relationships are critical. Effective recruiters create and exploit a sense of urgency and imminence.
- Effective leaders of terrorist organizations must be able to: maintain a collective belief system; establish and maintain organizational routines; control the flow of communication; manipulate incentives (and purposive goals) for followers; deflect conflict to external targets; and keep action going.
- Research on the psychology of terrorism largely lacks substance and rigor. Cultural factors are important, but have not been studied. Future research should be operationally-informed; maintain a behavior based focus; and derive interpretations from analyses of incident-related behaviors.

Section
1

Introduction

In the current national security environment, there is little question that terrorism is among the gravest of threats. Massive resources throughout the government and private sectors have been allocated and re-allocated to the task of preventing terrorism. These efforts, however, often lack a conceptual - let alone empirically-based – foundation for understanding terrorists and their acts of violence. This void creates a serious challenge at many levels, from policy-level decisions about how a state should respond to terrorism, to individual-level decisions about whether a given person of interest, who espouses extremist ideas, truly poses a serious threat to U.S. personnel, assets, and interests.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and synthesize what has been reported from the scientific and professional literature about the "psychology of terrorism." This focus is not intended to suggest that the scientific discipline of psychology provides the only, or even necessarily the best, analytic framework for understanding terrorism. Like all approaches to understanding or explaining human behavior, a psychological approach has advantages and limitations. Nevertheless, as psychology is regarded as "the science of human behavior," it seems a reasonable, and potentially productive, line of inquiry.

Although the basic question of how best to define terrorism has itself been a vexing problem, for purposes of this analysis, we are concerned generally with 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. Our focus on psychological dimensions, de-emphasizes analysis of sociologically-based explanations (sometimes referred to as "root causes") or macro-level economic and political theories. Moreover, our focus on terrorist acts de-emphasizes analysis of the psychological effects, consequences or amelioration of terrorism.

In many ways, our basic aim is rather modest. We do not anticipate identifying or discovering THE explanation for all terrorism. Rather, we

hope to identify, describe, and evaluate what contribution – if any – psychological theory or research may have made to understanding terrorists and terrorism. In approaching this task, we are mindful of Walter Laqueur's incisive conclusion based on more than a quarter century of personal research on the topic: "Many terrorisms exist, and their character has changed over time and from country to country. The endeavor to find a "general theory" of terrorism, one overall explanation of its roots, is a futile and misguided enterprise. ..Terrorism has changed over time and so have the terrorists, their motives, and the causes of terrorism." (Laqueur, 2003[1]). Psychiatrist Jerrold Post makes that caveat even more directly applicable to an exploration of the psychological dimension of terrorism. He cautions that "there is a broad spectrum of terrorist groups and organizations, each of which has a different psychology, motivation and decision making structure. Indeed, one should not speak of terrorist psychology in the singular, but rather of terrorist psychologies" (Post, 2001[2]). With that cautionary note, we offer the following review.

Section
2

Aims & Methodology

We have defined terrorism here as "acts of violence intentionally perpetrated on civilian non-combatants with the goal of furthering some ideological, religious or political objective." Our principal focus is on non-state actors.

Our task was to identify and analyze the scientific and professional social science literature pertaining to the psychological and/or behavioral dimensions of terrorist behavior (not on victimization or effects). Our objectives were to explore what questions pertaining to terrorist groups and behavior had been asked by social science researchers; to identify the main findings from that research; and attempt to distill and summarize them within a framework of operationally relevant questions.

Search Strategy

To identify the relevant social science literature, we began by searching a series of major academic databases using a systematic, iterative keyword strategy, mapping, where possible onto existing subject headings. The focus was on locating professional social science literature published in major books or in peer-reviewed journals. The following database searches were conducted in October, 2003.

- Sociofile/Sociological Abstracts
- Criminal Justice Abstracts (CJ Abstracts)
- Criminal Justice Periodical Index (CJPI)
- National Criminal Justice Reference Service Abstracts (NCJRS)
- PsychInfo
- Medline
- Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS)

The “hit count” from those searches is summarized in the table below. After the initial list was generated, we cross-checked the citations against the reference list of several major review works that had been published in the preceding five years (e.g., Rex Hudson’s “The Psychology and Sociology of Terrorism”[3]) and included potentially relevant references that were not already on the list. Finally, the list was submitted to the three senior academic consultants on the project: Dr. Martha Crenshaw (Wesleyan University), Dr. John Horgan (University College, Cork), and Dr. Andrew Silke (UK Home Office) soliciting recommendations based only on relevance (not merit) as to whether any of the citations listed should be removed and whether they knew of others that met the criteria that should be added. Reviews mainly suggested additions (rarely recommending removal) to the list. Revisions were made in response to reviewer comments, and the remaining comprised our final citation list.

	Psych Info	**Medline**	**CJPI**	**NCJRS**	**CJ Abstracts**	**PAIS**	**SocioFile**
Terrorism					50		
Terror* (kw)	844		1353	N/A	N/A		2115
Terror* (kw) & Mindset	1 (0)	0	4(0)	Boolean 33 (0)		10 (0)	2 (0)
Terror* (kw) & Psych* (kw)	N/A	428	141	N/A	N/A		N/A
Terrorism and Mindset	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	1	N/A	N/A
Psychology(Sub) & Terror*(kw)	50	17 (0)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Psychology(Sub) & Terrorism (Sub)	35	11 (0)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Psychology & Terrorism	N/A	N/A	N/A	Boolean 154 (0)	14	23	28
Political Violence (kw)	55	764(0)	89 (0)	Boolean 19	50	N/A	N/A
Political Violence (kw) & Psychology	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	10 (0)	149

Numbers= Total results

N/A= Search Term unnecessary

(0)=No items were kept from the results

kw=keyword

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Section
3

Psychological Approaches to Understanding Violence

Before exploring psychological approaches to the specific problem of terrorist violence, it may be helpful first to examine whether and how psychology and other behavioral sciences have sought to explain violent behavior more generally. Definitions of “violence” in the social science literature are at least as plentiful as definitions of terrorism. Most focus on causing harm to others, but some also include suicide and self-mutilation as forms of “violence to self.” Acts that intentionally cause physical harm or injury to another person would fit within most definitions. Yet many would insist that those parameters are much too narrow and restrictive to provide any meaningful description of violence. They might argue that threats as well as overt acts be included, that psychological or emotional harm is as relevant as physical harm, and that injury is merely an outcome and not a descriptor of the act. On the other hand, some would contend that “intentional harm” is too restrictive because it would include legitimate behavior in some contact sports or consensual infliction of pain.

Of what practical relevance is such an arcane definitional discussion among pointy-headed academics to someone who has to deal with understanding violence in the real world? A fair question.

Consider the following incidents:

- A 25-year old man drinks and beats his live-in girlfriend at least three times a week.

- A 17-year old girl who was thrown out of her parents’ house when she got pregnant and decided to keep the baby, now has a 9 month old colicky infant who has never slept through the night, and who screams so loudly and so persistently that the mom has vigorously shaken the youngster, just to get him to stop.

- A 53-year old man is known to lurk around playgrounds and summer campsites looking for young pre-pubescent boys who he then takes to a prepared location where he rapes them. Once he even killed a 10-year old boy.

- A 20-year woman has spent her entire life in an area where people of her ethnicity are marginalized and oppressed by the state. After two years of serving in a "first aid corps" of a militant resistance movement – and having her family killed in a raid by state soldiers – her anger and hatred toward the state has welled within her to the point that all she can think about is revenge. She dons an explosive-laden vest, and with a determination borne of rage, she heads toward a nearby military checkpoint, disguised as an expectant mother.

- A 30-year old man was born into the longstanding, intense religious and political strife of his homeland. His father is a university professor who is constantly watched by state security authorities, both because of his own radical religious involvement and because of family connections to known religious-based terrorists. The man is described by others as quiet, serious, and devout. He has been involved in coordinating and recruiting for a militant *jihadist* group that is widely known to be a terrorist organization.

Many people would view each of these cases as involving violence, but one might expect to understand or prevent the violence in such cases in very different ways. The personal and situational factors involved – and the extent of their contribution – might reasonably be expected to vary in these diverse circumstances. Yet, at a broad level, they might all be similarly classified as "violent." What might "cause" or "explain" behavior in one of these cases, might not in another. The point here is not to resolve the longstanding definitional debate, but to illustrate how the way in which practitioners and researchers view the problem of violence affects practical issues and decisions in the "real world."

One observation about causes that generally seems to be true and supported by the best available research is that violence is "caused" by multiple factors, many of which are strongly related to - and even affect - each other. The dichotomy of "Nature vs. Nurture" in explaining any form of human behavior, including violence, is outdated and inconsistent with the current state of research in the field. Violence is "caused" by a complex interaction of biological, social/contextual, cognitive, and emotional factors that occur over time. Some causes will be more prominent than others for certain individuals and for certain types of violence and aggression.

A second general observation is that most violence can be usefully viewed as intentional. It is chosen as a strategy of action. It is purposeful (goal-directed) and intended to achieve some valued outcome for the actor. It is not the product of innate, instinctual drives[4], nor is it the inevitable consequence of predetermining psychological and social forces. Obviously, many factors influence that decision and the competing options available, but humans typically are not passive vessels for involuntary displays of behavior. Certainly, there are exceptions. One can conceive of circumstances where an individual might have some brain dysfunction that causes general disinhibition and/or emotional instability that may result in aggression or violence. This would be inconsistent, though, with the kind of organization and planning necessary to carry out a terrorist attack.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

In reviewing explanatory theories and empirical models, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that the discipline of psychology has yet to develop or discover (much less agree upon) any that substantially explain violent behavior, particularly across its many contexts, motivations and actors. The problem is not that researchers, scholars and practitioners have not tried to locate such an explanation, but the "holy grail" has proved to be elusive. In fact, it is probably fair to say that psychological theoretical development in explaining violence has been given less attention, and has made less progress than in many behavioral realms of substantially lesser social importance or consequence.

What are some of the main psychological theories that have been applied to understanding violence?

Instinct Theory

Psychoanalytic: "The most widely recognized theory that addresses the roots of all forms of violence is the psychoanalytic model. Despite its influence on writers in the political science, sociology, history, and criminology literature, this model has weak logical, theoretical, and empirical foundations" (Beck, 2002[5]). Freud viewed aggression more generally as an innate and instinctual human trait, which most should outgrow in the normal course of human development. A later development in Freud's theory was that humans had the energy of life force (*eros*) and death force (*thanatos*) that sought internal balance[6]. Violence was seen as the "displacement" of *thanatos* from self and onto others. A number of more narrow violence-related theories have drawn on psychoanalytic concepts and ideas, but none are widely regarded as

psychoanalytic theories of violence.

Ethology: Ethology has been alternately defined as the scientific study of animal behavior, especially as it occurs in a natural environment and as the study of human ethos, and its formation (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). Ethologist, Konrad Lorenz advanced the notion that aggression arises from a very basic biological need - a "fighting instinct" that has had adaptive value as humans have evolved. He argued the drive from aggression is innate and that, in humans, only its mode of expression is learned through exposure to, and interaction with the environment. The theory of an instinctual drive for aggression suggests that it builds up over time, is fueled by emotional or psychophysiological arousal, and is subsequently discharged by a process of catharsis, which ostensibly decreases drive. Empirical research, including physiologic studies, however, do not support this "hydraulic" (building until discharge, then receding) theory of aggressive energy. Moreover, anthropologists and other social scientists have found significant differences both in the nature and level of aggression in different cultures, and experimental research has demonstrated that aggression can be environmentally manipulated; both findings that argue against a universal human instinct.

Drive Theory (Frustration-Aggression)

Frustration-Aggression: The link between frustration (being prevented from attaining a goal or engaging in behavior) and aggression has been discussed in psychology for more than half a century. Some even view it as a "master explanation" for understanding the cause of human violence. The basic premise of the frustration-aggression (FA) hypothesis is twofold: (1) Aggression is always produced by frustration, and (2) Frustration always produces aggression. When subjected to empirical scrutiny, however, research has shown that frustration does not inevitably lead to aggression. Sometimes, for example, it results in problem solving or dependent behaviors. And aggression is known to occur even in the absence of frustration. Thus it is not reasonable to view frustration alone as a necessary and sufficient causal factor. In an important reformulation of the FA hypothesis, Berkowitz (1989[7]) posited that it was only "aversive" frustration that would lead to aggression. The newly proposed progression was that frustration would lead to anger, and that anger – *in the presence of aggressive cues* – would lead to aggression. While subsequent research findings have, at times, been inconsistent or contradictory, "it is reasonable to conclude that aversive stimuli do facilitate, but probably not instigate, aggressive behavior" (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994, p. 68[8]). In a now classic work, Ted Gurr was among the first to apply a systematic FA analysis to the problem of

political violence, framing the frustration as one of “relative deprivation” (Gurr, 1968[9]).

Social Learning Theory

Fundamental learning theory suggests that behavioral patterns are acquired by links (contingencies) established between the behavior and its consequences. When behavior is followed by desired results (reward), that behavior is “reinforced” (made more likely). Conversely, when behavior is followed by undesirable or aversive consequence, that behavior is “punished” (made less likely). Social learning theory is a simple extension of this basic idea, suggesting that behavior (e.g., aggression) is learned not only through one’s direct experience, but also through observation of how such contingencies occur in one’s environment. Some have referred to this as vicarious learning. In this model, aggression is viewed as learned behavior. Accordingly, it is argued that through observation we learn consequences for the behavior, how to do it, to whom it should be directed, what provocation justifies it, and when it is appropriate. “If aggression is a learned behavior, then terrorism, a specific type of aggressive behavior, can also be learned” (Oots & Wiegele, 1985, p. 11[10]).

Cognitive Theory

The core elements in a “cognitive theory” of aggression derive from an area of study called “social cognition.” The basic notion is that people interact with their environment based on how they perceive and interpret it. That is, people form an internal (cognitive) map of their external (social) environment, and these perceptions – rather than an objective external reality – determine their behavior. The experimental literature clearly suggests that perceptions of intent affect aggression. Moreover, there are internal and external factors that can affect one’s perceptions of provocation or intent. Two common cognitive/processing deficits found among people who are highly aggressive are: (1) an inability to generate non-aggressive solutions to conflicts (and lack of confidence in their ability to use them successfully) and (2) a perceptual hypersensitivity to hostile/aggressive cues in the environment, particularly interpersonal cues[11].

Crenshaw suggests that the principles of social cognition apply both to terrorists and to their organizations. She notes “the actions of terrorists are based on a subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality. Perceptions of the political and social environment are

filtered through beliefs and attitudes that reflect experiences and memories" (Crenshaw, 1988[12], p. 12).

Biological Approaches

Consideration of biological factors affecting aggression does not constitute a theory, in any formal sense. Nevertheless they are an important element in a comprehensive biopsychosocial understanding of behavior. Oots and Wiegele (198513) argue that "social scientists who seek to understand terrorism should take account of the possibility that biological or physiological variables may play a role in bringing an individual to the point of performing an act of terrorism" (p. 17). Yet, it is rare that any biological studies are conducted on terrorists. One notable exception is an early finding by psychiatrist David Hubbard that a substantial portion of the terrorists he examined clinically suffered from some form of inner-ear problems or "vestibular dysfunction." This finding has not been replicated, however, nor is there a clear theoretical rationale for a potential link to terrorism. With that said, we offer here only the most basic, cursory review of current knowledge on biological factors influencing aggression.

<u>*Neurochemical Factors*</u>[14] : Serotonin (5-HT), of all neurotransmitters in the mammalian brain, has received the most research attention and has shown the most consistent association with aggressive behavior. Lower levels of serotonin have been linked to higher levels of aggression in normal, clinical, and offender samples. The association between 5-HT deficits and aggression seem to be specific to (or at least principally affect) impulsive, rather than premeditated aggressive behavior, which also appears to be mediated by perceived threat or provocation. Low levels of 5-HT may heighten one's sensitivity or reactivity to cues of hostility or provocation. "In the absence of provocative stimuli, decreased 5HT functioning may have little effect on the level of aggressive behavior exhibited by humans (Smith, 1986)" (Berman, Kavoussi, & Coccaro, 1997, p. 309). Because Serotonin is primarily an inhibitory neurotransmitter, it is possible that deficits in 5-HT reduce inhibition of aggressive ideas/impulses that would otherwise be suppressed – there is not real evidence that it creates them.
As neurotransmitters, *Norepinephrine* NE may affect arousal and environmental sensitivity and *Dopamine* DA may affect behavioral activation and goal-directed behavior.

"Compared to serotonin, the relationship between both dopamine and norepinephrine and human aggression is less clear" (Berman, Kavoussi, & Coccaro, 1997, p. 309). Although some studies have linked low levels of DA to increases in aggression (particularly impulsive aggression), DA and 5-HT levels are correlated (they travel together) so

it is particularly uncertain whether DA has any relationship to aggressive behavior independent of the effect of 5-HT.

Hormonal Factors[15]: The effects of androgens / gonadotropic hormones on human behavior – particularly aggressive behavior – are weaker and more complex than one might expect. There is not good empirical evidence to support "testosterone poisoning" as a cause of disproportionate violence in males. Testosterone has – at best – a limited role.[16] A meta-analysis of the relationship between testosterone and scores on the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (Archer, 1991) showed a "low but positive relationship between T levels and the overall inventory score of 230 males tested over five studies" (Brain & Susman, 1997, p. 319).

Psychophysiological Factors: Lower than average levels of arousal (e.g., low resting heart rate) and low reactivity are consistently found in studies of people who engage in aggressive and antisocial behavior (Raine, 1993, 1997[17]).

Neuropsychological Factors: Cognitive abilities relating to self-awareness and self-control are referred to as "executive functions." The frontal lobe of the brain, and the prefrontal cortex in particular, has been identified as the primary neuroanatomic site of these functions. "Evidence of the relation between executive deficits and aggression has been found among incarcerated subjects, among normal subjects in laboratory situations, and among nonselected populations. Effect sizes are small to moderate, but consistent and robust[18]. Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that dysfunction or impairment in the prefrontal cortex may be responsible for the psychophysiologic deficits found in people who engage in antisocial and aggressive behavior (Raine, 1993, 1997[19]). Specifically, brain imaging, neurological, and animal studies suggest that prefrontal dysfunction may account for low levels of arousal, low (stress) reactivity, and fearlessness.

Raw Empirical Approaches

In addition to these theoretically-based approaches, psychological researchers also have attempted to apply statistical models to explain violence and to identify its predictors. This line of inquiry has yielded some positive findings on risk factors for violent behavior.
The use of risk factors in the behavioral sciences is a concept borrowed from the field of Public Health, specifically the discipline of epidemiology (the study of causes and course of diseases). Technically, a risk factor is defined as "..an aspect of personal behavior or lifestyle, an environmental exposure, or an inborn or inherited characteristic which on the basis of epidemiological evidence is known to be associated with

health- related condition(s) considered important to prevent.[20] Applied to this study, it is any factor, that when present, makes violence more likely than when it is absent.
Notice that this definition does not imply anything about causation. It is possible to identify risk factors, without a clear understanding of the causal mechanisms by which they operate. In fact, this is why we have a well-developed base of empirical knowledge on risk factors for violence and so little explanation of its cause.

Literally hundreds of studies in psychology, criminology, sociology, and other behavioral sciences have yielded significant risk factors for violence. Risk factors have been classified as broadly falling into two categories: static and dynamic. Static risk factors are those that are historical (e.g., early onset of violence) or dispositional (e.g., gender) in nature, and that are unlikely to change over time. Dynamic factors are typically individual, social or situational factors that often do change (e.g., attitudes, associates, high levels of stress) and, therefore might be more amenable to modification through intervention[21].

Risk Factors for General Violence

- Juvenile delinquency .20
- Family problems .19
- Antisocial personality .18
- Hospital admissions .17
- Violent history .16
- Institutional adjustment .14
- Adult criminal history .14
- Unmarried .13

Numbers represent "effect sizes" from a meta-analysis by Bonta, Law s& Hanson, 1998

While it may be tempting to apply these risk factors to determine risk for terrorism, they are unlikely to be useful predictors. Although terrorism is a type of violence, risk factors tend to operate differently at different ages, in different groups, and for different – specific - types of violent behavior. For example, the factors that predict violent behavior in the urban gang member with a drug addiction often differ from those that predict violence among predatory child molesters or perpetrators of domestic violence.

Most of the risk factor research in the social sciences has focused on predicting "general violence risk." General violence risk here represents the likelihood that an individual might engage in any aggressive act toward anyone over a specified period of time. That is not the question posed in terrorist threat assessments. Most people who have a collection of general violence risk factors will never engage in terrorism. Conversely, many known terrorists – including some field leaders of the 9/11 attacks – did not have a large number of key general violence risk factors, although they were actively preparing to engage in acts of terrorism. That the correlates of general violence and terrorism are different has at least two important implications: (1) it is likely that the causal (explanatory) mechanisms also are different; (2) one cannot reasonably use the risk factors from one to predict the other.

Conclusion

No single theory has gained ascendance as an explanatory model for all types of violence. Perhaps the diversity in behaviors regarded as violent poses an inherent barrier to such a global theory. Social learning and social cognition approaches have received some of the most extensive empirical attention and support, but not necessarily for terrorism specifically. Terrorist violence most often is deliberate (not impulsive), strategic, and instrumental; it is linked to and justified by ideological (e.g., political, religious) objectives and almost always involves a group or multiple actors/supporters. These issues all add complexity to the construction of terrorism as a form of violence and challenge the emergence of a unifying explanatory theory.