

# The Role of Religious Fundamentalism in Terrorist Violence: A Social Psychological Analysis

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## Aims and Objectives:

- Examine social psychological factors often implicated in terrorist violence
- Brief description of psychological theories.
- Explore the role of religion in influencing terrorist violence.
- Propose a possible way of untangling the relationship between religious beliefs and terrorist violence through the use of social psychological theories.

## Setting the Scene:

- 9/11:
  - Prompted an intense examination of the level of terrorist threat and activity around the world.
  - Signalled a step-change in the world of terrorist research, as well as in the public mind.
- No longer acceptable to be lacking in long-term academic investment, sterile and underdeveloped psychological approaches, and theories unsupported by empirical research (Danieli et al., 2005; Taylor & Horgan, 2006).
- The difficulty of defining terrorism.

# Religion and Terrorist Violence:

- Researchers repeatedly conclude that religion is rarely the root cause of terrorism.
- Key factors driving terrorism tend to be low self-esteem combined with concrete grievances.
- Instead, membership in a terrorist group:
  - Fulfills self-esteem needs of an individual.
  - Provides the necessary training and outlet for the emotions caused by concrete grievances (Post, 1998).

(Moghadam, 2006; Pape, 2003, 2005; Rogers, 2006; Silke, 2006, etc.).

# Unpacking the Terrorism Toolbox:

## – Terrorism as Psychopathology:

- Research hindered by reliance on second-hand sources (a lack of direct contact by ‘experts’) (Ganor, 2005; Silke, 2006).
- Psychologically healthier and more stable than criminal population.
  - Different from common criminals because of the motivation by a wider goal, such as ideological, social, religious or economic changes.
- Group aims include the promotion of identity and cohesion, as well as legitimising the cause, securing funding, support and recruitment (Feldman, 1992).

# Unpacking the Terrorism Toolbox (2):

- The Cognitive Approach (Terrorism as Rationality/Irrationality):
  - Rational Choice Theory (RCT)- A rational response to the environment (Crenshaw, 1998a, 1998b, etc.).
    - A result of wilful choice selected from a number of alternatives.
    - Does not always apply on an individual level because costs are too high unless benefits are psychological.
  - Post (1998) blames psychological forces, rather than a wilful choice → terrorist psycho-logic.
    - Cognitive dissonance; just-world hypothesis
    - Reflected in terrorist rhetoric.

# The Social Approach: The Role of the Group

- Do group membership and identity have a greater influence over terrorist behaviour than individual psychopathology or beliefs (group processes)?
- Why is terrorism attractive to some organisations but unattractive to others with similar grievances?
- Unpacking terrorism at this level is a primary objective because:
  - Identifying groups is easier than identifying individuals.
  - Identification of groups provides access to individuals who might take part in violent behaviour, a point at which more individualistic theories can be applied.

## Grievance and Threat:

- Terrorism assumes many forms but all appear to be driven by a sense of grievance or threat.
- Concrete grievances ( e. g. A friend or relative killed, maimed or abused by a perceived enemy) (Kushner, 1996).
- Transition from member of a disaffected group to a violent extremist is usually facilitated by a catalyst event (Silke, 2006).
- Social drivers:
  - Fragmented families
  - Severe conflict, especially with parents
  - Existence of a criminal record (Post, 1998).
- Greater frequency of splitting and externalisation → linked to childhood trauma?

# The Power of the Group:

- Ethnocentrism:
  - In-group biases including characteristics, speech, customs, products, languages, etc.
  - Can lead to intergroup conflict.
    - Must be two identifiable social categories.
    - Members of in-group should not have much variation in beliefs or behaviour.
    - Treatment of 'other' or out-group must be uniform.
    - Competition for resources increases conflict (Hewstone and Cairnes, 2001; Sherif, 1966).

## Social Identity Theory (SIT):

- Positive identity created by group membership:
  - Assign value and emotional significance to their group and group goals.
  - Views own group as better than others, and a threat to group is seen as a threat to self (e.g. when Islam is perceived to be under threat from 'The West') (Jacobson (1997); Khosrokhavar, (2005).
  - Social forces in group.
  - Benefits and pressures of group membership.
- Survival of the group = absolutist goals.

# Religion and Terrorist Violence

## Re-Visited:

- Do perpetrators of terrorism *always* hold fundamentalist views?
- An issue worth exploring:
  - The Authoritarian Personality
    - Established a link between fundamentalism and prejudice (Adorno *et al.*, 1950).
  - Exemplary dualism where we (members) are good and others are evil is a characteristic of (though not exclusive to) many religious groups (Dein, 2006).
    - Similar to the polarizing and absolutist rhetoric of terrorist groups.
  - Religion can make people more prejudiced AND help to reduce prejudice. However, religious people tend to be more prejudiced than others (Allport, 1950s and 1960s).

# Fundamentalism:

- Fundamentalism remains a poorly understood but intriguing possible contributory factor.
- Variations in the causes:
  - American Christians → driven by patriotism and a response to a growing tide of immigrants.
  - Muslim → said to be a result of outrage at the encroachment of Western cultural and economic penetration.
  - Jewish → said to be driven by outrage at anti-Semitism and persecution (Antoun, 2001).
- These social differences make it difficult to decontextualise the understanding of individual belief styles from the social contexts in which they arise.

## Conclusions:

- The role of religious fundamentalism in terrorism = the ill-supported link that will not go away.
  - Fundamentalism unlikely to be a single cause of terrorism, but it may reflect other aspects of group and personal dynamics.
  - Social and psychological factors, including early upbringing, might result in prejudice and extrinsic religiosity.

### Future research directions:

- Is this a link between fundamentalism and susceptibility to terrorist activity?
- Are terrorists more prejudiced than others?
- Satisfactory definitions of fundamentalism need to be arrived at and the relationship between fundamentalism and the personality/attitude factors explained more precisely.

# Thank you!

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For further information, see:

- Rogers, M. B., Loewenthal, K. M., Lewis, C. A., Amlôt, R., Cinnirella, M. and Ansari, H. (2007). The Role of Religious Fundamentalism in Terrorist Violence: A Social Psychological Analysis. *The International Review of Psychiatry* (Special Issue on Mass Violence and Mental Health) Forthcoming (In Press, June 2007).
- Rogers, M. B., Amlôt, R., Rubin, G. J., Wessely, S. and Krieger, K. (2007). Mediating the Social and Psychological Impacts of Terrorist Attacks: The Role of Risk Perception and Risk Communication. *The International Review of Psychiatry* (Special Issue on Mass Violence and Mental Health) Forthcoming (In Press, June 2007).
- Rogers, M. B., Lewis, C. A., Loewenthal, K. M., Amlot, R., and Cinnirella (2008). Aspects of Terrorism and Martyrdom. Edwin Mellin Press (Forthcoming Edited Book June 2008).

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