

A Model of the Psychological Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism

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In this article, I outline a series of factors and hypotheses, which are logically connected and amenable to empirical testing, concerning the psychological causes of oppositional political terrorism. I then develop a model of this process. The variables, hypotheses, and model are derived from research descriptive of and associated with the psychological dynamics of terrorism. This model seeks to avoid the overgeneralization and reductionism prevalent in this area of research. I also propose ways in which hypotheses of the model can be tested.

The relatively recent Oklahoma City bombing and sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway have renewed interest in terrorism both in the United States and abroad. Oppositional political terrorism (hereafter *terrorism*; Ross & Gurr, 1989, pp. 406-407; Schmid, 1983, p. 100) frequently has generated considerable attention among politicians, policymakers, the media, and academics.

No explanation of any behavioral phenomenon can be complete unless it incorporates structural and psychological factors (Ross, 1993, 1994). The psychological causes of terrorism, however, have become an enigma in terrorism research. Approximately 3 years after most data sets on terrorism started documenting incidents of terrorism (i.e., 1968; e.g., Mickolus, 1980), the first book presenting the psychological background of terrorists was published (Morf, 1970). Since then, a series of problems has plagued this research, including the relevance of causes, assumptions that terrorism is different from other types of violent criminal or political behavior, utility of psychological explanations of terrorism, psychological health of terrorists, methodology used for psychological studies of terrorism, contribution of nonpsychological causes to the commission of terrorism, and

tradeoffs between overgeneralization and reductionism (Ross, 1994, pp. 158–162). None of these problems, however, diminishes the importance of continued theorizing about and research on the psychological causes of terrorism, and in particular developing a comprehensive model of the psychological causes of terrorism.

Such a model of terrorism would help researchers better understand the individuals and groups involved in this form of political behavior and crime. It could also aid policymakers and counterterrorist organizations to design better methods for combating terrorism. By extension, this should help minimize needless injuries, deaths, and destruction.

To this end, I developed a model of the psychological causes of terrorism by consolidating five principal factors and 12 interrelated hypotheses. The model summarizes a complex array of processes derived from research descriptive of and associated with the *psychological dynamics of terrorism*. I also recognized that there is considerable diversity among terrorists and their organizations. However, if analysts are to move beyond case studies, generalizations need to be made. Variables that are carefully constructed and hypotheses that are logically connected and amenable to empirical testing are both outlined in this article.

A phenomenal body of literature on the psychological causes of terrorism has accumulated. Six basic types of research can be discerned: (a) a series of case studies of individual terrorists (e.g., Bollinger, 1981; Caplan, 1983; Kelman, 1983; Knutson, 1981); (b) a number of studies of terrorist groups or subtypes thereof (e.g., Clark, 1983; Hubbard, 1971; Morf, 1970; "Psychology of Leaders of Terrorist Groups," 1982; "Psychology of the Followers," 1982; Russell & Miller, 1983; Weinberg & Eubank, 1987); (c) psychological interpretations of terrorism that took place in particular geographic locations (e.g., Ferracuti & Bruno, 1981; Heskin, 1984); (d) research that tries to ascribe the psychological causes to one or two causes or theories (e.g., Crayton, 1983; Crenshaw, 1990a; Ferracuti, 1982; Gutmann, 1979; Kaplan, 1978; McCauley & Segal, 1987; Miron, 1976; Morf, 1970; Pearlstein, 1991); (e) literature primarily concerned with critiquing the research (e.g., Corrado, 1981; Crenshaw, 1990b; Reich, 1990); and (f), by far the majority of the work, literature reviews (e.g., Cooper, 1977; Crenshaw, 1985; Hacker, 1976; Hubbard, 1971, 1983; Margolin, 1977; Taylor, 1988). In fact, almost every textbook on terrorism includes a review of some of the psychological factors that contribute to terrorism. Although this information has contributed to our knowledge base, none of it develops a comprehensive theory or a model of terrorism.

METHOD

To derive the model, seven steps were taken. First, inclusive explanations concerning the causes of terrorism were analyzed. Second, studies that comment on the causes of terrorism were reviewed to factor out those processes researchers considered important in explaining the causes. Third, case studies on the causes of

terrorism in various countries were reviewed. Fourth, case studies on the development of terrorist organizations and movements that have committed a substantial amount of terrorism and consistently relied on the use of terrorism to achieve their political objectives in those countries were examined. Fifth, analyses of individual causal factors were explored. Sixth, case studies of separate terrorists were reviewed. Last, all appropriate causes were integrated into easily understandable categories, and propositions were specified and assembled into a comprehensive causal model.

Political Terrorism: The Dependent Variable

To improve on the definition of oppositional political terrorism, the dependent variable, an act of terrorism, was measured in terms of three levels: its scope, intensity, and amount. This is based on the assumption that certain types of independent variables lead only to low levels of terrorist violence (e.g., embassy takeovers), whereas other types of independent variables lead to higher levels of terrorism (e.g., bombings).

It follows then that each type of terrorism has a different pattern of causation. Thus, the relative importance of each independent variable depends on the context, which includes the type of perpetrator, terrorist act, target, country, and time period.

Perpetrators may vary based on such subcomponents as age, gender, and ideological persuasion (e.g., anarchist-communist, nationalist-separatist, and right-wing; Post, 1986). There are also several different types of oppositional terrorism (e.g., domestic, international, and state sponsored). Additionally, there are both hard and soft targets. Moreover, countries can vary on their type of political and economic system (e.g., First World, lesser developed). And time periods can range, for example, through ancient, modern, and contemporary periods. Thus, even finer differentiations could be made with these different dimensions. This type of micro level theorizing, however, is avoided in an effort to increase the parsimony of the proposed model.

In general, there are five interconnected processes that a psychological theory can explain: joining, forming, staying in, and leading a terrorist organization; and engaging in terrorist actions. It is not necessary for an individual to join, start, remain in, or lead a terrorist group to commit violent acts. However, the process of committing violent terrorist behavior is aided by being a member of or leading a terrorist group, and the number of acts committed by a person(s) is likely to increase if it is conducted in a group setting.

Psychological Causes: The Independent Variables

Terrorism is mainly a response to a variety of subtle, interacting, ongoing, and changing psychological and structural factors manifested by perpetrators, victims,

state agencies, and audiences. Psychology has different schools, areas of research, and theories that offer some insight into the causes of terrorism. Seven psychological theories that explain terrorists' behavior are most prominent in the literature: psychoanalytical (e.g., Morf, 1970), learning (e.g., Pitcher & Hamblin, 1982), frustration-aggression (e.g., Gurr, 1970), narcissism-aggression (e.g., Pearlstein, 1991), trait (Russell & Miller, 1983), developmental (Sayari, 1985), and motivational/rational choice (e.g., Crenshaw, 1990a). These theories are accepted as partial explanations, but none in and of itself is sufficient to explain the psychological causes of terrorism. An alternative strategy proposed here is to integrate these approaches into one, with the understanding that analysts must take into account the limitations in integrating these theories, because they have fundamentally different underlying logics.

According to this integrated view, childhood and adolescent experiences condition individuals to develop personality traits that predispose them to engage in terrorism. The development of these traits can be explained by either psychoanalytic, learning, frustration, or narcissism-aggression theories. These developed traits motivate individuals to commit terrorism alone; form bonds with other people who are predisposed to engage in terrorism; or sometimes develop, join, remain in, or lead terrorist organizations. Terrorists experience the most important learning opportunities in the context of the group. These experiences, in turn, shape the cost-benefit calculus of individual terrorists.

THE MODEL

The proposed model consists of five basic etiological factors of terrorism: the development of facilitating traits, frustration or narcissism-aggression, associational drives, learning opportunities, and cost-benefit calculations (see Figure 1). A discussion of each process and the hypotheses that make up the model follows.

Development of Facilitating Traits

A considerable amount of effort has been directed at identifying basic personality traits of terrorists (e.g., Gutmann, 1979). The underlying assumption of this work is that specific personality characteristics predispose certain people to engage individually in terrorism, join terrorist organizations, and/or commit this type of political violence on behalf of the group. Although a generalized personality profile of terrorists has been criticized and largely discounted (Crenshaw, 1986, p. 385; Wilkinson, 1977, p. 193), the results from profiling studies (e.g., Jager, Schmidtchen, & Süllwold, 1981; Russell & Miller, 1983) have provided investigators with some insights on the personality traits of terrorists. A few of the more prominent characteristics are, from least to most reported: fear, hostility, depression, guilt, anti-authoritarianism, perceived lack of manliness, self-centeredness,

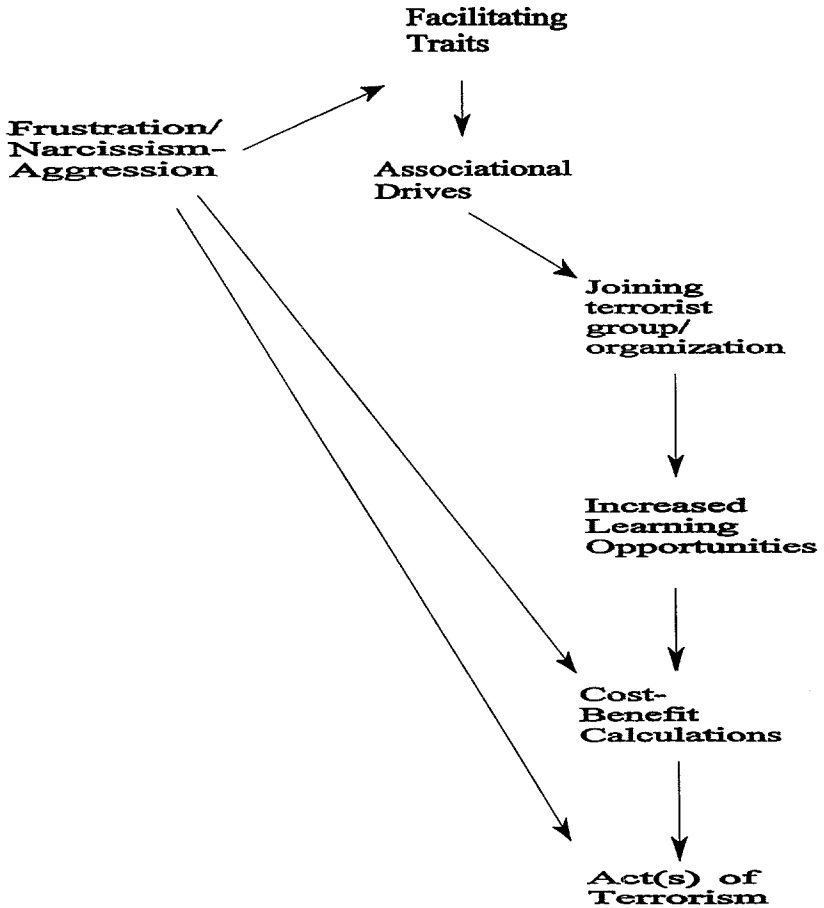


FIGURE 1 Model of the psychological causes of oppositional political terrorism.

extreme extroversion, need for high risks or stress, and alienation (e.g., Ross, 1994, pp. 20–24). Many of these traits are connected, in whole or in part, with symptoms identified with the mental disorders listed in the third and revised edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

The hypotheses (Hs) here follow from that:

- H1a: The greater the number of traits associated with terrorism that an individual possesses, the higher the likelihood that he or she will engage in terrorism.
- H1b: The greater the number of traits individuals possess that have an affiliational tendency, the higher the likelihood that individuals will join a group.

Frustration/Narcissism-Aggression

Although periodically discredited (Friedland, 1992, p. 86), some researchers have argued that terrorism is caused by frustration manifested in aggression (e.g., Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939; Gurr, 1970). The source of that frustration, whether it be relative or absolute deprivation, is not as important as how it translates into frustration-aggression.

Even though it is recognized that not all frustration experienced by individuals results in aggression (e.g., Merton, 1938), under some conditions some proportion of it does. In general, frustration may be caused by the accumulation of grievances. Whether they are the result of relative deprivation (e.g., Gurr, 1970) caused by economic, ethnic, racial, or religious difficulties or by revenge (Crenshaw, 1981) is irrelevant to the type of violence that is manifested. More important is the source of the frustration experienced by different types of terrorists. For example, many left-wing/anarchist and right-wing terrorists are frustrated in their attempts to satisfy educational, vocational, and social goals. They often pin their frustration on governments, corporations, and their respective interests that are opposed to their (the terrorists') own ideological beliefs. Nationalist/separatist terrorists can also be frustrated educationally, vocationally, and socially, but they attribute the cause of this frustration to what they believe are repressive foreign governments. Even though frustration-aggression may cause them to lash out individually at the targets of frustration, they may perceive that it would be better to join others who share the same beliefs.

Some terrorists are individuals who have previously received blows to their ego. This psychological injury, it is argued, leads to aggression, if an individual encounters an appropriate target. This is what is meant by narcissism-aggression (Pearlstein, 1991).

Narcissistic injury and rage may be present, but it is not sufficient as an explanation. Why? Those experiencing this reaction may engage in something other than terrorism to placate their anger. Instead, many terrorists either experienced frustration, a need to consolidate or make up for the lack of logic behind their previous careers, or want to redress grievances held by others. In the first scenario, grievances of a political nature may be dominant. In the second, individuals (e.g., criminals) wishing more meaning in their lives may interpret their past behaviors in a political context. In the third, compassion and empathy turn to action.

Regardless of the motivations, after committing a handful of terrorist incidents, those whose commitment was questionable may experience a process of cognitive dissonance, whereby it is difficult to justify their actions unless they truly believed in the cause. Once inside the terrorist organization, however, attacks against the group or other organizations with similar agendas are perceived as grievances against the opposition, including the state and its coercive apparatus.

Consolidating the previously reviewed literature, one can deduce the following propositions:

- H2a: The higher the amount of frustration, the greater the probability for aggression.
- H2b: The greater the probability for aggression, the higher the likelihood that some of that aggression will be manifested in terrorism.
- H2c: The greater the amount of frustration, the higher the likelihood that some of it will be evidenced as terrorist acts.

Associational Drives

Although some terrorist events are committed by individuals acting alone, the majority of violent political acts of this nature are performed by groups or organizations (Friedland, 1992; Oots, 1986). Thus, terrorism can appropriately be labeled a form of collective violence. Building on Sutherland's (1947) concept of differential association, joining terrorist organizations is for some individuals a conscious or unconscious attempt to affiliate with others who share similar personalities, can provide benefits, and further their individual goals. There is a tendency for some marginal, isolated, and lonely individuals with troubled family backgrounds to be attracted to certain terrorist groups. For these individuals, belonging to the terrorist group is the first time they may feel a sense of belonging (Post, 1984). In fact, Weinberg and Davis (1989) identified a "push-pull dynamic." Recruits may experience a "push provided by internal psychological attributes and ... [a] pull offered by the organizations to which these individuals become attached" (p. 97). As in Sullwold's (1981) theory, the organization then comes to

represent the family. This creates powerful pressures to conform within the group, for to disagree is to be seen as being disloyal and risk losing membership in the organization. The group is also seen as all good and the outside society as all bad. It is a code or ideology that is not to be questioned and becomes the rationale for committing violent acts. (Post, 1984, p. 254)

In particular, Post (1986) suggested that viewing the group as all good and society as all bad is central to the group's ideology and is the rationale for committing acts of violence against the established authorities.

Belonging to a terrorist organization, then, serves a series of purposes: It educates and socializes individual members (Post, 1984); legitimizes the collective grievances of individual members; satisfies the need of its members to belong, express their individual traits, and develop a shared identity and commitment to a cause (Hacker, 1976); "diminishes or eliminates conflicts among the followers through group identification in the service of a cause, cements the group into a coherent

whole" (p. 43); "permits precise role definitions in relation to and in the service of the cause" (p. 43); and protects individual members (Hacker, 1976). Thus,

- H3a: The higher the real or perceived benefits that a terrorist organization provides, the greater the tendency that individuals will join that group.
- H3b: The greater the amount of time in the terrorist group, the greater the reinforcement value of that group's orientations and behavior.
- H3c: The higher the reinforcement value of the terrorist group, the greater the likelihood of committing terrorist acts.
- H3d: The greater the learning opportunities for groups and individuals in a terrorist organization, the more skilled they will be in engaging in terrorism, and the less likely their members will be caught.

Learning Opportunities

The existence of terrorist groups and the commission of terrorism satisfy a number of psychological needs of those predisposed to use this form of political behavior. Building on Burgess and Akers (1968), who applied learning theory and behavior modification to Sutherland's (1947) concept of differential association, although terrorists bring some knowledge and skills into the organization, members are exposed to numerous and various learning experiences while there, allowing them to adopt different roles that shape their orientations and behavior.

Terrorism is a learned behavior, then, that can be explained by general principles of learning theory. Although learning in other conflict situations has been identified (e.g., Pitcher & Hamblin, 1982), the two most important learning theories applicable to terrorism are operant conditioning (e.g., Skinner, 1938), and social learning or modeling (e.g., Bandura, 1973).

Two processes of operant conditioning are apparent in the terrorist's behavior: positive reinforcement and punishment. First, terrorists are rewarded when they receive approval for their actions from members of their group and sympathizers. Receiving the label of "freedom fighters," media glamorization of terrorist events (Weimann, 1983), and success in attaining certain key tactical objectives can also serve as positive reinforcers. Second, terrorists are rarely punished; the amount of sanctions they receive is negligible (Wilkinson, 1977, p. 195), or punishment comes after the terrorist behavior has been positively reinforced, thus minimizing its effect. In short, "political terrorism offers to its practitioners certain distinct psychic benefits or rewards" (Pearlstein, 1991, p. 112).

Modeling or social learning theory also explains how terrorists learn their techniques. For instance, many types of terrorist activities are easily imitated, especially given the publicity terrorist activity generates by the mass media.

The mass media in particular are an important source of information for terrorists (e.g., Johnson, 1982; Redlick, 1979; Schmid & DeGraaf, 1982). The media publicizes terrorist causes, which in turn may trigger other terrorists to act (e.g., contagion), train new terrorists (e.g., by showing them the procedures of an actual operation), "promote international links among terrorists" (Johnson, 1982, p. 160), and convey favorable images of terrorists (Dowling, 1986; Martin, 1985; Rubin & Friedland, 1986; Weimann, 1983). Additionally, training may occur in camps and through international conferences. For instance, the larger terrorist movements (e.g., the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Dal Kalsa) set up their own training facilities. These were used to educate both their own cadre and members of other terrorist groups. There is also some evidence suggesting that several international conferences for revolutionary and terrorist movements were held during the 1970s and early 1980s. These meetings helped in the exchange of ideas, weapons, and techniques among terrorists (Sterling, 1981).

Training is also accomplished with the aid of experts and trial and error situations, and the methods, demands, and goals of terrorists are made available to recruits. It follows then that:

- H4: The greater the number and quality of learning opportunities, the greater the likelihood of terrorist acts.
- H4a: The greater the number and quality of learning opportunities, the greater the likelihood of terrorists preventing capture.

Cost-Benefit Calculations

Although this position is not unanimously held (e.g., Post, 1990), much of the emerging literature points to the fact that the choice to engage in a terrorist action is a conscious or unconscious cost-benefit decision, sometimes referred to as an "expression of political strategy," (e.g., Crenshaw, 1990a) in which expected utility is calculated by individual terrorists and collectively by terrorist groups. In other words, terrorists do what they do not because they are crazy or suffer from psychological maladjustments, but because they are relatively rational human beings (e.g., Corrado, 1981). Examinations of the motivations of terrorists often show a well-thought-out logic for their behavior (e.g., Kaplan, 1978). According to some terrorists, their actions are a cost effective means to achieve individual, collective, tangible, or symbolic recognition, attention, or publicity for their cause; disrupt and discredit appropriate targets; create fear and/or hostility in an audience identified as the "enemy;" provoke overreaction by the government and its coercive agencies; create sympathy amongst potential supporters; and increase control, discipline, and morale building within the terrorist group (e.g., Hacker, 1976).

Rational choices can be traced to the purposes and goals of terrorism. In other words, terrorist practices appear rational in light of their purposes and goals as defined by the perpetrators. This is much like the concept of bounded rationality (Simon, 1982). That is, the purposes of terrorism are “to terrify,” “advertis[e] a cause,” “provo[ke],” and “raise ... morale by disclosing the vulnerability of their enemies”; “or, if the victims belong to some disliked group (e.g., foreign business people) ... [encourage] admiration for their deed among the general population” and “sustain ... the group that is responsible for the violence” (Weinberg & Davis, 1989, pp. 9–10). It has been argued that the greater the sophistication, as measured in terms of planning, selection of target, and risk involved, the greater the amount of rational choice involved in the process. According to Jenkins (1982),

Terrorists may ... perform activities they believe are likely to win widespread approval from their selected audiences ... [and] desist from activities that are too brutal or too difficult to justify on ethical grounds. Terrorists may also fear that inactivity will cause them to lose credibility, support, or the chance to gain new recruits—and that people within the terrorist organization will become restless or depressed. (pp. 61–62)

Hence,

H5: The greater the number of benefits individuals and terrorist organizations perceive they will gain from involvement in terrorist actions, the higher the amount of terrorism in which they will engage.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I reviewed the psychological causes of terrorism and outlined a number of individual level processes, which are organized into a series of hypotheses. The utility of the model will be best determined only when the propositions are tested. Testing of each hypothesis (or many) outlined here would require operationalization of these processes, deciding the type of methodology to use (e.g., comparative case study vs. events database analysis), and collecting data in a systematic fashion. Unfortunately, no comprehensive, publicly available database exists that can be used to test these hypotheses. The two available databases (e.g., Cooper, 1977; Russell & Miller, 1983) primarily include demographic variables, and the more psychological oriented processes are not sufficient enough to test all but a handful of these hypotheses.

Testing and subsequent modification of this proposed model should lead to a comprehensive psychological theory of terrorism. Researchers who work in this area should be encouraged to gather appropriate data that will allow them to test

the propositions empirically. A better understanding of the complex psychological underpinnings of terrorism would enable analysts to establish a link with its structural causes to develop a more comprehensive explanation of terrorism.

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