

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

MODULE I: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TERRORIST STUDIES

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Shortcomings of Terrorism Research

Over the last 25 years, much of the research on terrorism has been accomplished without rigorous adherence to analytical frameworks. This series of four modules will trace the history of religious terrorism scholarship, introduce you to Social Identity Theory (SIT), and demonstrate how this particular approach within social psychology can provide nuance, depth, and rigor to your studies of religious terrorism. The first two modules will focus on SIT itself, while the final two modules take a closer look at the phenomenon we refer to as “religious terrorism,” applying the analytical framework of SIT in our examination of different examples of religious terrorist groups throughout history and in contemporary society.

First we should conduct a brief survey of terrorism studies. Terrorism studies took off in 1968, the same year that the international community was confronted with international terrorism itself, with the El Al airline hijacking. Since then some scholarly approaches have displayed great analytical clarity and precision, while many others have been theoretically inadequate, poorly researched, or crudely agenda-driven. However, a steady (if small) stream of scholars have called attention to these deficiencies and urged reform.

Theorizing about terrorism has always been problematic—a consequence of the diverse nature of groups and individuals that are categorized as “terrorists.” To complicate matters further, the main categories of interpretation—sociological, communicative, psychological and power-political—tend to offer only partial explanations, resulting in ultimately

unsatisfying theories about why terrorist groups behave in the way that they do. Of all of these approaches, the most abundant by far are psychological or power-political, or combinations of the two. These are the two academic frameworks we will now address.

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The Psychological Approach

According to the psychological approach, terrorist violence is not so much a political instrument, as it is an end in itself. It is not the result of rational thinking but the result of compulsion or psychopathy. Scholars pursuing this line of argument have suggested that terrorists are motivated by any number of psychological inducements, ranging from destructive urges, fantasies of cleanliness, disturbed emotions combined with problems with authority and the Self, and inconsistent mothering. According to Jerrold M. Post, “political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological factors and...their special psychologic is constructed to rationalize acts they are psychologically compelled to commit.” This approach seems logical—after all, no one in their right mind would hijack a plane and crash it into a building, or blow themselves up in an enemy checkpoint, right? But it is it merely our inability to comprehend the seemingly random or over-the-top violence that compels us to label a terrorist as merely a case of abnormal brain function? In any case, this explanation is in and of itself insufficient as an explanation for terrorism—religious or otherwise.

According to Schmid and Jongman, “if it is assumed that non-violent behavior in society is normal, those who engage in violence, criminal or other, are necessarily “abnormal,” deviating from the rules of society. An outflow of this assumption is the many theories which regard the terrorist as a peculiar personality with clear identifiable traits.” Psychological approaches offer some help when looked at within the proper social and intellectual context. However, not only is it unclear which are the supposedly salient psychological factors that influence “terrorists,” but the very meaning of “psychological factors” is itself vague. If it refers to the mental processes that cause individuals to act generally, the model is so broad that it lacks explanatory value. If it seeks to attribute a certain set of abnormalities to the “terrorist mind,” it lacks empirical evidence.

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The Power-Political Approach

In power-political, or “strategic choice theory,” terrorism “can be considered a reasonable way of pursuing extreme interests in the political arena.” This theory accounts for and

emphasizes the power concerns of terrorist groups and the individual terrorists operating within them. Akin to realist school of thought in international studies, power-political theory prioritizes self- or group-interest and security over ideology, moral concerns or social reconstructions. It views terrorist groups' activities in terms of reasoned and rational power struggles aimed at hegemony or at redressing grievances resulting in an improved situation relative to others. The "terrorist organization"—conceived as an outwardly unified, cohesive actor—opts for the "terrorist instrument" after a careful cost/benefit analysis based on its pursuit of social domination. However, these explanations only offer partial insights of the terrorism phenomenon. While strategic choice theory is useful for understanding organizational decision-making and possibly intergroup relations, few—if any—sub-state activist groups engage in struggles solely because of strategic power concerns. Furthermore, political and, especially, religious activists are not necessarily goal-oriented, so much as value-oriented.

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Out-Group Stereotyping

Ultimately, though terrorism studies literature is replete with statements about how there can be no general theory about terrorism, it seems that scholars would not only like to think of terrorism as a cohesive phenomenon, but also that their interpretations are in fact generalizable and perhaps even universally applicable. Psychologist Jerrold Post asserts that "a comparative study [does not] reveal a particular psychological type, a particular personality constellation, a uniform terrorist mind," while soon after claiming that "people with particular personality traits and tendencies are disproportionately to terrorist careers." Scholars' insistence that terrorists are somehow "not like us," but abnormal—insane, power hungry, or both—is a classic exercise of out-group stereotyping, a practice that undermines the analytical utility of the interpretations in use. As with stereotypes in general, it is facilitated and maintained by a profound lack of communication, a problem that we will address next.

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Lack of Communication

The majority of evidence within terrorism studies isn't taken from firsthand accounts—that is, discussions with the terrorists themselves. Where, then, does it come from? How is it possible to make psychoanalytical pronouncements about individuals one has never had contact with? How is one able to gauge the human dimensions that underpin the embrace of violence without having ever made an effort to find out? According to Brian M. Jenkins,

“Unless we try to think like terrorists, we are liable to miss the point.” Unfortunately, the persistent trend in the field has been to think like counterterrorism practitioners, rather than scholars attempting objective study. This trend has been exacerbated by the strengthening of links between academia, government and law enforcement.

There are probably few areas in the social science literature in which so much is written on the basis of so little research. Perhaps as much as 80% of the literature is not research-based in any rigorous sense. Furthermore, the scientific literature of terrorism actually should be apolitical and amoral. The researcher shouldn't take a “top-down” perspective, looking at the phenomenon of terrorism through the eye of the power-holders, nor should he or she look at terrorism from a “revolutionary” or “progressive” perspective, identifying with one “just” cause or another. Ideally, a researcher doesn't judge in-group and out-group by different standards, or really judge at all. The researcher should not confuse his or her role: it is not to “fight” the terrorist fire; rather than a “firefighter,” the researcher should be a “student of combustion,” to use a distinction introduced by T.R. Gurr. “Terrorist organizations must be studied within their political context, and the study of the terrorists' opponents and his (re)actions are mandatory for a fuller understanding of the dynamics of terrorism. This sounds almost trivial, but the absence of such even-handedness is nevertheless the chief deficiency of the literature of terrorism.”

Additionally, the field is increasingly reliant on secondary sources supplied by governments, intelligence agencies, law enforcement, and anti-extremism watchdogs. Clearly, these organizations have a bias; information they provide should be suspect, at least from an academic point of view. Bruce Hoffman writes, “Too often, terrorism research is conducted in a vacuum, divorced from the reality of the subject we study. Those researchers who succeed in overcoming this inherent distance often have the most interesting thing to say.” This statement implies that the best, most reliable and most effective approaches involve not only firsthand contact, but also operating with a view to understand, not simply dissect and condemn (or alternately, to justify and champion). Ultimately, many researchers in this field remain profoundly isolated from their subjects—the terrorists themselves—seriously diminishing their ability to understand the phenomenon of terrorism or to offer relevant advice on appropriate responses to it.

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Hermeneutic of Crisis Management

Terrorist groups pose a threat to the values and structures of liberal democratic societies, right? So isn't it understandable, even laudable, that people studying terrorism are driven by the intention to root it out? Furthermore, isn't the idea of an “objective” approach to any

subject a naïve, impossible, Enlightenment-age fantasy? Everyone has an agenda; academics are no exception. But think of it this way: if an anthropologist were to approach her study of some tribal society in the Brazilian rainforest with the express desire to eliminate it, the work of that researcher would likely be rejected by peers as diametrically opposed to the rational and ethical principles of academic study. A researcher within terrorism studies, however, is likely to be commended for aiming to facilitate the routing of Palestinian Hamas, Mexican Zapatistas or Aryan Nations.

As far as agendas go, defending liberal democratic values is no doubt a commendable one. But where should the line be drawn between academic research and counterterrorism? While moral outrage at acts of terrorism is certainly called for, is it really the mission of the academic to fight terrorism? What are the implications for scholarly research once the academic “enters the trenches”? A professed concern for liberal democratic values can easily snowball into a witch-hunt against whoever happens to subscribe to values and ideas that are not currently politically correct.

The inadequacy of current models stems from what we will refer to as *the hermeneutic of crisis management*. This means that most terrorism scholars’ attitudes and frameworks for analyzing terrorism have researchers approaching their subject antagonistically—as a threat and with a view to facilitate its defeat. This hermeneutic seems a default setting, rarely identified or articulated, and appears to have developed in parallel with a communal self-perception of its being an adjunct to the various Western counter-terrorism agencies with which terrorism studies enjoy a close working relationship. While crisis management thinking may be helpful in this particular interface, it taints and compromises the scholastic validity of the research itself. Unfortunately, this means that the research subject has long since become the research object.

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Switching to a New Framework

We need to replace the crisis management hermeneutic with a more academically rigorous and ultimately more constructive framework—one that can adequately account for the dynamics of group identity and belonging within a framework of profound cultural difference. The solution we would like to propose as an approach to terrorism studies is Social Identity Theory (SIT), a concept that will be more fully articulated in the following module. In short, SIT states that intergroup behavior can be accounted for by an individual’s identification as a member of that group. Embedding SIT in particular cultural settings powerfully illuminates the explanatory capacity of the *Emic*—that is, the indigenous, or native point of view—in dialogue with the *Etic*—the informed outsider, or

the social scientific point of view. It posits the *Emic* itself as the critical starting point for the investigative project. Rather than forcing the subject into externally constructed and ill-fitting frameworks, SIT offers a means of integrating insights from a variety of analytical models within an intercultural framework. Importantly, it allows the researcher to account for his or her own hermeneutic biases as well as those of the research subject.

The symbiosis with counterterrorism agencies is, in fact, proving disadvantageous to both sides. On the one hand, it has reinforced the academic community's view of itself as the intellectual vanguard in the struggle against terrorism, thus distorting its perception of its scholarly duties. On the other hand, when academic researchers no longer supply independent, primary source-based accounts, they cease to be truly useful to counterterrorism agencies. Supplying counterterrorism agencies with analyses that simply elaborate on the received view of a particular group or trend contributes to defective policy and countermeasures, and may in turn exacerbate social and political grievances serving as a source of discontent and violence. If researchers don't seek to regenerate and revise their views through primary encounters with their research subjects, this downward spiral of suspicion and violence will continue. If the aim of terrorism studies is genuinely to seek understanding, the prevailing approach to methodology must be left in the past.

Theodore Zeldin once wrote, "Conversation puts you face to face with individuals, and all their human complexity. Our education cannot be complete until we have had conversations with every continent, and every civilization. It is a humbling experience, which makes one conscious of the enormous difficulty of living in peace when there is so much injustice, but which also gives great hopes, every time one succeeds in having a conversation which establishes a sense of common humanity, a mutual respect. After such conversations, one can never be the same person again." *This* must be the common sentiment driving the study of religious terrorism—and indeed, all other forms of sub-national violence—into the future.

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Finding a Remedy

So, is there a "remedy" for ideological insurgency? SIT is developing an increasingly sophisticated battery of ideas for resolving intergroup conflict. These are primarily concerned with dispelling stereotypes and thereby facilitating dialogue and increasing understanding and tolerance between in- and out-groups, terrorists and scholars. There are three prominent approaches guiding scholars invested in this approach.

First, there is "crossed-categorization," an attempt to use one social category to cancel out another, with the aim of furthering dialogue. This approach uses the multiplicity of identity

to its advantage. In any given social situation, individuals and groups employ more than one categorization; for example: ethnicity/nationality, age, gender, social class or religious affiliation. Those who share different category memberships in one respect may share another category membership that could lessen hostility and foster dialogue and conflict amelioration. For example, class differences could be canceled out by religious commonality, and religious conflict could be countermanded by appeal to national, cultural or ideological similarities.

The second approach is “re-categorization,” which brings members of two categories under an inclusive, subordinate one. In re-categorization efforts, groups may see themselves as having allegiance to one group, but come together with another group under a different banner for some period of time—though this re-categorization is not always a lasting identification.

The final approach—“de-categorization”—aims at reducing emphasis on categorical judgment by dissolving problematic categories altogether. This may be achieved by contact between members of conflicting groups that heightens interest in and awareness of the individuality of the other group’s members, thereby lessening stereotyping behavior. The objective is to affect permanent change in attitudes towards members of the out-group.

These approaches are based on Floyd Allport’s “contact hypothesis” of 1954. According to this argument, the most effective way of reducing intergroup tension and conflict is to facilitate contact and dialogue under appropriate conditions, monitored and directed by a third party. These approaches have been applied on a small scale in the context of inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland, as well as in attempts to foster dialogue between Orthodox Jewish groups and Palestinian Islamist organizations.

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Opening a Dialogue

A significant practical problem is the expected unwillingness of groups’ and states’ leaderships to condone participation. Leaders may have vested interests in keeping a particular conflict alive, or may view rapprochement with an out-group as immoral and wrong. Another problem is that because these approaches operate on a personal level, they are necessarily local and therefore difficult to put into systematic practice. In order to sustain these efforts across regions and over time, they would have to be carried out under the aegis of an international inter- or non-governmental organization that possesses both the resources and the capability to do so. Naturally, the United Nations would be a promising possibility—it was, after all, founded on the principle of fostering international discussion, in the pursuit of peace.

In the past several decades, the world has witnessed a steady increase in the number and intensity of insurgencies and other sub-state conflicts, while the occurrence of “traditional” interstate warfare has been on the decline. This means that in order to reflect this changing reality and be properly equipped to deal with it, the UN must move away from state-centricity and towards facilitating dialogue among sub-state groups, as well. States are no longer the “be-all, end-all” of military conflict. The inclusion of insurgent organizations within sustained programs for directed and monitored dialogue with a view to conflict resolution would be a promising step in that direction.

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Closing Credits

Music