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The social psychological makings of a terrorist

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Social psychological factors pertain to all aspects of terrorism, including how terrorist organizations operate, and the impact of terrorism on everyday people. The present analysis focuses on the aspect of terrorism where social psychology's voice is perhaps most critical: radicalization (*i.e.*, how terrorists are made) and deradicalization (*i.e.*, how terrorists are unmade). In reviewing the literature, we identify three factors critical to radicalization: (1) the individual *need* that motivates one to engage in political violence, (2) the ideological *narrative* that justifies political violence, and (3) the social *network* that influences one's decisions along the pathway to extremism. Theoretical and empirical contributions are discussed. We end with an examination of interviews conducted with former extremists of various ideological leanings to highlight these same three factors as critical to their individual deradicalization experiences.

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In the wake of a terror attack, we find ourselves in a familiar yet unsettling scenario. As details trickle in about the attack, perpetrator, and casualties, the media scramble to answer the questions weighing on their captive audience's mind: how could this individual commit such an atrocity, and what motivated this behavior? Journalists intimate possible connections to noted terrorist outfits, cull 'evidence' from the perpetrator's life history or social media profile, and contact peers, colleagues, neighbors, and casual acquaintances to infer the perpetrator's state of mind.

The favored explanations proffered to lay audiences locate the cause of the attack within the individual attacker. They consist of internal attributions that blame violence on a personality flaw, psychological disorder, or

mental illness [1–4]. Not only are humans psychologically biased to perceive the behavior of others as internally determined, particularly when it is unusual [5,6], but such explanations are comforting and gratifying. These explanations ascribe terrorists' actions to a few unstable individuals, and disguise the fact that terrorism may constitute a widespread social psychological phenomenon.

Whereas such explanations satisfy the public, they are at odds with scientific evidence [7–13]. Indeed consensus among experts suggests “the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality” [7], and that understanding the causes of terrorism requires looking beyond individual psychology to ‘group, organizational, and social psychology’ [14]. There is an understanding that terrorists fulfill different roles within terrorist organizations, ranging from leaders and funders to actors on the front line to lone actors that operate outside the explicit direction of an organization. Different psychological profiles may typify these different roles, but unlikely apply to all [15*]. In this vein, recent findings point to mental illness as a partial explanatory variable in the actions of lone actors, but not ‘traditional’ terrorists that operate within terror organizations [16,17]. Findings have likewise pointed to suicide bombers having personality traits that distinguish them from organizers of suicide attacks [4].

The social psychological approach starts with the assumption that, even though personality traits are relevant to different terrorism related activities [4], most terrorists are psychologically normal. This approach highlights the social forces that may facilitate a person's migration from holding moderate, socially normative attitudes to endorsing violent behavior that is deviant from socially accepted standards for action [18**]. This process is referred to as radicalization. By now, experts of different backgrounds have taken stock of the radicalization literature, and come to similar conclusions regarding the key factors involved. The specifics of these theories may differ (*i.e.*, proposing different mechanisms, giving preferential status to one factor over another, the chronological ordering en route to extremism), as may the language whereby they address radicalization. Yet beyond these surface differences, they discuss the same general constructs. For instances, whereas some have [19] identified four processes involved in radicalization [19], and others see five common elements [20*], the present approach identifies three factors: individual motivation (needs), ideological justification of violence (narratives), and group processes (networks) (see also Ref. [21*]).

Theories from different social science disciplines such as sociology [22], criminology [23], and psychology [24–27] view terrorists as coming from a place of hardship. The specifics differ, but the gist is that the actor experiences some form of unfair humiliation. This can occur at a collective level, for instance, at the hands of an oppressive regime or social group (D Webber *et al.*, Submitted paper), disenfranchisement [24] or discrimination [28] of a given ethnic, religious or national group, or occupation of one's homeland by a foreign entity [29]. Humiliation could also stem from personal circumstances, including personal failure [30], personal victimization [26], loss of a loved one at the hands of an enemy [31], or a social stigma within one's community [32]. From the current perspective, the specifics are less important than the psychological effect of these experiences. Humans have a fundamental need to feel worthy or significant—to feel important, valued, and respected in the eyes of others; see Ref. [25] for a thorough discussion of this construct. Humiliating and shameful experiences like those mentioned above, create a discrepancy between the positive way one wishes to view oneself, and the negative self-perspective suggested by these humiliating circumstances. This discrepancy induces an aversive arousal and motivates action to repair this negative state [33]. The humiliated individuals thus search for routes by which they can restore their feelings of value and worth.

If we stopped at this point, there would be masses of motivated individuals with countless available outlets through which to earn feelings of significance. This is why additional factors must be identified that facilitate the progression toward extremism. An analysis of Islamic radicalization in Europe aptly labeled these components as 'opportunity factors' [34]. These opportunity factors, through the lens of the present perspective, influence the degree to which one channels their feelings of significance loss toward violent extremism, and form the remaining two factors of our trilogy.

The first opportunity factor (and second factor in our model) is ideology. The metaphor of a narrowing staircase has been used to explain radicalization [35]. The staircase model sees the masses of motivated individuals gradually decreasing as they progress through the following stages: (a) identifying an external entity to blame for the humiliation, (b) justifying aggression against the entity on moral grounds, and (c) indoctrination into a simplistic way of thinking that sees the world in black and white terms. The ideology's task, regardless of where it falls on the political spectrum, is to advance radicalization across these stages. Specifically, the ideology identifies an enemy and portrays violence against it as a legitimate course of action. This frees adherents of the ideology to act violently without the burden of guilt typically attached to perpetration of violence [36]. Tactics like dehumanization (*i.e.*, portraying the enemy as less than

human) can be an effective tool in this process [37], while simultaneously helping to indoctrinate one into a simplistic form of thinking that finds great appeal with individuals striving for significance [28].

The second opportunity factor (and third and final factor in our model) pertains to group processes. As with ideology, group processes act to further 'thin the herd' from masses of humiliated persons to committed terrorists. For instance, analyses of the radicalization of Islamic extremists in the diaspora, suggested that without network connections there would be 'a lot of angry young Muslims, but no real terrorists' as they would not know where or whom to turn to remedy their situations (p. 84) [19]. Moreover, there is evidence that 90% of Sunni terrorists responsible for domestic attacks in the U.S. radicalized through social networks [38]. Likewise, additional analyses of domestic attackers in the U.S. found that those with a close radical friend were more likely to engage in ideologically-driven violence [30]. The presence of like-minded (*i.e.*, radical) individuals likely increased willingness to engage in violent extremism for three reasons. First, when one has allies in the cause, it increases that individual's willingness to deviate against normative pressures [39,40]. Second, the presence of like-minded individuals validates the correctness and appropriateness of the ideology [41,42], specifically as it relates to the justification of killing [43]. Third, belonging to a group of radical others creates a strong collective identity where one's comrades are transformed into "brothers in arms" that one is willing to sacrifice and die to protect [44,45,46].

When we combine these three factors – Needs, Narratives and Networks – a clear picture of radicalization emerges; a varied number of experiences activate a quest for feelings of personal significance, and through connections to likeminded individuals, and an ideology that justifies violence, violent extremism becomes a viable and potent mechanism for earning feelings of worth. We should briefly note that the occurrence of these factors is not limited to the present order, and alternate mechanisms may activate the significance motive, absent significance loss such as a rare occasion for significance *gain* [25]. As we continue with our analysis, we examine the role of these same factors in the reversal of extremism (*i.e.*, deradicalization), and look to how they might weigh on the decisions of those who decide to leave extremist organizations and rejoin the fold.

Individuals are motivated to join terror organizations as a mechanism to gain feelings of personal significance. Should there come a time in their tenure when the organization no longer satisfies this need, or the need could be better satisfied through alternative sources, this should motivate deradicalization. Indeed, interviews with former extremists have borne this out empirically. For

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