Explaining Terrorism: A Psychosocial Approach

by Luis de la Corte

Introduction

Terrorism is a difficult topic. Its explanation may be biased by political assumptions and social prejudices. Policy makers and experts disagree about their theoretical perspectives. At a minimum, there are three approaches to studying terrorism: macrosociological, psychological, and psychosocial. Because the first two approaches have received more attention in past decades, this paper will discuss the third approach, which has gained more and more followers over the past few years (De la Corte, 2006)

Those researchers who subscribe to a macrosociological approach view terrorism as a reflection of various social dysfunctions or conflictive trends in the social system. In general, terrorism has been associated with several so-called "root causes" that have promoted other kinds of political violence such as riots and street protests, revolutions, civil wars, and international armed conflicts. Some of the possible root causes are poverty, authoritarian and repressive regimes, or cultural and religious practices. However, most of the studies that have analyzed the relationship among those sociological variables and terrorist campaigns are inconclusive (Crenshaw, 1995; Laqueur, 2003; Reinares, 2003; De la Corte, 2006; Newman, 2006). Classifying these sources is difficult because terrorism is usually promoted by minorities and the perspective of terrorists often involves a severe distortion of social reality.

The most popular psychological explanations of terrorism involve disruptive or psychopathological personalities. While research is speculative, some researchers have tried to analyze terrorists by their propensity for violence or an inability to control their aggressive impulses. However, impulsive aggressiveness is not a common trait of terrorists. According to biographical studies, people joining the same terrorist organisation have different motivations and personalities. Some common psychological attributes among terrorists are a lack of empathy with their victims, dogmatic or ideological mentality, or a simplistic or utopian worldview, (see Beck, 2003; De la Corte, 2006). However, one must consider that psychological profiles are based on information about the more fanatical and higher ranking members of terrorist organisations. While terrorist activity involves spreading one's ideology or carrying out attacks, it also requires strategic planning, logistical support, raising funds, and recruiting. Each of these activities usually requires people with different capabilities and varying psychological traits. Finally, it is not clear if the psychological attributes of the terrorists are fixed traits or attitudes induced by the experiences of the terrorist's life.

In sum, neither the individual psychology of terrorists, nor the social environments provide a complete explanation of why individuals become involved in terrorism. For this reason, more and more researchers are turning toward a psychosocial perspective in their studies.

First psychosocial principle: terrorism must not be seen as a syndrome but as a method of social and political influence

Social psychologists describe one's environment as the place where a person's behaviour is influenced by the social settings in which they live and their psychological predispositions. But first and foremost, it is a sphere of social influence, an area where people attempt to influence the behaviour and beliefs of other people. Therefore, the psychosocial perspective is not congruent with the widespread interpretation of terrorist attacks as a direct effect of any social or psychological determination, but viewed as several social interactive processes that take place both in both inter and intragroup environs. Moreover, many of these influential processes develop in a deliberate and strategic way. Often, terrorist organisations utilize an advertising technique similar to propaganda campaigns when promoting their cause. The idea is best describe by a well-known anarchist saying which defines terrorism as "propaganda by the fact".

Many minority groups conduct terrorist activities as a way to bring about social change. (Kruglanski, 2003). Usually, these groups represent beliefs and positions on political and religious issues which are not readily accepted by the majority. These terrorists are what some social psychologists define as "active minorities" (Moscovici, Mugny and Perez, 1991; Moscovici, 1996). According to research conducted by experimental social psychologists, minorities attempt to gain influence by persuading majority members to consider their point of view. Effective persuasion depends on the minority member's ability to clearly communicate their positions over several different occasions. Through such persistence, a minority may be able to change or influence the majority position. Terrorism is not much different from this process because the spreading of fear or terror through violence has a communicative dimension. Remember the relationship between terrorism and propaganda: after all, terrorist violence is a means to direct people's attention to certain problems (real, exaggerated or fictitious) and publicize the terrorist's political or religious demands.

Second principle: the attributes of terrorists are shaped by processes of social interaction

As a whole; social psychologists are predisposed to explain the psychological characteristics of individuals a result of several processes of socialization and social interaction. This ideal also applies to the mental attributes of terrorists. Previously, some researches suggested that the process of joining a terrorist group was heavily influenced by the prevailing political and social environment shared by friends and relatives. Obviously, growing up in an environment marked by radical ideas and values could lead one to a join terrorist group which embraces the same ideas and values. For example, many members of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), Red Brigades or Irish Republican Army (IRA) were born and raised in families respectively attached to the subculture of Basque nationalist (Reinares, 2001; Romero, 2006), Irish Catholic (Lee, 1983) or Italian radical left-wing (Della Porta, 1990).

In other cases, joining a terrorist organisation is the result of making contact and relationships with people who embrace extremist political or religious ideas. Sageman (2004) states that personal paths, interactions, and choices may lead young Muslims to become radical jihadists. According to that research, the act of joining a jihadist organisation such as al-Qaeda stems from the individual making an unintentional friendship with a person who has radical jihadists' views. In the sample of 168 subjects who were investigated by Sageman, 68% said friendship was the main influencing factor contributing to joining jihadist groups. In about 14% of the cases, one joined a jihadist organisation because of familial bonds. The two other explanatory variables also dealt with socialization experiences prior to involvement in terrorist activity: 1) experiences related to education in certain *madrassas* or Koranic schools (8% of the members of the sample,) or 2) assiduous participation in the activities of certain radical mosques.

The psychosocial perspective also emphasizes the importance of "secondary socialization" processes in which terrorists become involved after joining a radical organisation. It should be noted that some experts have found significant similarities between the indoctrinative method of sectarian groups and those that are used inside terrorist organisations (Rodriguez, 1992; Della Porta, 1998; Sageman, 2004; De la Corte, 2006). In any case, there is no doubt that the activities and lifestyles developed inside terrorist organisation shape the mentality of its members, intensifying their commitment to such organisations, and preparing them to engage in criminal activities.

Third principle: terrorist organisations can be analyzed by analogy with other social movements

Many terrorist organisations can be closely related to cycles of political mobilization and mass protests against states that take place from time to time (Tarrow, 1989; Gonzalez Calleja, 2003). Very often, terrorist campaigns are the result of a long radicalization process of certain political or religious movement. When those movements lose their social influence, they tend to split off and form different groups. Sometimes, extremists in those groups adopt terrorism as its preferred method of social influence (Reinares, 1998; De la Corte, 2006).

One aspect that terrorist organisations share with ordinary political or religious movements is the central role played by psychological processes of collective identification. Typically, terrorist organisations present themselves as the defenders of the values and interests of an ethnic or religious community (see Javaloy, Rodriguez and Espelt, 2003). As Social Identity Theory predicts, the self-identification of terrorists as members of a much larger community will help them to fulfil their goals; see table 1 (Tajfel, 1984; Turner, 1991; Javaloy, Rodriguez and Espelt, 2003; Taylor, 2003).

Table 1: Psychosocial effects and relationship to social identity

Effect	Explanation
Depersonalization	Terrorists tend to perceive themselves as interchangeable members of an organisation. This motivates terrorists to give

	preference to the interests and goals of the organisation
Social cohesión	The collective identity shared by members of terrorist organisation promote positive relationships among them, which increases intragroup cohesion and cooperation
Conformity, obedience	The greater identification with the terrorist organisation, the greater identification with the norms which rule the members' behaviour. Therefore, a reduction in disobedience and challenging the orders of their leaders.
Bipolar worldview	Identifying with their organisation and reference community motivates terrorist to develop negative prejudices about people from other communities. The world is divided between us and them. The responsibility of problems and injustices suffered by the terrorist's reference community may be attributed to another community who could play a scapegoat role.

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Fourth principle: terrorism only is possible when terrorists have access to certain resources

Resource Mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1973; McAdam, 1982) states that the probability of the emergence of any social protest movement depends not only on the opportunities offered by the social situation, but also by the capability of the movement to "mobilize" certain basic resources. Specifically, a terrorist campaign requires materials (money, technology and others), people (militants, collaborators, supporters) and symbols (clearly linked to the ideologies that motivate terrorist acts) (Waldman, 1997). It is important to note that a majority of a terrorist's time and effort is dedicated to obtaining the above resources. In order obtain these primary resources, terrorist may engage in predatory activities such as theft, extortion, kidnapping or various legal and illegal businesses (see Bovenkerk and Chakra, 2004; Ward, 2004). To obtain their human resources, terrorist organisations design unique methods of radicalization, recruitment strategies, and training programs (De la Corte, 2006).

Fifth principle: the decision to begin and sustain a terrorist campaign is always legitimized by an extreme ideology

Terrorism would not be possible without the existence of an extreme ideology that provides meaning and justification for the people who plan, execute, and support the violent actions. Ideology here refers to a system of extremist beliefs and values that are shared by a terrorist organisation and its allies. When the terrorist's ideology is rooted in the traditions and history of their reference community (for example, the Palestinian community for Hamas or the Basque people for ETA), it is possible that ideology also earns the acceptance of many individuals and other groups not involved in terrorist activity. As stated by Krunglanski (2002), the latter is important because the more people who share a similar point of view to that of the terrorists, the greater the potential for violence.

Several investigations have been undertaken regarding the nature, contents, and functions which characterized the ideologies of different terrorist organisations. One study found similarities in the ideologies of ETA (Sabucedo, Rodriguez and Fernandez, 2002; Sabucedo, Blanco y De la Corte, 2003), the Colombian guerrilla *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (*FARC), the paramilitaries group called Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) (Sabucedo et al., 2005) and the jihadist propaganda and the message of al-Qaeda's leaders (De la Corte, 2005; De la Corte and Jordan, 2007). Overall, the research has found at least five elements shared by all these ideological discourses. Table 2 lists these elements and describes their psychosocial functions.

Table 2: Arguments and beliefs which legitimize terrorism

Ideological resources	Psycho-social functions
Arguments and beliefs that identify and criticize certain social injustices, offences, or threats that affects a terrorist's reference community	· Activation of feelings of frustration and moral outrage
Arguments and beliefs that identify a collective enemy as responsible for such injustices, offences or threats and insults. Those arguments and beliefs configure a stereotype which devalues the enemy image even to the point of dehumanization	· Transference of responsibility related to terrorist attacks · Inhibition of empathetic reactions toward victims · Activation of feelings of hatred and desires for revenge
Arguments and beliefs that describe a positive social identity shared by terrorists and their reference community	· Identification of terrorists with the interests and values of their reference community
Arguments and beliefs that define: 1) collective goals linked with the values and interests of the terrorist's reference community; 2) violence as the only effective method to achieve those collective goals	· Legitimization of violence by their presumed political, social, or religious consequences
Arguments and beliefs which predict a future state in which terrorists would have reached their collective goals through violence.	· Increase in the efficacy expectations associated with terrorist activity

Sixth principle: every terrorist campaign involves strategic goals but the rationality which terrorists apply to their violence is imperfect

According to the most influential theoretical model in contemporary social sciences, individuals, organisations and social movements usually behave like rational actors (Coleman, 1990; Rosenberg, 1995). A rational actor only chooses those actions that he considers as the most effective means to attain his objectives or satisfy his preferences. In

its original version, Rational Choice Theory assumed that people always try to behave as rational actors and that human rationality tends to be almost perfect. In other words, it was understood that the actions undertaken by rational actors were the most effective according to the real situations in which they operate. Certainly, it seems that terrorist perceived themselves as rational actors. Many terrorist organisations have been able to introduce changes into their strategies in order to adapt themselves to changing situations and to react to their opponents (State, social audiences, etc). Some authors have interpreted those adaptations as a substantial proof of the terrorist's rationality (Crenshaw, 2001).

However, and contrary to suggestions which come from the first version of Rational Choice Theory, many investigations have showed that the rationality which guides human behaviour is rather limited and imperfect (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982; Elster, 1984; Simons, 1995). This paper will discuss only two aspects of the concept of human rationality (for a broader review see De la Corte, 2006). First, no individual or collective actor is really able to anticipate perfectly or realize *a posteriori* the complete sum of consequences that could be produced by their own actions. Therefore, many of the forecasts and assessments conducted by terrorists will not be completely accurate. Second, the emotions (anger, desire for revenge, hatred, etc.), ideological motives, and other psychological elements could influence the terrorist's subjective perspective in the sense to distort their expectancies and their reflections about the result of their violent actions. Various studies suggest that terrorists tend to overestimate their chances of success and sometimes have problems recognizing the ineffectiveness of their actions. Indeed, those biases are typical among the members of many non-violent protest movements (San Martin, 2005). Moreover, sometimes terrorists may underestimate the negative reaction that their most brutal attacks could provoke among their own actual or potential supporters (Bandura, 2003). Finally, the scientific literature shows that, if individual actors' rationality tends to be limited and imperfect, the rationality of collective actors (groups, organisations, social movements, institutions, etc.) becomes even more problematic.

Seventh principle: the activity of terrorists partly reflects the internal features of their organisations

The chances of terrorists acting in a rational way are not only limited by their individual psychological attributes, but also by the characteristics of their organisations. Research in the psychology of groups and organisations offers knowledge highly relevant in this regard (Blanco, Caballero y De la Corte, 2004). There exist at least two kinds of terrorist organisation attributes that affect their activities. The first has to do with the organisational structure, and the second one is relating to group dynamics.

The structure of any organisation is equivalent to the formal pattern of social relations that are established among their members depending on certain roles and norms. There are two main structures of terrorist organisations (De la Corte, 2006). The first type is a more or less hierarchical one, as in the case of terrorist groups such as the IRA or the Italian Red Brigades. The second structure is much less hierarchical and much more

flexible and decentralized. It corresponds to terrorist groups composed by multiple cells which usually operate almost autonomously. The small jihadist networks which today operate in various parts of the world offer the most obvious examples of this second type. The hierarchical structure involves stronger leadership and control over the organisation and ensures a greater compliance to the operational guidelines and order which emanate from the highest positions in the organisation. In turn, the less hierarchical structures are more difficult to dismantle because the neutralization of some cells or networks does not necessarily result in irreparable harm. According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2003), many contemporary terrorists have adopted more flexible organisational models which also are better adapted to the strategic and tactical demands of transnational terrorism campaigns.

Regarding group dynamics inside terrorist organisations, we need to be aware of the decision-making process. Many experimental studies have shown that human groups tend to polarize attitudes and decisions to a greater extent than individuals. Sometimes this group polarization effect promotes highly risky actions (Myers, 1978). Terrorist cells exhibit the same conditions which facilitate group polarization. For instance, during certain periods, terrorists tend to reduce drastically their contact with people who do not embrace their similar extremist ideology. Furthermore, terrorists are frequently subject to strong discipline. Both factors also could promote 'groupthink'. The social psychologist Ervin Janis (1972) coined that expression to define the dynamic of interactions which have caused some serious decision-making mistakes made by important political or military committees during the last century. Several researchers have applied the concept of groupthink to their explanations of different cases of terrorism.

Other group aspects that facilitate terrorist activities concern: the norms and roles to which terrorists use to adjust their behaviour; the influence exerted by group leaders; and the material benefits and psychological rewards associated with the terrorist's militancy. Finally, research on social influence, persuasion and changing attitudes show that reasons which people use to justify some of their actions are actually only developed after such actions haven take place (see Briñol, De la Corte and Becerra, 2001). Aronson (1972) coined the term "retrospective rationality" to design this tendency which has been demonstrated by several experiments. Furthermore, the same trend has been identified as a thought pattern frequently applied to justify collective and organisational actions (Pfeffer, 1998). In a similar way, some of the "reasons" that terrorists use to justify their activity could be mere rationalizations. Alonso and Reinares have found evidence that supports the rationalization hypothesis in their studies of IRA (Alonso, 2003) and ETA terrorism (Reinares, 2001).

Conclusions

This paper has offered some clues which can be used to characterize a social psychological approach to the explanation of terrorism. In addition, this approach provides some suggestions to future research and analysis of the following key issues: 1) the socio-political environment, social relations, and the primary socialization processes that could promote the radicalisation of and enlistment in terrorist organisations; 2) the relationship between terrorist organisations and broader political or religious movements;

3) the recruitment processes and indoctrination techniques applied by terrorist organisations; 4) the structure of terrorist organisations and their group dynamics, and 5) the discourses and ideological principles that some leaders and ideologists developed and propagate in order to legitimize their criminal activities and garner support from their reference communities.

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