Has the application of psychological theory aided us in understanding criminal behaviour? Discuss with reference to terrorism.

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2,553 Words

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism presents multiple avenues of potential research for psychologists; from why individuals initially become involved (and continue to participate) in terrorism, to the group processes of terrorist organisations, to the initial creation of such organs of violence. Indeed, merely understanding the aetiology of terrorism will not necessarily produce methodologies for its reduction; rather, process based approaches which tackle the socio-cultural complexities of terrorism as an activity and social function, are needed to make progress in its prevention (Horgan, 2005).

Despite the body of publications on terrorism, a paucity of empirical research on the psychology of terror exists; with only 7 English language PHD publications in the area between 1960-1997 (Horgan, 2005).

In this essay I will begin by discussing the phenomena of terrorism, and go on to outline many of the internal and external motivations which have been proposed and investigated by psychologists, sociologists and political scientists to account for the superficially incomprehensible violence engendered by terrorism.

WHAT IS TERRORISM?

Terrorism is beset with problems of exposition, explanation and subjective interpretation; confounds which have thus far prevented the acceptance at an international level of a unitary legal description. This issue of definition is more than a semantic abstraction; as the difficulty international institutions have found developing a universally accepted description – from attempts by the League of Nations

> *"All criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or a group of persons or the general public"* (League of Nations, 1937, cited UN, 2005),

and the European Union (CEC, 2001), which have focused on attacks on the state or its institutions; to resolutions proposed by the United Nations (UN General Assembly, 1996), and the 'academic consensus definition', which begins

> *"Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons.."* (Schmid, 1988),

more widely emphasising actions intended to create public fear for political intentions – definitions of terrorism have had to contend with such difficulties as whether to allow the inclusion of state actors abroad, or a states aggression against its own people, under the auspices of such implicitly condemnatory terminology (Gibbs, 1989).

 In the light of the various, contentious and contradictory definitions, it is perhaps wiser to consider a taxonomy that attempts to classify the variety and subtypes of terrorist activity. One such taxonomy is that proposed by Post, 2005, which divides terrorist activity into three broad categories; political terrorism – including substate (social, ethnic and religious group), state supported, and state terrorism; criminal terrorism, primarily those terrorist actions carried out by organised crime; and pathological terrorism, i.e.: terrorist acts arising as outcomes of the psychosocial trauma of individuals or groups, such as the Columbine High school massacre (Post, 2005). It is this broad and inclusive theoretical framework I will utilise to throughout the course of this essay; primarily focusing on substate and state terrorism. Although no typology can be theoretically neutral (Conway & Char, 2002), such a broad classification allows consideration of the greatest amount of research into the psychological analysis of terrorist activities.

ENDOGENOUS MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

 To conceive of terrorism primarily as an activity which results in a terrorist act, focusing on the dramatized and emotively labelled destruction wrought, is to forget that such acts are the 'aftermath of a wide series of activities and events', and encounter the danger of fundamental attribution error (Horgan, 2005).

A variety of endogenous theories, identifying 'the terrorist' either as a distinct personality type, or the sufferer of a psychological disorder, have been applied by psychologists. Cooper (cited in Horgan 2005), in comparing the terrorist to Cleckley's psychopathic personality (Cleckley, 1951), stated 'the political terrorist needs either a highly insulated conscience or a certain detachment from reality'.

Examination of Cleckley's (1951) description of the psychopath, and Hares Psychopathy checklist (Hare, 2005), reveals many characteristics which might be helpful to the terrorist, specifically the absence of delusions, lack of remorse and superficial charm (Cleckley, 1951) - and representative of the (non-fundamentalist) terrorist, i.e.: need for stimulation, manipulativeness, callousness, shallow affect and juvenile delinquency (Hare, 2005).

However, despite the intuitive appeal of linking terrorism to psychopathy, to apparently explain the denial of responsibility, and the ferocity of terrorist attacks; little evidence exists that the majority of terrorists are psychopathic (Horgan, 2005). Indeed in Hogan's view, the pathology of psychopathy (e.g.: self centeredness, unreliability, poor behavioural controls, 'alternative' behaviours) contrast with the requirements of terrorist organisations for their members – reliability, secrecy, selflessness and apparent normality. Cooper (cited in Horgan, 2005) stated that 'few terrorists seem to derive real satisfaction from the harm they cause'. Ultimately, the potential usefulness of the psychopath to terrorist organisations for specific acts of brutality, does not help to explain terrorism or terrorist violence as a whole.

Studies of imprisoned terrorists (and terrorist suspects) have endeavoured to describe a terrorist personality; focusing on psychodynamic and trait approaches. The largest study thus far conducted, carried out by the German ministry of the interior, surveyed 227 terrorist suspects (Horgan, 2005). This research identified two types of terrorist leader; extroverted – unstable, unemotional, uninhibited and self interested (e.g.: manifesting some of the characteristics of the psychopath) – and neurotically hostile, 'intolerant suspicious, aggressive and defensive' (Horgan, 2005). Given that this research has not effectively been replicated, that the researchers were unable to come to a consensus about the attitudes of those studied to violence (Horgan, 2005), and that the psychodynamic

perspective underlying this research is no longer considered current (a search of Pscyharticles, Psychinfo and PBSC, Jan 2000 - Dec 2005, reveals only 4523 articles under the keyword 'psychodynamic' 4523 and 14864 under 'psychoanalytic'; as compared to 87957 articles labelled 'cognitive' and 32814 'neuroscience'), this research is of limited usefulness.

Other reductive personality orientated research has similarly failed to find replicable homogenous traits in terrorists studied. For example research has failed to confirm Hershin's (cited in Horgan, 2005), suggestion that 'conflict oriented groups' with conservative ideologies, attracted authoritarian personality types.

Perlstein (cited in Horgan, 2005), proposed a narcissism based explanation of the actions of terrorists, orienting the individuals external relations 'to provide..sufficient ego reinforcement, satisfaction or compensation'. Similarly, such an approach fails to differentiate the ordinary narcissist from the violent terrorist.

Psychoanalytic accounts of terrorist behaviour, rooting violence in inadequately resolved Oedipal complexes, or Ericksonian identity crises, have been critiqued for lacking in predictive value, falsifiable and lacking theoretical validity (Horgan, 2005).

Silke (cited in Horgan 2005), states 'most serious researchers…nominally agree…that terrorists are essentially normal individuals'; emphasising that extreme behaviour does not necessitate pathological abnormality. A number of researchers (e.g.: Morf, Rasc, cited in Horgan 2005) have supported this assertion that a majority terrorists do not vary significantly from the norm for their cultures. Indeed Jamieson (cited in Horgan, 2005) in a study of the Italian Red Brigade group, described its members as having formed their ideology through thought and reflection; though such claims, especially where applied to groups functioning within peaceful democracies, ultimately fail to explain what drives such groups to violence.

Despite such claims of psychological normality, terrorists do exhibit a uniform rhetoric of opposition to society / occupying government / ethnic majorities etc; and through

heterogeneous in personality type, do exhibit disproportionate numbers with frustrated, externalising personality traits; who have been educationally, personally and vocationally unsuccessful (Post, 2005) - although in the case of Palestinian suicide terrorists (Hassan, cited in Silke, 2003) most come from successful middle class families.

Mirroring the failure of psychological theory to successfully account for criminality pathologically (Hollin, 1989), theories which attempt to locate terrorism within a personality type or psychological illness have thus far failed to be of more than hermeneutic significance (Hudson, 1999).

EXOGENOUS EXPLANATIONS

Frustration aggression approaches, such as those of Friedland (cited in Horgan, 2005), have attempted to explain terrorist actions through the motivation of 'real or imagined' disadvantaged status, both at an interpersonal and intergroup level. However such explanations fails to differentiate those individuals / groups who become involved in violence from socially excluded groups which avoid recourse to violent means; frustrations aggression approaches also questionably extrapolate group processes from individual psychological processes. Social learning theories (such as Bandura's model of violence imitation), may account for how historical antecedents or state terrorism engender the templates that serve as the differentiation leading to violence in such frustration based conflict models.

Terrorism is most often an organisational phenomena (Merari, 2000, cited in Silke 2003), and substate nationalist separatist / fundamentalist organisations, both train fighters, and frequently ensure the well being of their families should they die, especially in the case of suicide attacks. Such preparation takes the form of religious justifications and theological discussion rather than indoctrination, as community support (and the anger resulting from ongoing conflict) frequently ensure a ready supply of members willing to fight or give their lives (Merari, 2000, cited in Silke 2003).

Ethnic and religious conflicts involving terrorism have often been ongoing for generations (e.g.: Sri Lanka, Palestine, Northern Ireland); and in such cases, viewing terrorist activities outside of their ethnohistoric and organisational context, misses the primary, exogenous motivations for such violence. Terrorism usually occurs not as the sole activity of an organisation, but as one of a whole set of activities carried out with political / social aims; witness the numerous community activities of the Palestinian Hamas movement (Horgan, 2005).

Taylor, 1988, argues that involvement with terrorism occurs in a variety of phases, and with a variety of motivations for initial engagement (Taylor, cited in Horgan, 2005). Such gradual involvement mirrors the sociological theory of primary and secondary deviance (Becker, 1963), but the heterogeneity of 'pathways to terrorism' (Borum, 2004), in addition to the frequent community support for ethnic / religious fundamentalist substate terrorist groups, necessitate the analysis of the social factors leading to support from the wider community / ethnic / cultural group for terrorism.

LANGUAGE & PSYCHOCULTURAL NARRATIVES

The terminology utilised to discuss terrorism contains implicit value judgements and assumptions, which identify its users within contradictory expository psychocultural narratives (Ross, 2002); with prescriptive effects on the behaviour of and response to those seeking to communicate with the blunt message of political violence.
Differing interpretations of such violence - from Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' model (Huntington, 1993), encapsulating middle eastern terrorism as a by-product of the battle between ideologically opposed societies; to the classification by the Bush presidency of Al Qaeda captives as 'unlawful participants', justifying their subsequent internment (in violation of international law – ICRH, 2005) in Guantanamo Bay - despite their intangible nature, moderate processes of foreign policy and international policing

(e.g.: Lagon, 1999); and the initiation, direction, escalation and cessation of conflicts (Ross, 2002).

To such a social constructionist perspectives, a cultures 'historically transmitted pattern[s] of meaning', (Geertz, 1973 cited in Ross, 2002), impose common views which, during times of conflict, conformity pressures ensure become more universal and proscriptive. Such narratives lie behind competing conceptions of political violence as 'terrorism' and 'armed struggle'; and delimit the options allowed competing groups in conflict resolution.

Ross, 2002, describes how a narrative of American colonialism, based on American support of Israel, support for the Sha of Iran, the Gulf War, and the positioning of US troops in the middle east; motivated Al Qaeda to begin its attacks on US embassies and ultimately resulted in the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre. Similarly, the emotive conceptual absurdity of a 'War on Terror' (Lakoff, 2002), has been utilised by the incumbent American Presidency to justify the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Psychocultural narratives position terrorism within a social, political and group process context; and can be combined with theoretical perspectives such as labelling theory (Becker,1963), to explain much of the violence which terrorists exhibit. However, they face the criticism that by resisting implicit condemnation of terrorist violence they act to facilitate and normalise such activities; and that the task remains of evidencing the behavioural effects of social constructions, beyond their expository narrative quality.

SUICIDE TERRORISM

Suicide terrorism is not new, with roots in the 12th century Ismal'ili Shi'ite assassination group, nor is it limited to Islam; attacks in recent decades have been carried out by Christians, Sikhs, and Shintoists; with the majority of attacks in recent years coming from the Hindu 'Tamil Tiger' independence movement in Sri Lanka (Silke, 2003).

The ferocity and selflessness of suicide attacks have engendered speculation over the use of drugs to fuel their excesses; however tests on the remains of Palestinian suicide attackers in Israel have consistently failed to uncover any evidence of drugs or alcohol. Suggesting recent allegations of drug use by Iraqi insurgents (Defence Tech, 2005), may too be confirmed as inaccurate.

Suicide terrorists, when studied in their communities, outside of prison settings, do not generally suffer from low self esteem, nor do they show a tendency to have had disrupted family backgrounds (Silke, 2003). Neither are such attackers psychopathic or irrational, Nasr Hassan, who has interviewed Palestinian terrorists, including suicide attackers, describes such attackers as having stable personalities, not significantly differing from other terrorists, nor deviating from their cultures norms (Hassan, 2002, cited in Silke, 2003).
Suicide attackers are not solely male, 30%-40% of Tamil tiger suicide attacks have been carried out by women (Silke, 2003); nor are they usually coerced, Islamic Jihad (a Palestinian group) initially turn away volunteers, only accepting their 'martyrdom' if they persist in reapplying (Kishner, 1996, cited in Silke, 2003).

Suicide attacks often contain a religious motivation, but this is not universal – the Tamil Tiger movement, which 'invented' the tactic of suicide bombing, is not a religious movement (Silke, 2003). Israeli researcher Ariel Merari (cited in Silke 2003), states that religion is 'relatively unimportant in the phenomena of terrorist suicide'.

CONCLUSION

The psychological study of terrorism is beset with practical difficulties - gaining access to terrorists, personal danger, and the potential for manipulation of the researcher for political ends (Horgan, 2005). So too has the assessment of terrorists, and of terrorism as a phenomena, been beset with theoretical problems, primarily the assumption of pathology in the terrorist, and the continuing failure of efforts to uncover a 'terrorist personality' applicable to and responsible for the wildly varying forms and functions of terrorist violence.

Much psychological research on terrorism has focused on biological, psychodynamic and trait classifications - endogenous motivations assuming the abnormality of the terrorist. By contrast, growing numbers of researchers attempt to locate the terrorist in the exogenous social and group context of their activities, such explanations account for the cross cultural nature of terrorism, but face the difficulty of explaining why all pressured and marginalized individuals and groups do not resort to terrorism.

Abhorrence for the violence engendered by terrorists can too easily obscure consideration of the social, political, psychocultural and situational factors which must be comprehended to understand and reduce terrorist violence, whether it be the persecutory abuse of justice systems and military power in state and state sponsored terrorism, the slide of social activism into militancy in substate terrorism, the cynical terrorism of organised crime or the escalation of psychological illness and alienation into pathological terrorism.

Future research must emphasise statistical significance, experimental power and replicable methodologies, in combination with an emphasis on causal factors, and social / environmental / situational differentiations between those who engage in violence, and individuals and groups who strive for social change by peaceful means.

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