

CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES

The Samson syndrome: is there a kamikaze psychology?

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The commonly held assumption that suicide bombers are driven by direct experiences of deprivation and flagrant injustice is not supported by any strong evidence. The equally popular belief that they must be severely mentally disturbed is also not confirmed by studies of those bombers who have survived. Further, it is clear that suicide bombing is not limited to one religious group. Therefore, although there are ideological and religious aspects to the belief systems of many bombers they do not explain why any given person would actually carry out the attack. There is thus a value in giving more attention to the psychological and social psychological processes by which individuals become radicalised to the point that they will take their own lives as part of killing others. It is proposed that consideration of the parallels between suicide bombing and other forms of suicide, as well as other violent crimes, will assist an understanding of how educated, apparently Westernised, citizens could perpetrate the July 2005 bombings in London and the September 11 destruction in the USA. The limited material available on the experiences of suicide bombers suggests that some at least are most readily understandable from the viewpoint of group facilitated, self-destruction rather than being strongly driven by sophisticated understanding of guerrilla strategies or political or religious dogma. Analogies to spree killing or mass cult suicides are therefore illuminating. Even individual, depressive suicides throw some light on what may be the cognitive processes that enable people to carry out such destructive acts. Central to all these processes are two focal aspects of the bombers' cognitions, (a) a 'cognitive simplicity' that makes a very stark distinction between the 'in-group' the bomber identifies with and everyone else, and (b) the belief that the 'out-group' is implacably set on an immovable path that denies the 'in-group's' identity so that suicide is the only way of influencing that 'out-group'. This may be summarised as a 'Samson syndrome' after the Biblical example of a final act of self-destructive vengeance. Therefore, it follows that to reduce the likelihood of such occurrences, beyond the widely discussed political strategies, effort should be put into enriching the conceptualisations held within various subgroups about the diversity of society, encouraging potential bombers to accept the complexity of their own identities.

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The problem of understanding suicide bombers

The September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, etched into our culture as '9/11' and the July 2005 bombings in London, similarly now labelled '7/7' and '21/7' raise as many challenges to the social sciences as they do to the security services. The conventional wisdom on terrorists, particularly those who deliberately kill themselves in the act of killing others, is that they are the product of an oppressed, occupied country. The general assumption seems to be that the daily suffering and insult wished on residents by an alien power is interpreted within the claustrophobically over-heated atmosphere of orthodox religion to channel young men's ideas. It is assumed that they see no other way to gain respect and freedom for themselves and their people than suicide bombing. However, what is known, in the public domain at least, about all suicide terrorists in Britain, the USA and those who completed the related bombing in Madrid, makes it much more difficult to fathom the cause of their behaviour. As far as can be established all these bombers were reasonably well educated. They had grown up without any obvious deprivations, in functional families. The London 7/7 bombers were educated in Britain, seemed to be well assimilated into mainstream society and had no particularly aversive personal experiences that could be readily understood as a likely precursor to such devastating acts.

Therefore, if we are to understand the processes that gave rise to these bombings, and thus contribute to methods for reducing their likelihood in the future, we need to go beyond the conventional wisdom. That is difficult to do. But what can be gleaned is that there is little evidence for the popular assumptions about suicide bombers. Alternative perspectives are needed.

Challenges to studying suicide bombers

The many difficulties in uncovering the truth about the people who kill themselves apparently as an act of terrorism cannot be overestimated. The only people available for interview, if access can be gained to them, who have direct experience of the process, are those intended suicide bombers whose bombs failed to go off, either for technical reasons or because the bomber was caught before detonating, or decided not to detonate. These people may not be representative of the possibly more determined individuals who were able to achieve their objectives. Even if access can be gained to these 'failed' bombers what they tell the security services is unlikely to be made public and what they tell the few researchers who have gained access (e.g. Merari, 1990; Siobelman, 2004) is likely to be distorted by their own views of their failure and the current incarceration in which they find themselves. However, as Speckhard (2006) shows from her interviews with the families and associates of Chechen suicide bombers, it is important to attempt to get some understanding of the social and psychological processes involved in these outrages even if there is inevitable bias in the information obtained.

Information from the families, friends and associates of suicide bombers is also likely to be distorted. This process of building up a picture of a deceased person

from what is known about them through personal documents and those who have had contact with them, is often referred to as a 'psychological autopsy' (Ogloff & Otto, 1993). However, as Canter (2005) has detailed in relation to cases of equivocal death, in which there may be doubt as to whether the cause of death was suicide or murder, this process of developing a 'psychological autopsy' is far from problem-free. People are often reluctant to indicate any awareness of the mental state of a person who took their own life because such admissions could implicate them in the act. If they are willing to talk, their accounts are liable to have a strong justificatory component. For instance, it seems a reasonable assumption that it is much easier for a mother to come to terms with her son's suicide if she can claim it was an act of noble martyrdom rather than deep despair. In martyrdom she can have pride, but her son's despair could lead to feelings of her own weakness and inability to help him.

It is also important to point out, as Horgan (2004) does in some detail, that gaining access to people involved in or associated with any form of terrorism may actually be dangerous, and is often a lengthy drawn out process. Therefore, it is understandable that most researchers are reluctant to follow this path and rely instead on secondary and tertiary sources. This is one of the reasons why public understanding of terrorists is often so misinformed. There is very little direct empirical information drawn directly from the bombers themselves.

Statements that suicide bombers record for broadcast after their death suffer from similar difficulties. Merari (1990) suggests that the preparation of such a statement is part of the process by which the bomber is tied into the intended act. By committing him/herself in writing or on video to the action it is much more difficult to back out at a later stage without a tremendous loss of face. Furthermore, the schooling in the appropriate rhetoric for making such a statement is likely to be drawn from the writings and lectures of the leaders of terrorist movements. The statement is unlikely to be expressed in a style that would be typical of the idiosyncrasies of the particular suicide bomber. For example, the Tape of Mohammad Sidique Khan (2005), one of the 7/7 London bombers, has a formality to it that makes it sound more like quotations from the writings of Osama bin Laden than Khan's personal thoughts. Therefore, it is difficult to gauge from such broadcast material how totally it captures the psychology and personal perspective of the individual making the statement. Furthermore, it would be expected that such statements would claim international significance and grand motivations for the suicidal act rather than belittling it by reference to personal frustrations or individual experiences.

We must also be careful about generalising from what is known about one set of suicide bombers to all others. Most information comes from Palestinian suicide bombers who do grow up and exist in a very different setting from the areas of Leeds, home to the London July bombers, or the other countries in which the New York attackers were born. The changing world scene and evolving social processes also mean that there is unlikely to be one psychology of the bomber valid for all places and all times.

Despite these many difficulties in obtaining detailed information about the processes by which a person becomes a suicide bomber, the slowly growing series of

studies can be put alongside what is known about other acts of violence and of suicide, and suicidal assaults from previous eras, about the basis of radicalisation, to sketch a picture of how established Western citizens could become suicide bombers.

Is deprivation a direct cause of terrorism?

In his review of the psychological causes of terrorism Moghaddam (2005, p. 162) makes clear that 'material factors such as poverty and lack of education are problematic as explanations of terrorist acts'. He quotes Coogan's (2002) account of the IRA as giving no support to the view 'that they are mindless hooligans drawn from the unemployed and unemployable' (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 163). The Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs reported in 2003 that captured al Qaeda terrorists were not typically from impoverished backgrounds and had reasonable levels of education. Indeed, accounts of the people who carried out the 7/11 attacks on New York and Washington showed that they did not come out of refugee camps, and were not ignorant and lacking education (Bodansky, 2001). So a simple-minded Marxist analysis proposing that acts of terrorism are the first stages of a people's revolution, being the actions of a downtrodden proletariat that has no other means of bettering its lot, does not have much empirical support.

Indeed, any equation of suicide terrorism with acts of revolution as a response to a repressive state need to be treated with great caution. The concomitant idea that if people are given at least some limited material comfort then they are unlikely to want to overthrow their regime also needs careful evaluation. This was the view expressed so amusingly by George Orwell (1933) when he wrote:

It is quite likely that fish-and-chips, art-silk stockings, tinned salmon, cut-price chocolate (five two-ounce bars for sixpence), the movies, the radio, strong tea, and the Football Pools have between them averted revolution. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Chapter 5.

Just as it is a great over-simplification to propose that deprivation and oppression provoke acts of terrorism, so the proposal that no one who lives in relative comfort would be willing to take up a cause that violently challenges the status quo must also be questioned. The search for the origins of terrorism of any sort as fundamentally in material deprivation is not likely to prove successful.

A slightly more sophisticated argument would be that although an individual has some material comfort, if they live within a repressive regime the deprivation of their liberty is the source of their terrorist zeal. This view is also difficult to support from the facts. As Youngs (2005) makes clear in his analysis of the influence of political repression on the prevalence of terrorism, there is little correlation between relative degrees of political repression and 'radicalism'. He compares various Middle Eastern countries, India and China and the source of revolution in other areas of the world to show that, if anything, repressive regimes serve to keep terrorist activity under control and that those who wish to attack civilians benefit from the freedoms associated with democracy.

To account for the greater dissatisfaction and related violence in less repressive regimes it is fruitful to consider the widely explored issue of 'relative deprivation'.

Walker & Smith (2002) review over 50 years of study of how people tend to compare their own experiences with that of others that they know about and assess their personal deprivation relative to those other experiences. This subjective relativity has been taken to explain many paradoxes, such as why working women are more willing to accept disadvantageous pay differentials than would be expected (Crosby, 1982), because they compare themselves with other women rather than men, or the lack of impact of the removal of apartheid on inter-racial attitudes in South Africa (Duckitt & Mphuting, 1998), because the racial groups still made comparisons within their own groups.

Relative deprivation has also been elaborated by distinguishing between personal experiences and experience perceived to be shared by a social group (Smith & Leach, 2004). These are mainly laboratory-based experimental studies because it is so difficult to establish clearly what an individual's view of the experiences of a social group is. Nonetheless, they do indicate that when a person's identity is closely associated with membership of a particular group then the belief that the group as a whole experiences certain deprivations can have a significant influence on that person's levels of dissatisfaction beyond their own personal comparisons. These complexities thus help to point towards the need to consider the individual psychological processes and how an individual makes sense of his/her experiences rather than relying on some notion of the objective, material situation the person is part of.

Of course this does not mean that repressive regimes are just as likely to grow out of affluent democratic societies as of deprived ones. It is generally accepted that economic unrest was a significant contribution to the emergence of Fascism and in more recent times Rashid (2000) has shown that the brutal, totalitarian regime of the Taliban owed much to the deprived and primitive conditions in which they had their origins. Such regimes can export terrorism quite directly by the provision of material and training as well as espousing a destructive ideology, but it is important to distinguish between the broader political processes and the mechanisms by which individuals, who do not live in fear of their lives and who have a reasonably secure and comfortable existence, turn to the most destructive of acts against themselves and strangers.

Mental illness and suicide bombing

One common view about the psychology of suicide bombers is that they must be 'mad' in some sense of being severely mentally disturbed. However, even an elementary consideration of the July 2005 bombings in London would make clear that the perpetrators could not have been insane in the usual sense of out of contact with reality, drugged or even highly trained fanatics. The New York aeroplane hijackers similarly indicated a determination and coolness of purpose that is not compatible with a psychosis or other extreme form of mental illness. This accords with the reviews of both Silke (2003) and Moghaddam (2005), who make clear that there is no evidence at all that suicide bombers are overtly mentally disturbed. The five failed Palestinian suicide bombers that Soibelman (2004) had interviewed showed

no signs of mental illness and were able to discuss many matters with their interviewers in an apparently rational way. But then, the incidence of overt mental illness in serial killers appears to be no greater than in the population at large, such that it is very rare indeed for insanity to be used as a defence (Hickey, 2005). Neither are those possibly more bizarre acts of spree killing, in which a number of people are killed in one onslaught, as in the Columbine School shootings in 1999, or in Hungerford in 1987 or Dunblane in 1996, committed by people with any obvious psychotic illness (Canter, 1995). With hindsight their acquaintances may claim they were strange people who did not relate well to others, but people with diagnosed mental illnesses are far more likely to hurt themselves rather than anyone else.

Far from being disturbed there is some evidence that those recruiting people to commit these atrocities go to some pains to exclude people who may be mentally unstable. Merari (1990) claims that only a minority of those who volunteer to be suicide bombers are selected to do so. This is understandable in military terms. A person who was mentally unstable could not be relied upon to focus and follow through with the desired objective and so would weaken the whole operation and put disclosure of its methods at risk.

The lack of overt, diagnosed, mental illnesses in terrorists and others who commit violent acts against strangers allows us to assume that even though the logic of their actions may be difficult to comprehend the psychological processes by which they reach their decision to act should be available for consideration. If we do not consider these people to inhabit a totally alien psychological existence in which they are driven by demons, or believe they are following the instructions of disembodied voices, it should be possible to draw on processes we know about in acceptable, normal situations in order to elucidate how these young men become suicidal bombers.

Brainwashing?

The graphic metaphor for clearing a person of previously held beliefs, washing their brains, in order to insert some alien set of perspectives, has become a further explanation of how people could turn from reasonably well-adjusted citizens to violent terrorists. This perspective puts people such as Osama bin Laden and the Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin in roles that have only ever been demonstrated clearly in George Du Maurier's fictional story of the control of the opera singer Trilby by the manipulative Svengali. Many other studies show that in real life it is difficult to demonstrate the possibility of such quasi-occult powers (cf. Heap & Kirsch, 2006 for a review of these issues).

This view of the influence of terrorist leaders also implies a very strong hierarchy, very similar indeed to what would be expected in a rigid military structure. However, in general, as with all illegal groups (Canter & Alison, 2000), especially those spread over a wide geography, it is not possible to maintain the top-down discipline that is *de rigueur* for a standing army. Instead, what Atran (2004) calls a 'hydra-headed network' is much more likely to be the norm. In a detailed study of the al Qaeda network, Sageman (2004) shows just how complex and self-generating

terrorist networks can be. These loose networks come about partly because illegal organisations face such challenges to preserving the identification and communication processes that are crucial for the effectiveness of legitimate ones (as Canter, 2000, discusses) that they have to rely on other ways of operating. The indications are that they survive by encouraging and supporting small, independent groups, over which they have very little direct control (Atran, 2004). But this requires that the groups are very much self-defined and self-motivated, rather than being fiercely manipulated by some charismatic leader.

One important implication of this mechanism of support for terrorism is that it can be traced at least to the writings of 19th century anarchists such as Michael Bakunin (cf. Anarchist Archives, 2006) who saw revolution emerging out of spontaneous secret societies who combine together to overthrow the status quo. The intelligentsia were to articulate the disquiet and aspirations of the masses who would then find their own ways into revolution. This way of thinking may be a more appropriate ideological basis for present day Western suicidal terrorists than anything in the Koran. However, it also emphasises that it is the ways of thinking of individuals that need to be explored rather than only focusing on the grand designs of some notional leadership.

The role of religious ideology

If it is not some particular guru who leads the bombers astray, then it has often been thought that it is a general religious ideology that each one draws on to formulate their destructive intentions. The fact that all the London and USA attackers were Moslem and that Palestinian suicide bombers are typically Moslem too has led to the assumption in many quarters that there are some inherent seeds in Islam that provide the basis for suicide bombing. However, there is nothing new or particularly Islamic about suicide bombers. There is the ancient Jewish exemplar in the biblical account of Samson bringing the Temple down upon the Philistines as a way of escaping from his own degradation and death at their hands. In modern times, as the widely quoted report by Gunaratna (2003) documents, suicide bombing is certainly not limited to Moslem terrorists. The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) that has carried out many suicide bombings in Turkey is anti-religious, drawing on Marxist-Leninist ideology, but with a very strong Nationalist, rather than religious, orientation. What Gunaratna (2003) calls 'ethno-nationalism', rather than religious doctrine, is what drives the 'Tamil Tigers' to carry out suicide bombing in Sri Lanka and India.

Of course, the most well-known use of suicide as a military means was by Japanese pilots in World War II. This had nothing to do with either a challenge to state oppression or Islam. Yet its parallels to recent suicide bombings has been recognised by some European newspapers, referring to these attacks with the Japanese label of *kamikaze*, literally meaning the wind (or spirit) of God. So, flying planes into enemy ships was a significant, if rather ineffectual weapon in the war in the Pacific Ocean half a century before a similar tactic was used on the Twin Towers in New York. The use of military personnel as self-destructive missiles in World War II may teach us something of

the processes by which people think themselves into this desperate final act. In his detailed study of 'Japan's suicide samurai' Lamont-Brown (1997) reveals that Japanese military leaders were initially reluctant to use this military tactic that was so wasteful of trained pilots and aeroplanes, but that towards the end of the war they saw no other way of preventing the American fleet from landing troops on Japanese soil. A special airborne 'Divine Thunderbolts Corps' was therefore established. The pilots in this corps were initially drawn from well-trained airmen, who came from strongly nationalist families. They saw themselves as upholding the honour and traditions of their families. However, as the war progressed young men with very limited training, from working-class backgrounds, were drafted in to carry on the attacks.

The early suicide pilots endorsed a mythology of devotion to the Emperor, who was regarded as a God, such that it was an honour to die in his service. They believed they would be re-incarnated as cherry blossom in the nationalist Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, such that this flower became their symbol. Those who came after them appear to have been more directly motivated by dishonour of failure and the pride their family would feel in their success. The shame that would be brought on their family if they came back alive was regarded as unbearable. Certainly through the names of the squadrons, their symbols and rituals the pilots believed that they were 'divine wings' wreaking a terrible toll on the enemy. In fact, once the US navy got over the initial shock of such apparently senseless attacks, kamikaze assaults proved to be futile in stopping the advance of the US military on Japan. However, the determination the Japanese showed in fighting to the last breath may have been influential in the decision to drop the atom bomb.

There are doubtless some parallels in present-day suicide bombing, notably a conviction in the great significance of their actions and the often quoted belief in rewards in the after-life. Perhaps of more significance, as we shall see when we consider 'non-military' suicide, is the view that there was no other way for Japan to defend itself against a greatly superior military force. However, the fact that all five of the failed July 21 London Bombers were caught alive without any further violence shows that the British situation is very different from the Japanese. For that group of suicide bombers, at least, life was preferable to 'honourable' death.

The kamikaze pilots also show us that the concept of 'religious zeal' needs to be treated with caution. The Shinto tradition of which they were a part claimed it was honourable to die protecting the emperor. This has analogies to the Koranic claims that 'whoever fights for the cause of God, whether he dies or triumphs, on him we shall bestow a rich recompense' (4:72, Koran, Penguin books edition 2003, p. 68). However, they are both very different types of belief systems. The tradition of the Japanese Emperor as a God was greatly diluted after the war in a way that it is difficult to imagine happening to beliefs in The Prophet and His teachings. It seems more feasible to think of the religious ideology as a skeleton that can be fleshed out in accordance with the experiences and self-image of any given individual.

As has been illustrated religious zeal is not a sufficient condition for someone becoming a suicide bomber. However, the framework it provides on which to

develop conceptualisations for violent action can certainly be facilitative. All of Soibelman's (2004) interviewees declared a strong commitment to Islam and the rhetoric of Sunni fundamentalism is apparent in many of the writings and broadcasts that claim responsibility for these acts. Soibelman (2004) quotes the belief of many Islamic bombers that to die through suicide bombing was better than to live under non-Moslem rule.

However, as with any reference to a broad ideology you cannot blame an idea for the people who hold it. Many millions of people endorse fundamentalist Islam without interpreting it as meaning they should commit acts of self-destructive violence. The religion may offer up a belief system on which potential suicide bombers can draw, but it cannot be accounted as the primary cause for their actions. To understand the processes that give rise to suicide bombing we need to consider emotional and cognitive processes within the individual who primes the bomb and pulls the detonator whilst it is on his person.

Psychological processes that give rise to suicide bombing

Cognitive simplicity

After the World War II attempts were made to explain the psychological processes that gave rise to Fascism and the sort of totalitarian mentality that led to the atrocities committed in the name of that ideology. Most notable amongst these was the work of Adorno and his colleagues (1950). This gave rise to the notion of an 'authoritarian personality', called even more graphically the 'ethnocentric personality'. Such people were thought to be particularly prone to racism and to hold extreme views on loyalty to the group to which they belong and to traditional religion. A questionnaire measure was developed to determine if a person had such a personality type, containing an F scale, a high score on which was taken to indicate if that the person was indeed 'authoritarian'.

Although this was an interesting approach to describing and explaining how people came to hold such extreme views its validity, particularly as a predictor of racism, has been severely criticised. Ray (1990), for instance, argues that it is more appropriately seen as an index of 'old-fashioned' values, which can be worthwhile or destructive depending on the context. There is also confusion in the notion that an aspect of how people differ from each other, i.e. personality, can characterise a large proportion of a population.

Nonetheless, there are some aspects of Adorno *et al.*'s proposals that can possibly contribute to an elucidation of the thought processes of putative suicide bombers. Central to the idea behind the F scale is what I would like to call 'cognitive simplicity', contrasting this with the concept of 'cognitive complexity' first formulated by Bieri (1955) that characterises sophisticated experts in any domain. People who are cognitively complex have more constructs for conceptualising the entities in any particular domain, whether it be for instance, people, wines or medical symptoms, and they are able to distinguish more gradations in the variations along these constructs.

The person who has a less sophisticated conceptual system in any domain will have very few ways of distinguishing between the individuals within that domain. People high on the F scale would be expected to see the world in very simplified black and white terms, especially in areas relating to other people.

This categorical mindset has been particularly associated with right-wing authoritarians (Altemeyer, 1988), but there can be little doubt that all forms of religious orthodoxy emphasises a world-view in which the most significant distinction is between believers and infidels. Indeed, the opening paragraphs of the Koran serve to make a distinction between 'the righteous, who believe in the unseen and are steadfast in prayer' (2:2) and the 'unbelievers' for whom 'grievous punishment awaits' (2:6). This establishes even more directly than the 'chosen people' of the Old Testament, that there are only two types of people, and that membership of the 'righteous' type is considerably more preferable than being in the 'out-group' of 'unbelievers'.

The crucial point here is that the person who is radicalised to the point of taking violent action develops a cognitive process that allows of only very simple categorisation of others. There are informative parallels here with the conceptualisations of many rapists who see women as either whores or saints (Marolla & Scully, 1982; Scully, 1990), so that very different moralities are considered appropriate for the different categories of women.

The distinction between the identified subgroups can be enhanced by characterising one group as less fully human than the other. This process, sometimes known as 'distancing', is especially feasible if individuals believe they are not a part of that other group. This is a practice that is deliberately encouraged by any leadership that wishes to persuade its members to act violently towards the 'distanced' group. Thus, as Grossman (1996) illustrates, an important aspect of military training is often aimed at making soldiers discount the humanity of the enemy. He points out the reluctance that raw soldiers often have in killing other people and the consequent need to train them out of such a pusillanimous set of attitudes. This is a process well understood by demagogues whether it be Hitler's tirades against Jews, or the more recent conflicts between the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda.

Social identity

Only identifying simple categories of people does not lead to radical action. An important further component is the individual drawing his/her identity strongly from one of the categories. The process of defining oneself as part of a particular subgroup is a crucial part of the move towards violent action. This is where the influence of external agents and interpersonal contact becomes particularly significant.

Over the past 20 years there has been a growing emphasis within social psychology on Social Identity Theory, which can be traced to the seminal work of Tajfel (1982). Many studies testing and developing this theory have used what is known as the minimal group paradigm. They have shown that even the arbitrary assignment to one group can lead to people believing there are important differences between the group they are part of and

the 'other' group. Thus, although this is an artificial experiment in the extreme it serves to illustrate the emotional power of group membership for many people.

It is interesting to note that suicide bombers and others who carry out terrorist acts are typically young men in their mid-20's (Victoroff, 2005) which is the stage in life at which many young men are beginning to determine their social identities and setting out on a track that defines their career. This is thus a stage at which young men can begin to feel the flavours of success in their lives, seeing possibilities opening before them, or having lost the optimism of youth, begin to worry about their life's trajectory.

Young women do not seem to have the same pressures on self-identity as young men, possibly because their challenges relate more directly to role conflicts within society and because the options of motherhood and wifedom provide a different milieu within which to seek out a sense of self and challenge social norms. There certainly are female suicide bombers, but they tend to be prevalent in very particular cultural contexts. Gunatara (2003) records that the Sri Lankan LTTE uses many women suicide bombers, one of whom killed Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. Furthermore, he reports that most suicide operations in Turkey are carried out by women. In both of these contexts the terrorists' ideologies are essentially sectarian. Therefore, it would seem that women are suicide bombers within a rather different culture from those embraced by men. This environment is typically less fundamentally religious, assigns women somewhat more equal social roles to men, and possibly puts less premium on manly courage and associated noble sacrifice.

The need to defend a challenge to the sense of self that may be part of suicide terrorism can certainly be found in other forms of murder. As Katz (1988) argues murder is often experienced as 'righteous slaughter', that he describes as 'leaps of blind faith' in which the killer is deliberately setting up an event that he knows will change his life for ever and which has a part of its seduction the excitement of now knowing exactly how it will turn out. The typical age of people who commit murder is in the mid-20s, the same as the typical age for suicide bombers (Silke, 2003). Both of these very personal violent acts also seem to emerge out of a mix of the frustration of challenges from others and the feeling that some inexorable, but possibly unpredictable, change will be the result.

For the terrorist the search for significance may be conducted in a more leisurely way than the murderous outburst. In their interviews with Northern Ireland terrorists Taylor & Quayle (1994) drew out the common indication that part of their mission was to achieve some significance in their own eyes and in the eyes of their associates. Soibelman (2004) also draws attention to the pride felt by the failed suicide bombers she interviewed in the act of what they saw as martyrdom.

This puts the notion of martyrdom in a somewhat different light from that cast on it by religious iconography. For although suicide bombers certainly describe themselves as martyrs rather than terrorists, any altruistic components, in which they are dying for the sake of a cause rather than for personal gratification, have to be weighed against what we know of other murderers and people who kill themselves. There is the real possibility that young men who are unsure, or uncomfortable, with their own sense of themselves are attracted by access to a group that has a very clear and

strong identity of itself. Once welcomed into such a group the potential convert, as with many cults, is vulnerable to having his definition of himself restructured to incorporate the conceptualisations that dominate the group. There is an extensive literature (summarised for example by Gergen, 1971) that shows how much of our own notions of who we are is shaped by the people with whom we come into contact and that these notions can be shaped further by the social roles we take.

The secrecy and isolation that is necessary for the continuation of any group that sees itself as challenging the status quo also helps to give strength to the identity of the group and to the members who are within it. The use of small 'cells' who are independent of each other, which has a long history in what used to be known as 'urban guerrilla' activities, also has the social psychological benefits of defining a distinct sub-group with which each member identifies and which can build up various forms of reciprocal support. However, it should not be assumed that this process that may be literally one of 'indoctrination', in the sense of absorbing the person into the doctrinal framework of the group, needs to take a great deal of time. If the individual has already formed a view that accepts the value of suicide bombing then the process of recruitment, training and action can be achieved in a very short time, within a few months, or in some cases even a few hours (Moghaddam, 2005).

Although the suicide cells may work in secrecy, explicit or implicit support from their family and community is often crucial as well. As mentioned, kamikaze pilots were keen to uphold the honour of their families and assumed support from them. Soibelman (2004) found that Palestinian suicide bombers were encouraged by the pride their family and associates would take in their act and the admiration with which others would regard their family after their death. In the more general context of terrorism there is considerable evidence of the importance of community support. In his interviews with IRA terrorists Horgan (2005) uncovered the crucial role of identity with a particular community that clearly shared the values of the terrorists themselves.

This community and family support is important for these violent young men because it helps to feed and shape their own sense of who they are. They absorb the distinction between their in-group and all others who are not part of that group from the culture in which they are immersed. This can be a very precise, constrained distinction in which, for example, only one particular Moslem sect is acceptable as true believers. As with those 'spree killers' who killed so many in the Columbine school shootings, or Michael Ryan's rampage of shootings around Hungerford (Canter, 1995) the target becomes some symbolic representative of all those who have caused anger and frustration in the past. They may represent 'the school' as at Columbine, 'the community' as at Hungerford, or 'the West' as in the London and New York suicide attacks.

Dominant narratives

These processes of identity shaping are given further power by the dominant narratives on which the terrorist groups draw. This aspect of the ways in which in-group

and out-group are given significance tends to have been under-valued in many of the considerations of the rhetoric of terrorist leaders, but narratives that individuals can incorporate into their views of themselves are of great significance in shaping their actions, notably in the criminal context (Canter, 1995).

Sarangi & Alison (2005) drew on interviews with captured left-wing terrorists in India to develop an account of the central narrative that gave meaning to their actions. In essence they found that the narrative recognised the interviewee, his family and local community as a downtrodden, exploited group that was ruled by an evil government that were the forces of repression, including the police and affluent traders. Their heroes were their leaders and those who had inspired them. These men were seen as brave and knowledgeable and would eventually, be victorious over the evil oppressors. This narrative had deep roots, ascribing duplicity to the oppressors, great power and virtue to their leaders, and their group being simple, salt of the earth.

The essential battle between good and evil that such a narrative enshrines will take on different forms in different contexts, but it seems likely that the power it draws from its canonical form. There would appear to be very few major storylines that re-occur throughout all cultures (cf. Frye, 1957; Booker, 2004). These include tragedies, adventures and romances and possibly a handful more. Their existence within the general culture provides a template that individuals can readily populate with their own particular characters. The existence of the conceptual frameworks that the stories encapsulate thus greatly enhances the impact of any rhetoric that makes reference to champions and oppressors, believers and infidels. Such a narrative requires virtuous heroes and dastardly villains and the underdog who suffers their actions and can purify himself by moving from the dark side to join the force of good.

Justifications of violence

Narratives also give life to justifications for violence. They embed these justifications in the plausible context of the story. This allows an individual to draw emotional support from accepting that the reasons for acts of terror are a natural consequence of the account he believes. These storylines also usually contain justifications for violence. So just as humanity draws on relatively few dominant types of story, so there also seems to be a few justifications for violence that are widely drawn upon. When examining the autobiographies of violent men, Canter & Barrett (2006) found that there were really a very limited number of justifications that were cited, each of these implicitly emerging out of a different narrative. Interestingly, these few forms of justification map directly onto the rhetoric drawn on by politicians of all shades for going to war, as well as by terrorist groups. In other words, there are limited frameworks available for explaining and/or excusing state as well as personal violence.

This is what makes these excuses so easy to draw upon. The fact that these justifications are so widely used, probably being universally embedded in all cultures, helps to give them power because every individual can acknowledge their significance in

their own lives and readily understand their implications. They do not have to learn their form and how they are told or structured. All that is needed is to populate the justifications with the details relevant to the individual's own perspective.

Canter & Barrett (2006) summarise these justifications under four headings. The most prevalent is dealing with disrespect/avenging insult. For the avowed gangster, maintaining respect, especially in response to insult that shows a lack of respect for his position is accepted as an appropriate basis for violence. Where the insult is seen as being perpetrated through acts of war against 'brothers' then it takes on an even stronger significance of justifying murder. What is especially noteworthy of some fundamentalist Islamic rhetoric is that there is an attempt to convert the very existence of infidels into an act of insult to their religion, making acceptable the killing of anyone who does not embrace their religion.

The second is a more direct act of retribution, paying back for the wrongs that have been done, in the biblical 'eye for an eye' paradigm. This may run into a third justification where the violent action is seen as essential in defence of something that is threatened. There can be little doubt that the central argument for the recent Iraq war was 'to get him before he gets us'.

A final justification is that people can be killed by accident. With gangsters this is seldom accompanied by any remorse. It is more likely to be seen as an inevitable consequence of the irony of life, sometimes couched in the vernacular summary of a nihilist philosophy, 'stuff happens'.

Taken together with an identification with a particular subgroup whose significance in a struggle is enhanced by dominant narratives, that are themselves simplified by a cognitive style that allows of no grey-areas or subtleties, these justifications have a strong emotional power. The power serves to strengthen the individual's feeling of worth and significance that provides a further emotional support to the act of murder.

Suicidal ideation

Beyond the psychological processes that set a person on the tack to murder it is also necessary to explain why this should be carried out through suicide. The political impact of suicide bombing as a powerful weapon within the armoury of what is now often characterised as asymmetrical warfare cannot be denied, and has been widely discussed (most recently by Speckhard, 2006). Yet most soldiers do not set out to get themselves killed and there is a long history of terrorism in which the individuals themselves go to some lengths to try and survive the attacks they carry out.

To suggest that suicide bombers are merely depressed terrorists who no longer care if they survive or not does not accord with the accounts of these individuals in the days and hours before they kill themselves. The remarkable study recently completed by Speckhard and her colleagues (Speckhard, 2004) utilising interviews with the survivors of the Chechen suicidal terrorists in Moscow, recorded that physicians amongst the survivors said the terrorists were proud of the fact that they were going to die and showed no signs of depression, suggesting that disassociation and euphoria may be more appropriate descriptions of their mood states. The same

calmness is reported for kamikaze pilots by Lamont-Brown (1997) once they had accepted their fate.

However, the lack of agitation in suicidal attackers presupposes that all intending suicides are characterised by states of clinical depression. Canter *et al.* (2004) has proposed that as many as one in ten of non-terrorist suicides may reflect a 'secret despair syndrome' in which the individual shows no outward sign at all of their deep belief that they have no alternative. Such people may even feel some relief once they have made the final decision that ends all decisions. The oft quoted claim by some suicide bombers that both Merari (1998) and Speckhard *et al.* (2004) cite 'we are already dead', only serves to show their commitment to killing themselves, rather than this coming out of a depressed state of mind.

In general suicide emerges out of the belief that there is no alternative. Thought processes are distorted so that all memories are of possibilities that lead nowhere. There is a narrowing of cognitions to focus on only pessimistic views of the past and present (Williams, 1997). In a social context it would be expected that this will be seen as true for the group with which the person associates as much, or even more, than for the person himself.

Where the individual sees a clear oppressor who is the central cause of this despair then in rare cases the act of violence against that target is combined with the act of self-destruction. Spree killings such the Columbine School shootings in 1999, or in Hungerford in 1987 or Dunblane in 1996, all ended in the death of the killer. As Canter (1995) argues these killings can be seen as ultimately an act of suicide because the people involved never create a circumstance in which there is much chance of them escaping alive. Indeed, Hillbrand (2001) proposes that there is a much closer link between violence against the self and aggression against others than is often realised and that many homicides grow out of a deep-seated unhappiness with the self, as much as with the other person attacked.

As mentioned, of particular importance with spree killers is that their targets have a strong symbolic significance. They represent the source of their frustration, anger and depression. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon could not have been more symbolic in representing the American military, capitalist enemy. The general mass of people in London that were the targets for the July bombers were a less focused target and as such indicate a much more general anger with the people of Britain as a whole, and probably even more generally 'The West' as is apparent from Khan's (2005) video recording presented as his testimony for setting off the 7/7 bombs.

It is also worth drawing attention to there being some evidence of what might be called 'copy cat' suicides. What seems to occur is not that the act of hearing about another's suicide gives rise to a decision to kill oneself but rather that the technology of suicide is learnt. Once Buddhist monks started to set fire to themselves there was a wave of others doing similar things. When public attention was drawn to a man in Australia killing himself by placing his head on a railway line as a train approached there were a spate of similar suicides. There is a recognisable increase in school shootings in the USA whenever a particularly violent attack on a school is given a great deal of publicity. This all implies that people who have for whatever reason determined to

kill themselves will draw on public accounts of what others have done as guidance for how to carry out the act themselves.

Similarly to the way that individuals determined to commit suicide will draw on methods that have received public attention it is reasonable to assume that a group that embraces the need to challenge existing Western society will also draw on what they have seen others achieve. Their ideas of what are the ways to perpetrate any challenge must be influenced by what they perceive to have been effective earlier challenges. Media accounts of the unsuccessful 21/7 bombers in London do indicate that they were spurred on by the devastation wrought two weeks earlier, rather than by any concerted, or co-ordinated plan to repeat the earlier attacks.

However, one crucial point here is that all these bombers have accepted the belief that there are no alternatives for achieving their aims but to kill themselves in acts of defiant reprisal. This is a belief they share with spree killers and many people who kill themselves. In conflicts in which there are apparent solutions and lines of communication between the parties are open, even if covert, such as is and was the case in Northern Ireland, there will not be the same belief that suicide attacks are the only way forward. In those situations there will not be the same depth of despair.

For although the despair of suicide bombers will not necessarily be overt, as with the military decision to use kamikaze attacks, there has to be the belief that it is the only way to impinge upon a much mightier enemy. But beyond these military aims the bombers are likely to believe that their personal significance will be greatly enhanced by this desperate act. This significance will have been given authority by the way in which their intended act is embedded in a strong and powerful narrative in which the lowly underdog can change the world.

Excitement

One final component of the psychology that gives rise to suicidal bombing needs to be mentioned. In his very thorough review of the psychology of terrorism Victoroff (2005) mentions 'arousal-seeking' as an explanation, which is often also offered to account for many more mundane crimes, such as burglary. This accords with work by Canter & Ioannou (2004) that has attempted to articulate the various emotions that are associated with different crimes and the ways these emotions may be what maintains the criminal actions. Canter (2005) has argued that these emotions derive in part from the role that the offender believes he is playing in the crime. It therefore is not too great a leap to suggest that if a suicide bomber believes he is carrying out a role in a major drama he will get some emotional benefits from carrying through that role, excitement, feelings of heroic achievement, even some forms of pleasure.

The importance of emphasising the emotional component is that there is plenty of evidence that emotions distort both perceptions and cognitions. Once a person is locked into a way of seeing the world that gives them direct emotional support they are very likely to re-interpret everything that happens to maintain their particular ways of thinking about things. The target of their actions and even its outcome

becomes less important than following through and committing the act itself. Appeals to logic are not likely to be of much use in such situations.

In conclusion: the Samson syndrome

A kamikaze psychology, which might be conceptualised as a fanatical nationalism that blinds the person to any possibility other than honourable death in a final attack, from this review seems to be a very limited framework for considering suicide bombers. There is much more to taking your own life as a means of killing strangers than sheer fanaticism. It is necessary to believe that you are part of a significant narrative in which there is no other option but to kill yourself in order to wreak havoc. This must grow out of a way of conceptualising people as either with you or part of a distant out-group to which you cannot relate, and who are less than fully human. This out-group, however characterised, becomes 'the enemy' and any act against them is conceived of as an act of war.

This way of thinking about the self and the context of personal actions, enhanced by the emotional support it gives to the person then makes the person feel especially empowered, believing that, like Samson, his act of supreme sacrifice will bring down the temple of the oppressors.

There are many implications for actions to counter present day terrorism, especially suicide bombing, from this psychological analysis. But the analysis is not offered as a substitute for political and social action. So many people, in the mass media and in the Groves of Academe have argued at length for the need for comprehensive political solutions to undermine the sources of terrorism that it would be disingenuous to cite any few of them here. However, the psychological considerations do suggest that political and social solutions will never be sufficient. As long as people can see the world in simple 'us' and 'them' terms and will assign themselves to a storyline that requires them to make the ultimate sacrifice to challenge an implacable and mighty enemy there will be individuals whose search for identity will lead them to terrorist acts.

Countering the psychological precursors to terrorism

At the heart of any attempts to undermine the central psychological processes that feed terrorism has to be to break down the simple division into the terrorist group and the rest. So many commentators draw attention to this issue of social identity that it is remarkable that politicians and educators are not more robust in their overt attempts to undermine any such simple-minded dichotomy. Indeed, there are so many processes that support the distinction espoused by terrorists between 'us' and 'them' that without a major campaign to erode its distinctions the divisions are likely to become stronger and simpler. To take a significant example, although holy texts are always open to complex and subtle interpretations, it is salutary that as has been mentioned the most obvious distinction made in the opening paragraphs of the *Koran* is between the 'righteous' and the 'unbeliever'. It is a lot to ask of religious leaders to weaken the implications of this bald division, but if that is the religious

starting point there is a long way to go to pull back from it. A distinction here needs to be made between religious orthodoxy, that upholds conservative religious traditions but does not see the need to impose them on the whole world, and any form of fundamentalism that insists there is only one perspective on society and all must follow it.

The *Koran* and Islamic leaders are not the only sources from which may be derived perceived propaganda benefits for their own causes by enhancing rather than challenging, at every opportunity, the simple assignment of individuals to distinct subgroups. US Presidential references to the 'axis of evil', or even the claim that 'we know who 'we' are, but we do not know who 'they' are' feeds naïve and simple minded difference between processes and countries that are anything but distinct from each other. As short-term rhetoric such dichotomies may have immediate political benefits but they limit the exploration of richer overlapping objectives that are shared by many different communities.

What major public figures seem to underestimate is that the in-group/out-group division can all too readily be the skeleton that can be fleshed out with a heroic narrative enlivened by justifications for violence. Anyone who has seen the anodyne Danish cartoons of the Prophet that have been cited as the cause for violence and bloodshed around the globe will immediately realise that the cartoons themselves were of far less importance than the narrative in which they were embedded that presents 'The West' insulting 'Islam' and the importance of revenge against such insults.

In recent years we in 'The West' have come to recognise the difference between Shia and Sunni Moslems, but the attempt to claim that the EU is 'Christian', and therefore admitting Turkey would be significant because of its Islamic orientation perpetrates exactly the same type of naivety. Italy that houses the centre of world Catholicism has one of the lowest birth rates in the world. This is clearly not because Italians follow the crucial teachings of the Pope on contraception or sexual abstention, at least if the evidence of the Italian mass media is anything to go by. Waves of inter-necine slaughter between different Christian groups over the centuries also lay the lie to Christianity being one monolithic ideology. Furthermore, the British Prime Minister is embarrassed to express his belief in God because of its likely political fall-out. So there are endless examples of how unconvincing is the distinction between Christian and non-Christian as is the notion that Islam is one unified religious perspective. Yet it is these limited, binary conceptualisations that provide the basis for narratives of Martyrdom.

When these limited religious concepts are institutionalised they become ever more destructive. The most pernicious of these institutional applications is to define educational organisations mainly in terms of their notional religious affiliation. The apparently politically correct act of designating schools by their dominant religion and supporting schools that are defined in terms of their religious intake, feeds into a simple-minded categorisation on which terrorists draw.

There has been a very long history in many countries of religious freedom within education. Certainly British schools have for many years made it perfectly secure for people of many different religious backgrounds to co-exist quite comfortably within any given school. There does not often seem to have been the need for

Jews, or Sikhs, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics or Protestants, or children of any other religion to be in a school solely devoted to their own creed. They can bring their own lunches if their religion has dietary laws, take off the appropriate holy days, and even say prayers as need be, all within a religiously mixed environment. A school that embraces and explores such a mix of religious beliefs, by its very existence, undermines the cognitive simplicity of suicide bombers.

As we saw with the 7/7 London bombers youthful integration may not prevent later experiences convincing a person of his separateness, for by all accounts at least one of the London bombers had grown up in an integrated school environment. But such integration will do more to enrich cognitive complexity than to foster a simple heroic story line. Perhaps if the schools had done more to explore the great liberal Moslems of history and the strong tradition of tolerance within Islam they may have enriched the social identity of Moslems themselves.

Studies of racism in the US also teach us that the more integrated a community the less likely are the individuals in that community to hold strongly ethnocentric or racist views. It is the whites who have no contact with the blacks who are most extreme in their attitudes. This is an inevitable human, cognitive process; because the more actual contact with real people the less sway generalised stereotypes can hold. Time and again riots have broken out in US, British and, more recently, French cities, when communities become homogenised so that a disaffected group can generate its own unchallenged narrative of despair. The lack of contact with outsiders reduces the discussions within the subgroup to a self-satisfying one of alienation. Increasingly individuals within this group obtain social significance from how strongly they can express the simple anger against a notional 'oppressor'. It only takes one powerful story, or unfair arrest, misattributed rape or murder to provide the narrative flashpoint for the anger to be acted on.

The human process of categorisation is so fundamental that we are usually not aware that we are doing it. This lack of awareness is particularly dangerous when the categories are arbitrary and naïve. In the current climate there is a remarkably simple-minded notion of 'ethnicity' that colours far too many debates. As Marks (2002) amongst many others has made exceptionally clear, there is no biological basis to race and even less to any notion of 'ethnic' group. In broad terms, the closer together any two people live the more likely are they to share genetic material. So there will be some similarities within any population, but despite the superficial distinctions of skin colour or nose shape the major differences between people are in their attitudes and culture, not in their biology.

It follows that groups which attempt to defend their culture, attitudes and values from those of others around them in the belief that they are defending their 'race' or 'ethnic group' are mistaken. What they are doing is attempting to corral a set of subgroup specific narratives in which their own images of themselves are protected. These are the parents who insist on single-faith schools for their children, and the government ministers who support such developments. They may believe such schools offer a stronger moral framework, although the evidence for this is lacking, but what the schools do is feed the narratives of divisions based on religious practices.

Any attempts to define individuals in terms of single characteristics, be it religion, country of birth, 'ethnicity', 'race' or even football team supported, rather than any of the many other ways they can be identified serves to foster the basis for the Samson syndrome. Education that unpacks the many different overlapping narratives that characterise human history has to be at the forefront in the fight against terrorism. Intending suicide bombers need to be aware that we are not all Philistines.

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