

A call to arms: The need for more psychological research on terrorism

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THE AFTERMATH of any major terrorist event brings with it blanket media coverage. The immediate questions address who might be responsible and which targets might be next. After a few days, the intensity of the coverage wavers, and with it, different kinds of interviewees are consulted. National security pundits and terrorism analysts welcome the reprieve, and are temporarily replaced by psychologists and other social scientists approached for a different kind of perspective. For these experts, the questions are as predictable as they are deceptive in their simplicity: 'Why do you think they did it' or 'What causes someone to become a terrorist?'

Faced with what appears to an unending series of terrorist events, and equally invasive media coverage, a temptation for the seasoned pundit might be to offer a different, perhaps more honest answer: 'Actually, we don't really know why people become terrorists', or 'No, psychology cannot 'predict' who is vulnerable to becoming a terrorist' (or, certainly at least not right now).

A conscientious terrorism expert faces a recurring dilemma: the most scientifically accurate answers (typically of the 'it's complicated' variety) fail to satisfy most audiences. And that is understandable. The drama that surrounds terrorism heightens the urgency for answers, and there is little patience for what audiences assume is academic pontificating. Yet credible commentators refuse to offer simple answers, and many will say that no terrorist profile has been found (Victoroff, 2005). Yet, and especially regarding the latter, this is not as much an indictment of psychological research rather it is an *outcome* of what research currently is available. For every disenfranchised, angry young Muslim man who joins the so-called 'Islamic State', we can find examples of well-off, well-integrated young men and women who leave their current lives, jobs, partners or spouses behind them. Sometimes, entire families join *en masse*. For every religious person that mobilises to join, we find others either completely ignorant of any religious practice or knowledge, and others again who are recent converts. Little wonder then that answers to questions like 'Why do people become terrorists?' don't easily satisfy (how can they?). But a close examination of the relevant psychological research suggests that any honest answer to that question has to reflect two persistent qualities of terrorism: diversity and complexity (Borum, 2011).

Terrorism is complex because it is a process that unfolds at multiple levels. Individuals seek to join terrorist groups (or are encouraged to join them), and those groups in turn are driven by a desire to influence a bigger, broader community (the public and governments alike) by targeting non-combatants to be victims of violence. Their 'message' is part of a broader strategy to promote some social, political or religious cause. Terrorism is basically a story of non-state actors going to war with state actors, the repercussions for both felt at national and international levels. As the academic might view it, terrorism is a complex, mutually reinforcing but always evolving matrix of micro, meso- and macro-processes. Complex, certainly, but surely nothing less than the normal stuff of social psychology (Jaspal et al., 2015).

The complexity of the *nature* of terrorism is reinforced by the diversity of its recruits, their profiles, pathways and experiences. Psychological research on terrorism suggests that the 'radicalisation process' (shorthand for describing how people become involved) encompasses

a varied pool of recruits (young, old, male, female, religious, non-religious, rich, poor, etc.), each of whose involvement trajectory looks and feels just a *little* different from one another. Put another way, different people become involved in terrorism in different ways, and their pathways as well as subsequent experiences manifest themselves in different ways. Some people, raised to value community tradition no matter what the cost, join through family connections. Others, unsure of what precisely they are getting into, go along because their friends are doing it. Some recruits are deeply religious, while others are recent converts, armed with little more than a sense of adventure and even littler learning. For some, a catalyst for mobilisation is exposure to certain media, social or otherwise, that entices them to learn more and consider moving from being a mere bystander to fully-fledged activist. But once again, for others, learning about ideological content and acting out in accordance with that content happens only after they have joined a group or engaged in an act of violent extremism. For some, therefore, acquiring a religious or political ideology is a by-product of their involvement rather than its cause. But in no way is involvement in terrorism a linear path. The idiosyncratic, labyrinthine process of becoming a terrorist is shaped and sustained by a gradual, incrementally-experienced supportive qualities, real or *imagined*. Accounts of involvement and their analyses (even within very specific groups) rarely bend to the will of even the most flexible of metaphors, models or analogies.

But the complexity doesn't end there. Once involved, people experience the day to day reality of the group in different ways, perhaps a reflection of the role(s) they are either assigned or whatever initial expectations or fantasies they held prior to involvement. For the lucky few, involvement is exhilarating, empowering, and utterly exciting. It is fantasy made reality. For others, reality bites; pre-existing notions are quickly crushed upon the first encounters with, and consequences of, violence or merely being told what to do. That disappointment can lead to disillusionment which in turn can cause the person to want to leave terrorism behind – or disengagement. Disengagement can lead to de-radicalisation, which is a fundamental change in the views that the now former militant once embraced so dearly. But for others coping with disillusionment, disengagement may not be possible. Fearful of persecution by comrades, or equally fearful about the prospect of recruitment by the police or spy agencies, they may remain involved despite their disillusionment. In other words, they may be deradicalised, but not necessarily disengaged (Horgan, 2014).

And yet, after all this, as far as the story of terrorist psychology is concerned, this 'arc' of involvement, engagement and disengagement is just the tip of the iceberg. Why then is it that psychological research on terrorist behaviour remains in its infancy? On the one hand, things are certainly better than they were a decade ago, but in the US there are fewer than a dozen psychologists involved in terrorism research on a full-time basis and in the UK, it's probably a third of that. This lack of engagement is puzzling because there is so much that we don't know about terrorist behaviour that is at the heart of major policy debates right now. Perhaps this is why we remain forever answering stagnant questions about terrorist profiles and personalities (Sageman, 2014). Of far more practical relevance, we know so very little about the reality of terrorist lives, the culture and internal dynamics of their groups, how they attract and retain new followers using particular kinds of messaging strategies (such as special narratives, and conspiracy theories), how as a group they sustain themselves psychologically in times of uncertainty and doubt, and how they work to prevent small group disintegration.

While we now know there are multiple roles and functions to be fulfilled inside terrorist groups, we know virtually nothing about the social psychological qualities of those roles, and how they impact or affect individual members. Do certain kinds of terrorist roles come at a greater psychologist cost than others? Based on interviews conducted with former terrorists, it seems to be a myth that terrorists don't feel guilt for what they do. Still, we don't know much

about how immersion in extremist ideologies can help suppress those sentiments. In fact, the role of ideology in terrorist recruitment remains very poorly understood. In an effort to 'counter violent extremism', Western governments are openly and actively pursuing strategies yet without the slightest appreciation for the psychological dynamics of influence, narratives and counter-narratives.

The relevance of social psychology might seem too obvious to all of this. Despite abundant commentary surrounding 'lone wolves', terrorism remains a fundamentally social phenomenon. The nature of terrorism itself is predicated on key social dynamics. Terrorist groups seek to use acts of seemingly random (and certainly extreme) violence to instill anxiety and uncertainty in public consciousness and governments alike. Terrorism is aptly characterised as psychological warfare because though its participants may be small in number, the consequences of their actions vastly outweigh their inflated and overblown capabilities. That inflation is often a function of over-reaction, panic, and poor resilience. Media coverage of terrorist events plays a key role in sustaining such anxiety, yet the implications of this are rarely discussed in more than a fleeting acknowledgement.

We know a lot about how terrorism functions, in a strategic sense, and why in the short-term it appears to be effective. And yet, there is so much we don't know about the social psychology of terrorist behaviour itself. If we understand how and why people are prone to embracing and professing 'radical' attitudes (e.g. McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011), we are far less certain about whether those views will ever (and under what conditions) be reflected in violent behaviour. Yet policymakers and their advisors follow the same presumed pathway to prevention – that is, to reduce the threat of terrorism, we must root out and suppress certain attitudes, ideas and outlooks.

What is striking is that all of these kinds of questions have been asked before, just in different areas. But when did psychology become so completely removed from addressing the big social problems of our time? It is incredulous that psychology as a *discipline* has been virtually absent from a serious, systematic exploration of terrorist behaviour. Those unerringly predictable questions that are always asked in the wake of a terrorist attack do nothing if not demand input from psychological science. For too long, the study of terrorism has been the concern of other disciplines, notably political science. In fact, such is the glaring absence of psychology from these debates (let alone systematic research), that we are witnessing the routine appropriation of psychological concepts to those other disciplines. While psychology more or less shuns terrorism studies, political science dominates what it calls 'micro-level' studies, often clumsily appropriating concepts from social psychology, and leaving an impression that psychologists are not quite so concerned with unraveling the dynamics of terrorist behaviour.

It's always easy to be critical, and it would be unfair to not acknowledge how some of the most valuable insights into terrorist behaviour are rooted in social psychology research. Yet our progress is sluggish at best. We are so far behind, it's little wonder that psychological commentary about terrorist behaviour is replete with one metaphor after another, and (at worst) folk psychology and explanatory fictions. What little quality research exists is rarely sustained in any systematic way, and most contributors remain transitory in their focus. Given the passing interest shown by psychologists, it's little wonder that each new terrorist drama simply exposes the same gaping holes in our knowledge time and time again.

This is not new, but something has to change. It is ironic that those tasked with counter-terrorism are as open as ever in asking for input from psychologists to help understand terrorism, yet *our* engagement is lackluster by comparison. The subject matter needs greater engagement from social psychology and I believe the field would be irrevocably improved by it.

We don't *really* know why people join terrorist groups because we neither have enough data-driven research to confidently answer the question, nor do we have a sustained effort from psychology to build on (and/or challenge) earlier efforts. Our psychology of terrorism too often teeters on outright stagnation, saved only by periodic, creative endeavors of a tiny handful of new researchers. We are also hampered by some uncomfortable structural and cultural problems of our own. While our graduate students are eager to dive into complex real world issues like terrorism, so often their advisors and supervisors alike steer them towards 'safer' areas.

In the US, the American Psychological Association recently ratified a decision to prohibit psychologists from participation in national security interrogations. Though it represented an effort to reassert the public credibility of the organisation following revelations that it had promoted the involvement of psychologists in assisting the 'War on Terror', it is possible that the pendulum will swing completely to the other side. Many of my colleagues in psychology have told me they will shy away from taking on the challenge of terrorist behaviour – it's too controversial, and not a 'good time' to do such research. Yet terrorism will not go away, and now is not the time for us to disengage. If we don't take ownership of these critical issues and research questions soon, we only have ourselves to blame for the sad state of affairs that sees half-baked 'radicalisation' theories and pop psychology proliferate on our airwaves and in our governments' policies.

Biographical note

John Horgan is Professor of Global Studies and Psychology at Georgia State University. His current projects explore the role of religious converts in violent extremism, and the socialisation of children into the 'Islamic State' movement. His books include *The Psychology of Terrorism* (2nd ed.) and *Divided We Stand: The Strategy and Psychology of Ireland's Dissident Terrorists*. Professor Horgan is editor-in-chief of the journal *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* and is a member of the Research Working Group of the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. His research has been featured in such venues as *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *CNN*, *Vice News*, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, *Nature*, *Scientific American* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. You can learn more about his work via his website: www.terroristbehavior.com.

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