The Terrorist Identity

Explaining the Terrorist Threat

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1

Introduction

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, once again thrust terrorism into the international spotlight. Moreover, subsequent attacks in Indonesia, Spain, and England have led to renewed discussions about the nature of violence and the spread of militant extremism around the world. Fundamentally, political and policy pundits, social and behavioral scientists, and security researchers and analysts question what motivates a person or group to commit such heinous acts. Admittedly, over the past several decades, numerous attempts have been undertaken to explain terrorism from a variety of perspectives. Regrettably, however, many of these efforts have been of marginal utility, especially for a profoundly frightened and deeply perplexed public. Thus, we are led to ponder the limits of the existing accounts regarding the phenomenon of terrorism.

While political, sociological, and criminological accounts exist, the majority of the extant literature examines the causes of terrorism from within a psychological framework.[1] Many of these studies regard extremist militant conduct as a function of the individual's psyche and attempt to identify specific personality traits that would compel a person to act so violently. In addition, in his extensive review of the *search for the terrorist personality,* Horgan noted that, statistically, psychodynamic theory has been the most popular of psychologically animated approaches accounting for terrorism.[2] Based chiefly on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, this perspective focuses on various unconscious forces and their deterministic influence on human behavior and social interaction. For example, utilizing such concepts as "repressed desire" and "unresolved childhood conflicts," psychodynamic theorists explain extremist militant conduct as an internal struggle waged within an individual's psyche on the basis of unsettled and traumatic life events. Interestingly, despite this discipline's waning influence on modern psychology, the process of identification is one psychodynamic construct that

has received considerable attention throughout contemporary explanations of terrorism.[3]

One theme that appears constant in this research,[4] and subsequent investigations along these lines,[5] is that the identity construct is routinely mentioned as a contributing factor in the emergence and maintenance of extremist militant conduct. For example, in a chapter addressing how individuals join and then sustain their involvement in a terrorist collective, Taylor and Quayle explained how identity was a theme that reoccurred throughout their discussion with an Irish terrorist about his troubled life experiences.[6] This is consistent with the insights of M. Taylor, who observed that there is a particular process of identification that materializes when one assesses terrorism and the terrorist self-concept.[7] As he noted, this identity process functions as an intense motivating factor in the manifestation of extreme militant behavior.

Given these observations, it would seem that the link between identity and terrorism has already been well established in the relevant literature. However, as Horgan notes,[8] the initial research[9] upon which these observations were based are seriously flawed for at least two reasons. First, psychological researchers have been guilty of committing the fundamental attribution error.[10] In short, they overestimate the internal causes for terrorist behavior. Indeed, research supporting the notion that those who commit such acts are intrapsychically flawed, abnormal, and/or psychopathic is rare and typically of poor quality.[11] Second, research based on the psychoanalytic paradigm often suffers from methodological deficiencies.[12] Consequently, while previous research has distinguished identity as an integral factor in explaining terrorist behavior, relying purely upon psychological explanations appears wholly inadequate.[13] Indeed, given much of this research to date, the identity construct remains a fundamental, but elusive, feature of society's efforts to successfully understand this deeply disturbing phenomenon.

The Purpose and Design of the Present Study

The overall goal of this volume is to demonstrate how existing knowledge pertaining to identity and terrorism is limited and, in response, to develop an alternative and, perhaps, corresponding social psychological framework[14] grounded in selected insights derived from structural Symbolic Interactionism.[15] To facilitate this project, the five organizing

concepts derived from structural symbolic interactionism (i.e., symbols, definition of the situation, roles, socialization and role-taking, and the emergence of the self) are systematically examined, especially as they are understood by Identity Theory.[16] Moreover, as a way of contextualizing this conceptual undertaking, we evaluate five militant extremist organizations that engage (or have engaged) in terrorism. These extremist collectives include the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), the Shining Path, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and racist Skinheads.

The theoretical work undertaken in this volume endeavors to deepen and extend society's understanding of the way terrorist identities are created, embraced, and maintained, as well as the way they influence the behavior of members in a militant extremist subculture. This is accomplished by exploring the delicate relationship that exists among culture, self, and society in the formation and preservation of the terrorist self-concept. Ultimately, this undertaking will contribute to a growing body of research known as the "sociology of terrorism" by building upon the initial work proposed within this area.[17] For example, Alexander[18] utilizes the dramaturgical framework developed by Goffman[19] to describe how acts of terrorism are social dramas performed in a manner similar to a major theatrical production. Within this context, terrorists, like actors in a performance, are expected to fulfill certain role expectations according to a script. Moreover, Kappeler and Kappeler examine how terrorism is constructed as a social threat by exploring terrorist groups' use of techniques such as identifying villains and heroes.[20]

Additional illustrations within this emerging field known as the sociology of terrorism are discernible in the literature. For example, relying upon socialization theory, Oberschall points out how Islamist terrorists are bred through preexisting groups and subcultures maintained in schools and mosques that are viewed as legitimate rather than deviant.[21] By employing the methodology of tethered or positivist constructivism, Silverman provides a detailed examination of the similarity between the Western concepts of "just war" and the Islamic concepts of *jihad*.[22] In doing so, he recognizes the important role identity plays in the motivation of terrorism as individuals learn the social expectations of their behavior and the justifications for their violent actions within a group context. These are identities that come with a set of grievances that serve to fuel terrorist behavior. Appropriating a postcolonial perspective, Brents and Mshigeni explore the construction of racial, religious,

and political identity in Zanzibar and the way three distinct self-concepts (i.e., being "Shirazi,"[23] Arab, and African) have been framed and reformulated in the context of conflict.[24] Finally, Akers and Silverman view the motivation of terrorism through the prism of social learning theory and determine that the identity and ideology adopted by terrorists include attitudes, beliefs, and values that justify violent acts in pursuit of a noble end.[25] While social learning theory is grounded in psychology, this cross-disciplinary approach utilizes sociological-type concepts—such as the definition of the situation—to explain how individuals, through identity, come to justify their violent actions. Taken together, these works provide a foundation for the sociology of terrorism. This is an important foundation out of which our own explanatory model of identity emerges.

To be clear, however, we must explain that the suggested framework is not meant to be a comprehensive explanation for militant extremist conduct. No single discipline or theory can accomplish this; no single solution or model can eliminate the commission of violence. Instead, the proposed interpretive framework so central to this book's thesis explores one facet of the complex phenomenon known as terrorism. Moreover, this project endeavors to go beyond the demonization and vilification to which terrorist individuals and collectives have been subjected, given their calculated and vile acts. To this end, the ensuing study does not represent an apology for such nefarious conduct; rather, it signifies a novel contextual basis from within which to understand individual and group participation in such extremist behavior.

The specific terrorist organizations under investigation were selected for two reasons. First, the five groups are quite distinct and heterogeneous. Indeed, they represent diverse regions of the globe and include Europe, the Middle East, South America, Asia, and North America. In addition, they reflect four types of terrorism and consist of nationalist/separatist, religious, revolutionary, and racial/ethnic militant extremism. Presumably, this miscellany helps advance the explanatory and predictive properties of the overall model while heuristically contributing to the generalizability and credibility of the interpretive framework.

Second, each of the terrorist organizations under consideration has received a substantial amount of attention in both the academic and popular literature. This attention includes the release of various types of primary source documents and correspondences that detail the affairs of

the respective militant collectives under review. These data form the basis for the ensuing interpretive analysis of identity and terrorism.

Preliminarily we note that other investigators have endeavored to explain the formation of self-concept in relation to extremist militant violence from within an interactionist framework. For example, although not specified as an interactionist analysis, Aho's examination of Idaho Christian Patriotism identified several interactionist-based themes.[26] One of these is socialization. Aho described it as central to one's involvement in the White supremacist movement.[27] Indeed, as he observed, "right-wing radicals are 'socialized' to this orientation by the words and examples of those with whom they are most deeply bonded: parents, teachers, friends, coworkers, or pastors."[28] In his commentary along these lines, Aho specified a concept integral to the symbolic interactionist's understanding of the socialization process, namely, the *significant other*.[29] Significant others convey the various meanings that attach to symbols. This process contributes to the development of one's sense of self and identity. In addition, Aho discussed the importance of social networks and social structure for purposes of membership recruitment, maintenance, and the adoption of extremist attitudes. As we previously explained, social networks and social structure are important concepts within the interactionist framework.

Although more journalistic in scope and orientation, the influence of interactionist theory resonates in Dillon's examination of the role that religion plays in the Northern Irish conflict.[30] This is especially noticeable in Dillon's comments regarding the experiences of those involved in religious life and terrorism. For example, in a series of interviews with Kenny McClinton, an infamous former loyalist paramilitary leader, Dillon indicated that

> McClinton spoke of the traditional symbols that divided the two communities, the wall painting of King William of Orange on the white charger, and slogans such as "Kick the Pope," which seemed "a part of life, just like breathing." Only retrospectively was he able to detect a philosophy underpinning the sectarianism but in his youth he accepted that the slogans defined him and the rest of the Shankill community.[31]

Not only were these symbols described as having meaning in the lives of the Protestant community; they were depicted as informing McClinton's

sense of self and identity during his youth. Elsewhere, Dillon described this former loyalist paramilitary leader as having engaged in anti-Catholic violence as an unconscious desire to further his own status within the working-class community of Shankill. Interactionists, especially those who subscribe to structural Symbolic Interactionism, would see the symbolic nature of social structure, stratification, and the enhancement of one's status as profound influences on the emergence of one's sense of self and, hence, one's (group) identity.[32]

In his exploration of religiously motivated terror, Juergensmeyer argued that terrorism or extreme militant acts emerge from cultures of violence. To those within the collective who share similar perceptions of the world, bloodshed, harm, and destruction signify valid and justifiable means by which to instigate change.[33] Although Juergensmeyer grounded his cultural analysis of terrorism in the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Clifford Geertz, he made frequent reference to the impact of symbols and meanings on acts of political violence. For example, he described "symbolic empowerment" as the process through which individuals gain a sense of control over their lives. This empowerment or enfranchisement unfolds through a four-stage process: (1) a world gone awry; (2) foreclosure of ordinary options; (3) satanization and cosmic war; and (4) symbolic acts of power. According to Juergensmeyer, the final stage represents "the performance of acts that display symbolically the depth of the struggle and the power that those in cultures of violence feel they possess."[34] An instance of this is the taking of one's own life and those of others in an effort to secure martyrdom. One of Juergensmeyer's most compelling arguments relative to this study is that terrorism is as much a product of culture as it is the result of individuals.

Fully embracing an interactionist framework, Berbrier conducted a case study of the right-wing publication entitled *Instauration* and its editor.[35] Berbrier argued that White supremacists utilize the technique of impression management[36] to counteract the negative stereotypes that affix themselves to individuals when assigned the stigmatizing identity of racist.[37] By engaging in such normalizing techniques as intellectualizing, transforming, massaging, and manipulating, White supremacists attempt to redefine the meaning for their involvement in this movement.

In a similar fashion, Arena and Arrigo constructed a social psychological model—based on Mead's intrapsychic, interpersonal, and situational frames of reference—in order to understand membership in and

the deviant behavior of White supremacist collectives.[38] On the basis of these three prisms, four thematic categories were systematically investigated: power, identity, sexuality, and the definition of the situation. These categories were considered integral to a systematic assessment of White supremacists and their ongoing social interaction.

Blee's treatment of women involved in racist and anti-Semitic groups (e.g., skinheads, neo-Nazis, Christian Identity, Ku Klux Klan), draws attention to the construction of feminine identities within hate movements.[39] On the basis of in-depth interviews with thirty-four women, Blee demonstrates how one's personal and collective feminine identity emerges through racist knowledge and activism channeled within one's mainstream family and home life. Whether pursuing careers in health care, education, or engineering, these mostly middle-class women experience intense racial hatred because they participate for social rather than political reasons in racist groups. This is a process of identity formation in which such things as advertisements for Aryan cookbooks in white power newsletters instruct women on "proper" domesticity, transforming everyday racism into extraordinary racism.

Collectively, the studies cited above lay the essential groundwork for a more detailed and systematic exploration of the identity construct, especially as manifested, nurtured, and sustained in extremist militant groups. The next logical step is to develop an integrated and seamless model that accounts for the formation and maintenance of one's sense of (social) self within the terrorist collective. From our perspective, the structural Symbolic Interactionist framework, built around the insights of Identity Theory, which understands identity to be those aspects "of the self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically [assume] in highly differentiated contemporary societies,"[40] is the most serviceable for this particular endeavor. However, before we move on to a more comprehensive review of the conceptual approach undertaken in this book (see chapter 3), some summary observations on alternative interpretive models by which to explain terrorism are warranted.

Alternative Interpretive Approaches: A Brief Review

There are several approaches within the interactionist paradigm wherein the connection between identity and extremist militant behavior

could be investigated.[41] These include social constructionism, phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, and labeling theory. Each of these orientations is succinctly described below.

The constructionist framework is based on the premise that people's perception of reality is socially conceived.[42] This organization of reality takes place through the interpretations for, perceptions of, interactions with, and ascribed meanings regarding the symbols in one's environment.[43] In this context, identities are formed through one's personal experience, history, and stock of knowledge, as well as the views that others have about one's self-concept as delineated over time. Of particular relevance here is the study of the way societies or cultures construct social problems (e.g., homelessness, flag burning, AIDS, pedophile priests), including the impact such typifications have on those individuals or groups affected.[44]

Phenomenological sociology is based on the conviction that reality is socially constructed. It is informed by the work of existential phenomenologist Alfred Schutz, among other notable theorists. Schutz[45] maintained that by exploring the everyday, routine dimensions of an individual's social life and the person's conscious experiences of it, researchers can expand and deepen their understanding of the way people construct their reality and assign meaning to it.[46] In this regard, then, phenomenological sociology is "the study of consciousness and social life, [exploring that space] between the shape of social life on the one hand and how people perceive, think, and talk about it on the other."[47] Thus, as an investigatory and interpretive model, phenomenological sociology requires that the researcher provide deliberately detailed descriptions of the individual's cognitive and affective experiences as a way of accessing the contours of the subject's consciousness.[48]

Ethnomethodology is another investigatory model based, in part, on the work of Alfred Schutz.[49] However, as conceived of by Harold Garfinkel, "ethnomethodology (meaning 'people's methods') is the study of how [individuals] actually use social INTERACTION to maintain an ongoing sense of reality in a situation."[50] Garfinkel described the ethnomethodological approach as "the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life."[51] Indexical expressions refer to the interpretation of language, behavior, motives, objects, and events in a given environment, all of which

have a multitude of meanings. Therefore, only by submerging himself or herself into a particular environment can the researcher understand these expressions from the actor's unique vantage point. Descriptive in nature, the ethnomethodological model relies on knowledge obtained through experience that is local and situated, including conversational analysis. This approach, then, focuses on the taken-for-granted, routine activities of social interaction and, in an effort to understand the human experience, emphasizes the natural encounters that take place during everyday life.[52]

As an interpretive prism for understanding the complexities of human behavior, labeling theory has specifically been applied to studies on deviance.[53] Also known as the "societal reaction approach," labeling theory is based on the premise that people come to perceive themselves and the meaning of their actions from the responses others have to them. Labeling theorists argue that individuals engage in deviance because various systems of social control (i.e., police, court, juvenile, and correctional agencies) define or stigmatize them as such. At the individual level, these definitions can become a part of a person's self-image and personify one's identity. The more an individual comes to internalize the assigned stigma, the more committed the person will become to a deviant career. In addition, at the societal level, the more socially recognized these deviant labels are, the more likely it is that people will come to expect from others behavior that is defined as deviant.

Although all four of these interpretive approaches offer something unique to the study of self-concept and crime, each of them principally emerged from Symbolic Interactionism and the insights generated from within this intellectual tradition. Consequently, it is this explanatory framework that represents a useful and, perhaps, pivotal foundation from which to engage in subsequent interpretive studies on identity and terrorism. Moreover, each of the aforementioned alternative approaches lacks sufficient theoretical and organizational grounding such that any one of them could provide a testable framework for subsequent empirical investigations relevant to our stated thesis. In other words, accessing the identity construct as a basis to explain one's membership in and allegiance to an extremist militant collective necessitates an appeal to social-psychological constructs integral to an understanding of this phenomenon. Social constructionism, phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, and labeling theory either do not consist of such well

developed concepts or have only tangentially examined them to date. Accordingly, turning to Symbolic Interactionism—an interpretive field of inquiry devoted expressly to examining the meaning-making process through such concepts as roles, symbols, socialization, the definition of situations, and self-concept—seems as logical as it does prudent.

Certainly there are additional alternative approaches outside the realm of the interactionist paradigm that could be of help in understanding the connection between identity and terrorism. For example, postcolonialism critically examines the aftermath of colonial rule.[54] Common topics of study include the subjugation of indigenous peoples, the means through which such communities are oppressed, and the way in which national, ethnic, and/or cultural identities are constructed, understood, and reclaimed in postcolonial climates by both the colonizers and the colonized. Another alternative strategy is postmodernism. As a broad conceptual approach to the knowledge process, postmodernism scrutinizes the role that language plays in shaping reality. In the context of terrorism, postmodernist inquiry would focus on examining the narratives of race, class, power, ethnicity, identity, culture, and gender.[55] The aim of such an inquiry would be to assess how the prevailing "texts" regarding these narratives foster or impede a more complete regard for social justice,[56] especially in relation to the individual's or collective's involvement in militant behavior. Additionally, feminist inquiry is worth noting. This critical approach to understanding social relationships, harm, and identity focuses on the construction of gender as constitutive of the social person and of social life.[57]

While each of these alternative approaches would be useful in its own right for exploring the dynamics of militant extremism and identity construction, these orientations are decidedly beyond the scope of what this book intends. Our approach uniquely addresses the social psychology[58] of terrorism and the manifestation and maintenance of the social person as militantly violent, within the confines of structural Symbolic Interactionism and Identity Theory. Accordingly, incorporating alternative perspectives within the selected framework does not advance the project's overall and targeted thesis. Having said this, we add that future scholars exploring the sociology of terrorism would do well to more systematically assess the relevance of colonialism, postmodernism, and feminist theory, especially in relation to the interpretive model developed in this book. This task is especially noteworthy given that the intended goal of any genuine attempt to advance the study of terrorism

would entail a more complete regard for the way territorial imperialism, language construction and meaning making, and gender and sexuality all figure prominently into the analysis of culture, self, and society.

Organization of the Book

This volume is divided into three substantive sections. Consisting of chapters 2, 3, and 4, part 1 emphasizes theoretical developments and sets the stage for the interpretative analysis contained in subsequent chapters of the book. Specifically, this section examines the conceptual dimensions of identity relevant to the model in question and provides a brief overview of the five terrorist organizations under consideration. Part 2 is composed of chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 and applies the insights of structural Symbolic Interactionism to the five militant extremist collectives. The five chapters contained in this section demonstrate the explanatory and predictive properties of the interpretive framework as developed in the previous portion of this volume. Chapter 10 represents the third part of the book and addresses the implications of the overall conceptual model. The material canvassed here reviews the general utility of the interpretive framework, highlighting future theory construction, research, policy, and programming.