POLS 429: International Terrorism
Lecture 11 (02.07.2020):
Explaining Terrorism - The Psychological Approach, Vol. 2

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Overview

Review

WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- Explain terrorism: psychological traits, emotions.

- Personality disorders.

- Social identity theory, quest for significance, cognitive theory (attribution error and groupthink).

- Moral disengagement framework.

Questions??

The Psychological Approach - Implications

- Psychological factors: idiosyncratic and large variation between individuals.
- Data collection problems: cost, practicality and ethics.
- Collect data with interviews of suspects/operators that were caught.
- Confounding factors: hard to disentangle the psychological profile (for instance socioeconomic status).

Evidence/Examples

- Omar Mateen - "Pulse" nightclub attack (Orlando, June 2016, 49 dead).
- Was he motivated by psychological or ideological issues? (hatred towards LGBTQ or links to ISIS). ▸ PulseShooter

The Psychological Approach - Implications

- Identify subjects only post-factum.
- Unlikely that we could identify these factors and predict the attack in advance.
- Data: PIRUS Data

Evidence/Examples

- DeAngelis (2009) - focus on political, group dynamics and universal psychological principles (quest for significance).
- Data collected on right,left and Islamic groups: "loners" are more likely to resort to violence (US sample post-WW2).
- Jensen et al. (2015): 'losses' in social standing contribute to engage in extreme actions and violence.

The Psychological Approach - Implications

- Merari (2010): important psychological study.
- Why?
- Interviewed 15 would-be suicide bombers and **compared** them to a control group, while holding many environmental factors constant.

Evidence/Examples

- Avoident-Dependent personality disorder: 60% among suicide bombers vs. 17% for control group.
- Suicidal tendencies: 40% among suicide bombers vs. 0% for others.
- Symptoms of depression: 53% of suicide bombers vs. 8% of control.
- Less useful for practical policy actions.

The Psychological Approach

COUNTERING TERRORISM

- No short term solutions since psychological effects and group dynamics make it very hard to convince one person to abandon terrorism. ▸ SocialStanding
- Long term approach: developing useful policies to prevent recruitment of terrorists.

Chenoweth and Moore (2018, p. 115):

"For terrorists whose only sense of significance stems from being a terrorist, or from being a member of a terrorist group, getting them to abandon this position once they have joined seems futile, at best".

The Psychological Approach

COUNTERING TERRORISM

- Intervention strategies for Groupthink.
- Alleviate stress and threats that drive towards violence: offering opportunities, "hear their voice".
- Improve self significance: social mobility and opportunities for individuals to achieve goals.
- CVE (Countering Violent Extremism) programs offer practices like family therapy, individual psychotherapy, medication, life skills education.
- Educate mental health professionals: identify individuals at-risk.

The Psychological Approach

COUNTERING TERRORISM

- Understanding recruitment process can provide insight regarding ways to encourage leaving terrorism.
- "Hearts and minds" programs (Arab world and UK):
    1. Dialogue with former terrorists to learn about their view of religion and violence.
    2. Defuse anger and frustration by caring for families of perpetrators.
    3. Recognize detainees' propensity to re-enter societal situations that aggravate radical views.
- Interdisciplinary approach and programs that are tailor-made for individual needs and issues.

The Psychological approach - Criticism

Critique 1: Overgeneralize Personality

- Generalize findings about individual personality despite extensive variation among perpetrators.
    1. Loss of parent at an early age.
    2. Severe conflicts with authority.
    3. Boyhood heroes: religious or secular group members.
    4. Educational background.

- Multiple potential explanations to why individuals engage in terrorism, identifying a single framework is complex.

The Psychological Approach - Criticism

Critique 2: A reductionist approach

- Focus on the individual level of analysis and lack of consistent findings.
- Most findings cannot be generalized.

Critique 3: Problems in causal inference

- How specific psychological traits effect participation in terrorism.
- Difficult to demonstrate a chain of causal effects.
- Direction of causality.

The Psychological Approach - Criticism

Critique 4: Data limitation

- Few large cross-national and time-series data complicates analysis.

Critique 5: Selection bias in methods

- Restricted access to subjects and data.
- Merari (2010) had to gain permission and access from... terror groups!?
- Subjects in studies have failed in their mission, they may be different from "successful" terrorists.

The Psychological approach - Criticism

Critique 6: Policy options are immoral

- Concerns regarding privacy and freedom of conscience.
- Risky for violent individuals who do not necessarily support terrorism.

- **Profiling** - a policy based on psychological studies.
- Authorities monitor and detect certain attributes, habits, identities and behavior of large population groups in order to single-out those that **may** become terrorists.
- Profiling and political misuse (Sec. Kerry's remarks).

The Psychological Approach - Criticism

GAPS AND UNANSWERED PUZZLES

- Why only certain individuals join terrorism while many people experience psychological processes such as quest for significance?
- Terrorists are members of groups that radicalize, why only some groups experience this radicalization process?

Some of the answers are based on Ideology - our next topic...

Recommended readings

More studies on the topic of Psychological approach to terrorism:

1. Merari, Ariel. *Driven to Death: psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism*. 2010. Oxford University Press.
2. Jeff Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2005), pp. 3-42.
3. Kruglanski, Arie and Shira Fishman. "The Psychology of Terrorism: Syndrome Versus Tool Perspectives." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (2006): 193-215.

National Security

'He was not a stable person': Orlando shooter showed signs of emotional trouble

While Mateen claimed allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, no evidence had emerged by late Sunday pointing to actual ties to terrorist groups or a significant association with jihadist causes. And although family members said Mateen had expressed anger about homosexuality, the shooter had no record of previous hate crimes.

Figure: Motivation for Terror?

Repsect and Social Standing

Post et al. (2003)

"Recruits were treated with great respect. a youngster who belonged to Hamas or Fatah was regarded more highly than one who did not belong to a group, *and got better treatment than unaffiliated kids. Anyone who did not enlist during that period (intifada) would have been ostracized."*