

PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLING FOUNDATIONS OF TERRORISM

Jobi Thurackal♦

1. Introduction

Terrorism imposes heavy psychological impact on individuals and the society at large. The recent spurt of terrorist strikes has largely disturbed the hale and hearty homeostasis of our society. The affected individuals suffer from high risk of psychological impacts like developing stress reactions, post-traumatic stress disorder, and related anxiety and panic disorders. The ongoing terrorist threat causes chronic states of high stress resulting in stress-related health problems, of low grade suspicion, paranoia, and hyper vigilance, persistent feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread, confusion, and uncertainty. Psychology recognizes terrorism as a subject worthy of consideration only in 1982, when ten publications under this topic were listed in psychological abstracts.¹ This article focuses on taking precautionary steps than curative factors of the aftermath of terrorism and, thus, to deal with motivational foundations of terrorism and psychological principles to combat terrorism, where the orientation is more individualistic rather than communal. It goes deeper in search of identifying psychological realms of terrorism as well as terrorist as an individual who is inclined to destructive behaviour.

2. Psychological Definition of Terrorism

After studying all the available definitions on terrorism, Lord Carlile concludes: “There is no single definition of terrorism that commands full international approval.”² There were more than hundred definitions of

♦**Jobi Thurackal** CMI, who holds a Masters in Psychological Counselling from Bangalore University, is currently teaching psychology and counselling in the Institute of Spirituality and Counselling, DVK (Bangalore).

¹Ariel Merari, “Academic Research and Government Policy on Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, 1 (2001), 88-102.

²Lord Carlile, *The Definition of Terrorism*, London: Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2007, 47.

terrorism in late 1980s that had appeared in the professional literature.³ Some researchers are concerned that without a common definition, it won't be possible for the field to systematically accumulate a body of knowledge.⁴ UN Resolution 1566 lists the following as terrorist acts:

Criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature, and calls upon all States to prevent such acts and, if not prevented, to ensure that such acts are punished by penalties consistent with their grave nature.⁵

Further, *Encyclopaedia of Psychology* defines terrorism as “a particular variant of the use or threat of violence to oppose the authority of governments.”⁶ Indeed, any terrorist activity is a form of calculated, organized, and deliberate violence; it is not a spontaneous outburst.

3. Motivations behind Terrorism

The major motives that are influential in terrorism can be classified into three categories: psychological, rational, and cultural. According to the Field Manual of US Army, the combinations of these motives form a terrorist.⁷

3.1. Psychological Motivation

Personal dissatisfaction with one's life and accomplishments is at the root of psychologically motivating a person to become part of terrorism.

³T. Strentz, “The Terrorist Organizational Profile: A Psychological Role Model,” cited in Y. Alexander and J. M. Gleason, eds., *Behavioural and Quantitative Perspectives on Terrorism*. New York: Pergamon, 1981, 86-104.

⁴Randy Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, Tampa: University of South Florida, 2004, 65.

⁵Carlile, *The Definition of Terrorism*, 16.

⁶*Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2000 Edition, vol. 8, “Terrorism,” by Martha Crenshaw.

⁷Kirkhope, “The Basics: Combating Terrorism,” 03 January 2007. <http://www.terrorism.com>.

Though there is no valid proof for clear psychopathy among terrorists, a nearly universal element is found in them. Terrorists have a tendency to project their own antisocial motivations onto others. They create a polarized “we *versus* they” outlook and they have no hesitation to dehumanize their victims. They make themselves free from any sort of ambiguity. Group acceptance is a stronger motivator than the stated political objectives of the organization. The need to belong to the group discourages resignations, and the fear of compromise disallows their acceptance.⁸

3.2. Rational Motivation

The rational terrorist will go through the goals and options, making a cost-benefit analysis. The alternatives will be sought to have less costly and more effective ways to achieve the objective than terrorism. To assess the risk, a rational terrorist weighs the target’s defensive capabilities against one’s own capabilities to successfully attack and calculates the group’s capabilities to sustain the effort. The main concern of the terrorist group is that whether terrorism can toil for the desired purpose.⁹

3.3. Cultural Motivation

Cultural characteristic has a remarkable force on terrorism. Individuals identify themselves in terms of group membership which includes family, clan, or tribe. In such societies, there may be willingness to self-sacrifice. This phenomenon is present among terrorists who show readiness to offer their lives for their organization and cause. The lives of the other, being conceived as wholly evil in the terrorists’ value system, can be destroyed with little or no regret. Religiously motivated terrorists analyze their acts with moral certainty and for them what would otherwise be extraordinary acts of desperation become a religious duty and it helps explain the high level of commitment and readiness to risk one’s life.¹⁰

Martha Crenshaw suggests that there are at least four categories of motivation among terrorists: (1) the opportunity for action, (2) the need to belong, (3) the desire for social status, and (4) the acquisition of material

⁸Kirkhope, “The Basics: Combating Terrorism” [online].

⁹Kirkhope, “The Basics: Combating Terrorism” [online].

¹⁰Kirkhope, “The Basics: Combating Terrorism” [online].

reward.¹¹ She observes that many people are influenced to join by seeking solidarity with family, friends or acquaintances, and that for the individuals who become active terrorists, the initial attraction is often to the group, or community of believers, rather than to an abstract ideology or to violence.¹²

Based on a review of the existing literature, another analyst, Randy Borum, identifies three motivational themes: injustice, identity, and belonging.¹³ The synergistic effect of these dynamics forms the root cause of terrorism. Further, Luckabaugh and colleagues conclude along this line: “The real cause or psychological motivation for joining is the great need for belonging, a need to consolidate one’s identity. A need to belong, along with an incomplete personal identity, is a common factor that cuts across the groups.”¹⁴

4. Theoretical Foundations

Different theories and approaches in Counselling Psychology draw light on understanding the personality of a terrorist. Though terrorism is a recent concept inviting interest from among psychologists and counsellors, many of them deal with the issue differently focusing on the life of the individual terrorist as well as the society at large.

4.1. Psychoanalytic Approach

According to Freud’s theory, aggression is an innate and instinctual human trait developed in a human person in the normal course of development. Later, he states that humans have the energy of life force (*eros*) and death force (*thanatos*) that seeks internal balance. Violence is perceived as the “displacement” of *thanatos* from self and onto others.¹⁵ Jeanne N. Knutson strengthens this concept of Freud by stating that persons involve in

¹¹Martha Crenshaw, “An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism,” *Orbis* 29, 3 (1985), 465-489.

¹²Martha Crenshaw, “The Subjective Reality of the Terrorist: Ideological and Psychological Factors in Terrorism,” *Current Perspectives in international terrorism*, ed. Slater and Stohl, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1988, 12.

¹³Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 24.

¹⁴Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 26.

¹⁵Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 12.

terrorist activities as a result of feelings of rage and helplessness over the lack of alternatives.¹⁶

Carl Jung, a psychoanalyst, brings out two types of attitudes: introversion and extraversion. The introvert thinks, feels, and acts as though the subjective is what is the most important and the object is of less importance. The person has an orientation in life that particularly values subjective psychic contents. Those individuals are prone to be reserved, inscrutable and rather shy.¹⁷ Crayton states the very basis for the activity of terrorists stems from their sense of low self-esteem and humiliation.¹⁸

In his article, "The Psychodynamic Dimension of Terrorism," Akhtar reaches the conclusion with evidence that most terrorists are deeply traumatized individuals. As children, they suffered chronic physical abuse and profound emotional humiliation. They grew up mistrusting others, loathing passivity, and dreading repeated reoccurrence of violation of their psychophysical boundaries.¹⁹

Various researches and terrorist case history analyses prove that periods of imprisonment and incarceration often facilitated experiences of injustice, abuse and humiliation.²⁰ Interviews done among the 35 incarcerated middle-eastern terrorists by Jerrold M. Post and colleagues extend a rich account of the impact of such experiences.²¹ Histories of childhood abuse and trauma are very common among terrorists. Besides that, themes of perceived injustice and humiliation often are prominent in terrorist biographies and personal histories. These may be seen as indicators of vulnerability, as possible sources of motivation, or as

¹⁶Jeanne N. Knutson, "Social and Psychodynamic Pressures toward a Negative Identity," in Yonah Alexander and John M. Gleason, eds., *Behavioural and Quantitative Perspectives on Terrorism*, 105-152, New York: Pergamon, 1981.

¹⁷Richard Nelson Jones, *Six Key Approaches to Counselling and Therapy*, London: Continuum, 2000, 71.

¹⁸J. W. Crayton, "Terrorism and the Psychology of the Self," in L. Z. Freedman and Y. Alexander, eds., *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 33-41, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1983.

¹⁹S. Akhtar, "The Psychodynamic Dimension of Terrorism," *Psychiatric Annals* 29, 6 (1999), 350-355.

²⁰Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 39.

²¹Jerrold M. Post, E. Sprinzak, and L. Denny, "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, 1 (2003), 171-184.

mechanisms for acquiring or hardening one's militant ideology and not a causal explanation for terrorism.²²

4.2. Behavioural Approach

This approach states that “all human behaviour is learnt by adapting to outside conditions.”²³ Oots and others state: “If aggression is a learned behaviour, then terrorism, a specific type of aggressive behaviour, can also be learned.”²⁴ Many psychologists, like Dodge, Pettit, and Bates, suggest that aggressive behaviour tends to be formed from early childhood by a combination of stressful and unstimulating home atmosphere, harsh discipline, lack of maternal warmth and social support, exposure to aggressive adults and neighbourhood violence, transient peer groups, etc. Hartup observes that highly aggressive children tend to seek out friends like themselves and to egg each other onto antisocial acts.²⁵

Another behavioural aspect is the fact that most of the terrorists depend on their leaders who deficit in the area of assertion. Wolpe defines assertive behaviour as “the socially appropriate verbal and motor expression of any emotion other than anxiety.”²⁶ According to Alberti and Emmons, assertive behaviour is the expression of positive as well as negative thoughts and feelings.²⁷ Terrorists are inhibited from normal behaviours because of their neurotic fears. Such an environment leads them to act destructively rather than constructively.

From the perspective of the operant conditioning,²⁸ terrorists are reinforced financially, ideologically and emotionally by sponsors and supporters of terrorism. These reinforcers are mostly destructive in their operation, and they affect social, interactional, ego supportive, and

²²Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 40.

²³*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th ed., s.v. “Behaviourism.”

²⁴Kent Layne Oots and Thomas C. Wiegele, “Terrorist and Victim: Psychiatric and Physiological Approaches,” *Terrorism: An International Journal* 8, 1 (1985), 11.

²⁵Diane E. Papalia, Sally Wendkos Olds, and Ruth Duskin Feldman, *Human Development*, Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 2004, 291-292.

²⁶J. Wolpe, *The Practice of Behaviour Therapy*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990, 135.

²⁷Richard Nelson Jones, *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Therapy*, 3rd edition, London: Continuum, 2001, 283.

²⁸Operant conditioning is a type of behavioural conditioning referred to in a kind of learning process whereby a response is made more probable or more frequent by reinforcement.

affective life of the individuals who become gradually alienated from the mainstream of the society.

4.3. Cognitive Model

Aaron Beck, a cognitive behavioural therapist, in his article, "Prisoners of Hate," identifies a cognitive model while observing the thinking pattern of the terrorist which is evidently similar to those who engage in violent acts with cognitive distortions, either solely as individuals or as members of a group. Cognitive distortions include overgeneralization, that is, the supposed sins of the enemy may spread to encompass the entire population. Terrorists are subjected to express dichotomous thinking that people are either totally good or totally bad. Lastly, they demonstrate tunnel vision; that is, they are engaged in their holy mission by focusing exclusively on the destruction of the target.²⁹

Albert Ellis, the proponent of rational emotive behavioural therapy, looks at humans as those who are prone to irrationality and are exacerbated by the destructive environments, especially early in life. Ellis recognizes that humans are essentially highly suggestible. The irrational ideas are generated due to the following reasons. Primarily, the individual is unable to think clearly, especially when insisting on immediate rather than future gratification and being unable accurately to distinguish real from imagined fears. Secondly, it takes place when the individual's demands are childish and that are assuaged by magic; thirdly, when the individual is dependent on the planning and thinking of others, and his or her suggestibility or conditionability is greatest in childhood. Fourthly, irrational ideas may be generated when the individual lives in a community or family where members of the group themselves have irrational tendencies, prejudices and superstitions which they inculcate into others. Finally, it happens when this process is exacerbated by the indoctrinations and when cultures and religions can impart irrational, self-defeating and society-defeating analysis.³⁰

4.4. Existential Approach

Victor Frankl recommends *Logotherapy* by stating that to be human means "being responsible for fulfilling the meaning potential inherent in a given

²⁹Aaron Beck, "Prisoners of Hate," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 40, 3 (2002), 209-216.

³⁰Jones, *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Therapy*, 304-305.

life situation.”³¹ The foundation of human existence is the responsibility for one’s life which is expressed in total freedom. It is not a ‘freedom from’ but rather a ‘freedom to’, the freedom to accept responsibility.³² Human beings can reach out beyond themselves. Individuals can become most human when they transcend the boundaries of their selves by either fulfilling a meaning or encountering another person lovingly. According to Frankl, the basic human need is a search for meaning rather than a search for the self. Unless life points to something beyond itself, survival is pointless, meaningless and impossible. Terrorism and its ideologies take away individuals from their responsibilities as members of a society. Terrorists lack in finding meaning beyond their selves. They cannot go beyond their destructive ideologies and terrorist activities.

4.5. Family Therapeutic Approach

Lloyd De Mause, a psychohistorian, affirms: “The roots of terrorism lie ... in the extremely abusive families of the terrorists.”³³ Patterson and others observe that parents of chronic delinquents often fail to reinforce good behaviour in early childhood and are harsh or inconsistent, or both, in punishing misbehaviour. Those children get payoffs for antisocial behaviour, especially when they act up, as they may gain attention or get their own way.³⁴

Apart from the individual level, the families of terrorists face both internal and external threats and they develop a dysfunctional system and have to keep a rigid boundary where outsiders are strictly restricted. Children of those families lack in social skills and modelling. The family structure of terrorists, which is a set of covert rules that govern transactions in the family, may be that of rigid boundaries where the individual fosters autonomy, growth, and mastery while terribly limiting warmth, affection and nurture.

Motives for terrorism are largely unconscious and arise from hostility toward one’s parents and it is the product of early abuse and maltreatment.³⁵ In the early 1980s, Jerrold Post suggested that the

³¹Victor Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975, 125.

³²Jones, *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Therapy*, 225.

³³L. deMause, “The Childhood Origins of Terrorism,” *Journal of Psychohistory* 29, 4 (2002), 340-348.

³⁴Papalia *et al.*, *Human Development*, 448.

³⁵Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 18.

anarchic-ideologue, one form of dysfunction, in which individuals come from severely dysfunctional families, have suffered severe abuse or maltreatment, leading them to have hostile feelings toward their parents. Their extremist ideology is a displacement of their rebellion and hostility onto the state authority.³⁶ Many psychologists suggest that ineffective parenting leads children to delinquent behaviour and association with deviant peers.³⁷ According to Baumrind, among different parenting styles, the authoritarian parenting affects the child very negatively. The child tends to be more discontented, withdrawn, and distrustful.

5. Conclusion

2005 World Summit Outcome adopted by the United Nations General Assembly by its resolution 60/1 states: “We strongly condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations committed by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, as it constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security.”³⁸ Therefore, combating terrorism is a process of establishing international harmony through individual reformation. Any destructive act of a terrorist is the outcome of his/her inability to differentiate rationality and emotionality. A healthy personality is developed when the individual can differentiate them. Differentiation of the self is an intra-psychic and interpersonal process. An intra-psychic differentiation is the ability of the individual to separate feeling from thinking. If it is not differentiated, one finds it difficult to distinguish thoughts from feelings. Since one’s intellect is so flooded with feelings, one is almost incapable of objective thinking. The differentiated person is able to balance thinking and feeling, being capable of the restraint and objectivity, which comes with the ability to resist the pull of emotional impulses. It is achieved through the initiation of counselling at the individual (personal counselling) or familial (family counselling) or group (group counselling) levels.

³⁶Jerrold M. Post, “Notes on a Psychodynamic Theory of Terrorist Behaviour,” *Terrorism*, 7 (1987), 241-256.

³⁷Papalia *et al.*, *Human Development*, 448.

³⁸Cited in <http://www.unodc.org/images/A60288.pdf>.