In this presentation, I would like to give a brief overview of the psychology of terrorism and offer our own analysis of the process that leads an individual to become an active terrorist. The topic of modern terrorism has been of interest to social scientists at least since the late 1960s and 70s when a wave of bombings, hijackings, and kidnapping catapulted the subject to the top of the world’s concerns. This interest spiked following the tragedy of 9/11 and has grown as the world realizes that the problem is not going away anytime soon, and that it may undermine the security of most nations. The study of terrorism is proceeding apace around the world; numerous institutes and associations have sprung up devoted to research on the topic, and the number of conferences, symposia, and publications on terrorism and political violence exhibits an accelerated growth curve. But what exactly is the state of our knowledge concerning terrorism?

The Distal Focus: Person versus Environment-Based Explanations of Terrorism

Early psychological research on terrorism focused on categories of variables assumed relevant to behavior, namely the person or the environment. Researchers’ initial instinct was to commit the “fundamental attribution error” and ascribe terrorist behavior to specific personality traits, or specific psychopathologies (Atran, 2003; Kennedy, 2009). Given the terrorists’ bizarre cruelty, seeming callousness, and readiness to engage
in violence against civilians, the first hypothesis that came to mind was that because their
behavior was so unusual, their deviant **personalities** must be to blame. However, the
research results quickly disabused terrorism researchers of this notion. The consensus in
the field today is that there is no unique terrorist personality profile, nor is there a unique
terrorist psychopathology.

If not a unique form of psychopathology or personality disorder, perhaps it is the
environment that explains why someone would become a terrorist. This may seem
plausible as well as charitable, as it depersonalizes terrorism and hence removes the
burden of responsibility from individual terrorists. Yet here too the research struck out:
The hypotheses that poverty, poor education, and political oppression are the root causes
of terrorism have proven unsustainable on empirical grounds.

Of course, personality and environment are not irrelevant to terrorism. In fact, we
have mounting evidence that they **are** relevant. For instance, Ariel Merari (2010) who
conducted clinical interviews with failed suicide bombers in Israeli jails found that they
were characterized by dependent and rigid personalities. Of course, this does not mean
that all people who have dependent and rigid personalities will become terrorists. Thus,
the relation between personality and terrorism seems to be moderated by circumstances.
Another example: Our research team has carried out research with terrorism suspects in
Filipino detention centers (members of the Abu Sayyaf organization affiliated with
Jemmah Islamiyah and Al Qaeda, and members of the Raja Sulaiman organization of
Christian converts to Islam). We found, for example, that stable individual differences in
the **need for cognitive closure** are highly correlated with Islamic extremism. But, again,
we know many people who are high in the need for closure who do not support Islamic
extremism. In fact, in research we carried out in the Netherlands (Orehek et al., in press), we found that Need for Closure is significantly correlated with anti-Muslim attitudes. So, the relation between need for cognitive closure and Islamist extremism also appears to be moderated by the circumstances.

In yet another study carried out with detained members of the LTTE in Sri Lanka (arguably, one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the history of the phenomenon) we found that stable individual differences in collectivism and collective narcissism are correlated with support for armed struggle against the Sinhalese majority. But again it seems clear that these relations must be moderated rather than general, for there surely are numerous collectivists and collective narcissists (those who believe their group to be the best) who do not support terrorism and are even strongly opposed to it.

Similarly, it would be a mistake to conclude that situational factors such as poverty, political oppression, or poor education are irrelevant to terrorism. Rather, their relation to terrorism also seems to be moderated by circumstances. Thus, for example, Krueger and Laitin (2005) found that many recently active terrorists come from countries in which regimes are politically oppressive, or “tight.” But we also know of circumstances (e.g., in the former Soviet Union, or Nazi Germany) where political oppression was considerable yet there was no terrorism. Similarly, there have been numerous instances of terrorism in major Western democracies (e.g., in the US, Canada, Spain, Italy, Germany, and France) where there was terrorism without political oppression. So the question again is what are the moderating circumstances, and under what conditions does political oppression produce terrorism and under what conditions does it not.
**Getting Proximal: On States, Ideologies, and Networks as Explanations of Terrorism**

Whereas the personality and environment factors studied originally were rather general, researchers have recently tended to cleave terrorism along more *proximal* joints by drawing distinctions between *emotional states, ideologies, and social networks* as explanations of terrorism. For instance, Spekhard and Akhmedova (2005) found in their sample of Chechen women terrorists that personal trauma and frustration caused by the loss of a significant other (e.g., a husband or fiancé) constituted the tipping point that pushed these “black widows” toward terrorism. And Ami Pedahzur (reference) noted that several Palestinian terrorists suffered serious personal problems before volunteering to blow themselves up in suicidal missions.

Of interest, investigators who stress the role of emotional states and personal problems as causes of terrorism typically view them as the exclusive causes, downplaying the role of ideology as *epiphenomenal*. Other investigators disagree and believe that ideology is essential. For instance, Jeremy Ginges, Scott Atran, and colleagues (2007) in their work on “sacred values” highlight the ideological bases of terrorists’ attitudes, and view these as the unique explanation of their behavior. Certainly, the various de-radicalization programs that have sprung up in several Muslim nations (Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Singapore, Iraq) are premised on the belief that ideology matters and that religious and moral counterarguments are essential to reversing extremism.

Finally, some investigators, like Marc Sageman who published a well-known book in 2004, have highlighted the role of the *social process*, maintaining that an individuals’ social networks are the most important ingredient of terrorism (at least the
recent Jihadist terrorism). How do we reconcile these seemingly incompatible views (emphasizing personal traumas, ideologies, or social networks)? Like the wise rabbi in the joke who told two combative disputants that each of them was right—we too believe that everyone is right, though not exclusively right. Personality can matter under some circumstances and so can the environment. Emotional states can matter, and so can ideologies, though not in all cases, and the social networking of individuals can matter as well. The big question is when they matter, and under what conditions.

One way of addressing this issue is by harking back to the basics and outlining a general analysis of terrorists’ behavior. Accordingly, we assume that, like other behaviors, terrorists’ behavior is goal driven, and that it constitutes the means through which the individual chooses to pursue the goal. We assume that this self-regulatory process of goal pursuit is carried out against a backdrop of cultural meanings that determine what goals are worthy of pursuit and what means are effective and legitimate for that purpose. And we also assume that this process is unfolding dynamically within a persuasive social context that convinces the individual to adopt certain goals, relinquish others, and choose certain means with which to pursue the goals.

The foregoing characterization is, admittedly, rather general. It applies to all behavior not only terrorist behavior. Is there a unique goal that terrorists in general are pursuing? Or do different terrorists pursue different goals altogether, and one can engage in terrorism for any number of reasons.

The literature on this topic has proposed a variety of possible motives, including honor, redressing humiliation, heavenly rewards, devotion to the leader, vengeance, group pressure, even feminism. But in a recent paper we argued that there is a way to
integrate all of the specific motives under a more general motivational rubric that we call the quest for significance (Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009). The quest for significance refers to a general motivational force beyond mere survival, and it has been recognized by psychological theorists under various labels such as competence or effectance (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; White, 1959), self-esteem, and mastery. We have also delineated three general cases under which the quest for significance can be aroused, namely where (1) one has suffered a considerable loss of significance, e.g., because one or one’s group has been severely humiliated; this applies to the Chechen widows who were rendered powerless, and hence were demeaned by having their husband or fiancé forcefully taken from them, or the Palestinian women humiliated by their infertility or infidelity, or the Muslim immigrants to Europe who feel they are victims of Islamophobia. And (2) when one faces a threat of significance, should one fail to comply with the pressure to engage in terrorism (cases include the Japanese kamikaze pilots, many of whom did not want to die, but could not live with the dishonor of refusing the mission, as well as individuals who commit themselves publically to an act of martyrdom and see no way of undoing this commitment without tremendous loss of face. (3) When one sees an opportunity for a considerable significance gain, becoming “famous overnight” and acquiring the status of a martyr or hero. This explains why individuals who seemingly have not been personally humiliated, poor, uneducated, or particularly discriminated against (like Muhammad Atta, Bin Laden, and many others) choose to engage in terrorism.

It should be clear that the goal of attaining or restoring personal significance can vary as a function of personality (some people are more sensitive to the issue of
significance than other individuals), hence personality matters, but also as function of the situation (of being humiliated oneself or belonging to a humiliated group, being threatened with humiliation, etc.), hence situation matters as well. Also, arousal of the quest for significance is typically accompanied by an emotional state of some sort (shame, anger, frustration, elation). Thus, personality, situation, and emotional states are all relevant to the tendency to engage in terrorism in so far as they relate to the goal of maintaining significance, our main explanatory construct.

Of course, in and of itself arousal of a goal is not enough to explain a given behavior. In addition, one needs a means to that goal. Typically, such means are suggested by a terrorism-justifying ideology. In other words, the ideology tells what an individual needs to do in order to attain significance. Such an ideology is grounded in the shared reality of one’s group. It is a collective belief system to which an individual subscribes. In case of a threat to the group from its (real or imagined) enemies, the gain or restoration of significance often has to do with defending the group and making personal sacrifices on the group’s behalf. In exchange for this benefit, the group accords one the status of martyr or hero whose exploits are to be forever engraved in the group’s collective memory. In other words, ideology can be important.

There has been considerable debate among terrorism scholars as to whether ideology in general and religion in particular are necessarily involved in terrorism. So let me quickly disavow what I am not saying. I am not suggesting that anyone who engages in terrorism is privy to an intricate “ideology.” A jihadist terrorist need not be a theological expert on the Q’uran, and in fact many Q’uranic scholars strongly oppose terrorism. Hence, no systematic relation should be expected between religiosity and
terrorism. Those who subscribe to moderate Islam believe that the road to personal significance is moderation and charity rather than violence. But an extremist interpretation of the religion offers terrorism as a means to significance. In short, ideology is relevant to terrorism only in identifying a means to personal significance, no more and no less. And it does not have to be any particular ideology; for instance it can be an ethno-nationalist ideology such as the ideology of the LTTE organization that we have recently studied.

Perhaps the most elementary, bare bone, form of means suggestion is a pronouncement of a worshipped and beloved leader. For instance, those who have studied the suicide bombers of the LTTE reported that in many cases it was the say so of the leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, and the feeling that he deeply respects the Black Tiger volunteers who decided to sacrifice their lives that motivated them to embark on a suicidal mission. To those volunteers, the leader is the utmost “epistemic authority” (Kruglanski et al., 2005) on the right means to significance and glory.

This brings me to a final theoretical point concerning the role of distal culture and of the proximal social process in defining what constitutes significance. One’s culture outlines what is societally valued (for instance in our research in the Middle East, we find that “honor” is valued considerably more than it is in the US, and that having honor is what constitutes significance). And one’s local social process brings one into contact with, and renders accessible and salient, the notion that terrorism is a means to personal significance. So social networking is typically very important, just as Sageman (reference) suggested. Similarly, charismatic, firebrand leadership can be important, and propaganda can be important, though in some cases (atypical ones to be sure) an
individual may arrive on her or his own at the idea that terrorism is a means to significance (as may have been the case with Ted Kaczynski, the ill fated Unabomber, or Igal Amir, the assassin of Izhak Rabin). In those cases what is crucial is the compelling means suggestion accomplished through networking, charisma, propaganda, or one’s own deliberation.

**Empirical Evidence**

Recently, we collected evidence concerning aspects of our theory related to the loss of significance and its association with support for violence and self-sacrifice on behalf of one’s group. Specifically, we hypothesized that a loss of significance would generally lead one to become attuned to one’s group’s norms and likely to abide by them, something we refer to as a collectivistic shift. In particular, we hypothesized that self-identification as a group member (i.e., thinking of oneself as “we” rather than an “I”) would (a) restore one’s sense of significance and immunize one to significance loss, and (b) dispose one to defend one’s group and engage in violence against the group’s perceived enemies. And, therefore, ultimately, a loss of personal significance would prompt a support for martyrdom and self-sacrifice for a common cause.

Let us examine these elements one by one. That personal failure (loss of significance) leads one to a collectivistic shift, that is, greater attunement to one’s group, is suggested by several studies. For instance in an internet survey of 12 Arab countries, Pakistan, and Indonesia, we find that participants reporting lower life success tend more strongly to self-identify as members of collectivities (nation or religion). In experimental studies, individuals who were given failure vs. success feedback scored higher on a measure of interdependence and lower on a measure of independence. And on a different
task, those given failure (vs. success) feedback chose more often to work in a group rather than alone.

We additionally find that collective self-identity immunizes one to an extent against feelings of insignificance. This is manifested specifically through people’s reduced defense against notions of mortality and death which (according to terror management theorists) convey the possibility of utter insignificance (the prospect of becoming a “speck of dust in an uncaring universe”). So in one study participants were asked to circle either singular first-person pronouns (I, me, my) or collective pronouns (we, us, ours). The latter scored lower on a scale of death anxiety, and they pulled death-related words faster toward them (indicating stronger approach) and pushed death-related words away from them more slowly than persons in the individualistic condition.

In internet surveys conducted in 12 Arab countries, Indonesia, and Pakistan and in representative face-to-face research in Egypt, Morocco, Indonesia, and Pakistan, we found that individuals who identified collectivistically (as members of their religion or their nation) tended more strongly to support the killing of American civilians.

We have some evidence that in circumstances where the group norms support violence against an outgroup, feelings of personal insignificance, anger, and shame are associated with support for armed struggle in a sample of LTTE members. And in circumstances where one is made to feel bad about oneself, one’s support for martyrdom seems to increase. In a study relevant to this proposition we had religious participants exposed to stimuli assumed to arouse forbidden sexual thoughts and hence sexual guilt. They looked at sexual stimuli or neutral stimuli, and we measured their sexual guilt.
Those exposed to sexual stimuli evidenced greater sexual guilt. What is more intriguing, they also evinced greater support for martyrdom as measured by our scale.

Conclusions

The understanding that at some level terrorist behavior is governed by the same principles as any other behavior, and more specifically that it is goal driven, serves an important function. It directs our analytic gaze beyond the observable surface specifics and allows us to peer deeper into the underlying dynamics of the process that can result in terrorist behavior. It suggests certain questions that need to be answered if we are to understand the psychology of terrorism. What is the fundamental personal goal that individuals are trying to achieve when they engage in terrorist behavior? (We have concluded that the main goal is personal significance.) What are the conditions under which such a goal is likely to be adopted? (We answered this question by suggesting that it is likely when significance has been lost or threatened and there is an opportunity for considerable gains in significance). These insights integrate a variety of disparate personality and cultural/environmental factors. To mention just one cultural factor, research that Michele Gelfand and our MURI team has carried out in the Middle East (references) suggests that dishonor and loss of face are particularly important causes of significance loss in the Middle East, more so than in the US, and that these experiences might, therefore, constitute particularly important incitements to violence and terrorism in that part of the world.

Our framework also directs one to ask what are the perceived means to the goal of significance, and what are the circumstances under which they are suggested? What is the role of ideology in this regard; how deep an ideological conviction does it necessitate.
What is the role of charismatic leadership in means suggestion, and what is the function of the social process in this regard? One important implication of our analysis is that strong ideology alone does not necessarily produce violence, not even a fundamentalist ideology; it is the explicit ideological justification of violence that matters, not ideology per se. It is not the social networks alone that matter either, or the leader’s charisma, but rather the content of the message carried by the networks and advocated by the leader. In short, recognizing that terrorist behavior is an instance of human behavior allows us to apply to it general psychological knowledge concerning goal-directed behavior. In this case, then, the “banality of evil,” or the “normalcy of terrorism,” is good news in that it affords a well-grounded understanding of radicalization and terrorism with potentially important practical implication for counteracting these dangerous phenomena.
REFERENCES


