Individual differences in relational motives interact with the political context to produce terrorism and terrorism-support

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Abstract

The psychology of suicide terrorism involves more than simply the psychology of suicide. Individual differences in Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) interact with socio-structural, political context to produce support for group-based dominance among members of both dominant and subordinate groups. This may help explain why, in one specific context, some people commit and endorse terrorism, while others do not.

We agree with Lankford that one cannot understand suicide terrorism without considering individual factors as well as contextual ones, and must distinguish perpetrator from audience effects.

Nevertheless, while being willing to kill oneself is a necessary condition for carrying out suicide bombings, this need not imply that what really drives suicide bombers, rampage shooters and other self-destructive killers is simply suicidality proper, conveniently disguised as political terrorism in cultural and religious contexts that ban individual suicide. In the case studies he uses to make the latter point, Lankford not only seeks to estimate reliable predictors of suicide—such as prior suicide attempts, expressed death wishes, and debilitating depression—but also includes many "soft" risk factors such as the deaths of parents or siblings in childhood, unemployment, divorce due to infertility, and even disciplinary problems in school. Without knowing the base rates of both kinds of factors among the general population, it is impossible to evaluate the degree to which they lead people to commit suicide, let alone suicide terrorism, particularly when considered in the often war-torn, occupied settings from which Lankford draws many cases.

Just as a suicidal mental condition is insufficient to drive suicide terrorism, so it may likely be unnecessary. The case of Anders Behring Breivik—who shot 77 teenagers at a political youth camp after seeking to blow up the Norwegian governmental building—demonstrates the uncertainty of clinical judgments based on interpretations of written or limited data records. Though Lankford concludes that Breivik was clearly suicidal because his writings named the plight of conservative

"brothers and sisters" being pushed toward suicide, and anticipated dying during his terror mission, a final forensic-psychiatric assessment, following extensive clinical interviews and 24-hour-observations, not only concluded that Breivik was not psychotic, but found absolutely no evidence that he was suicidal (NTB, 2012). Indeed, Breivik expressed fear of getting killed by the police upon being taken captive.

What clearly is necessary for committing any such acts of terrorism is the willingness to kill civilian others. We agree that this homicidal intent is likely fueled by rage and that cultural and ideological endorsement facilitates suicide terrorism. But both respond to the political reality in which a community finds itself. For instance, Pape (2005) argues that suicide terrorist attacks in Lebanon ebbed and flowed with the absence and presence of Israeli occupation (while suicidal intent presumably remained fairly stable). Dismissing this as simply about increased access to weapons and enemy targets ignores the role of the political context in fueling rage towards an enemy group—relationally motivated, moral outrage (Rai & Fiske, 2011) that *they* are subordinating, humiliating, discriminating, victimizing, persecuting, and killing *us,* or threatening to do so, culminating in the intended killing of perceived enemy civilians.

Such political context effects may play a role even in cases of *remote identification* with group members suffering at times of conflict or oppression (Sheehy-Skeffington, 2009). For instance, we recently found that support for a variety of terrorism-related items among Muslim citizens living in Denmark, ranging from

general understanding of terrorism to personal willingness to use violence to defend Islam, was predicted by perceptions of general Muslim suffering, and was mediated by the anger this suffering evoked (Obaidi, Thomsen, & Sidanius, 2013). These *victimization-by-proxy* effects were even stronger among Danish-born than foreign—born Muslims (Sidanius, Levin, Obaidi, Pratto, & Thomsen, 2013), and held even when controlling for the effects of personal experiences of discrimination, a structural factor indicated in radicalization among British Muslims (Travis, 2008).

In understanding how individual factors play into these processes, such that some people in a specific context endorse or commit acts of terrorism while others in the same context do not, we must go beyond the biographical and psycho-pathological to the relational and ideological/political. The degrees to which people like, want and seek relationships that are communal, hierarchical, or egalitarian underpin many psychological phenomena (Thomsen, 2010). One particularly potent dimension of relational motives is social dominance orientation (SDO)—the motivation to create and maintain between-group dominance hierarchies (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Individuals high in SDO support hierarchical intergroup structures, in which some groups dominate others, whereas individuals low in SDO favor intergroup equality. These motives, and the cultural context that embeds them, influence both the societal endorsement of suicide terrorism, and the attitudes of those willing to commit it themselves. For instance, by looking at the *negative* relationship between SDO and support for terrorism against the West amongst Lebanese and Syrians, our work has demonstrated that *counter-dominance* is an important ideological motivation undergirding support for terrorism against

dominant groups (Levin, Henry, Pratto, & Sidanius, 2003; Henry, Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 2005; Pratto, Sidanius, Bou-Zeinnedine, Kteily, & Levin, in press). Conversely, among members of dominant majority groups in the West, the desire for group-based dominance *increases* support for violence, wars of conquests, and terrorist acts in retaliation against a threatening group or country (Thomsen, Green, & Sidanius, 2008; Ho, Sidanius, Pratto, Levin, Thomsen, Kteily, & Sheehy-Skeffington, 2012). Further supporting the crucial interaction of individual, relational motives and the structural context, the effect of group identification on terror support among *subordinate groups* (e.g. of Arab identification among Lebanese) is particularly strong among those who are *low* in SDO, whereas identification with *dominant groups* (e.g. national identification among Americans) particularly increases support for violence among those *high* in SDO (Levin et al, 2003; Kteily et al, 2013; Thomsen, Green, & Sidanius, 2013). Again, Breivik's self-described radical identification with a Christian in-group and desire to preserve its dominance would fit this picture.

In sum, we concur that it is crucial to consider both the person and the situation in understanding suicide terrorism. Research and theory in the Social Dominance tradition explicates how individual differences in relational motives interact dynamically with the socio-structural context in shaping people's attitudes towards actions of group-based violence. Just as social psychology involves more than just the situation, and individual differences more than just the psychopathological, so the psychology of suicide terrorism is more than simply the psychology of suicide.

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