

The Role of Psychological Modeling to Try and Understand Terrorism

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Rec date: Jan 04, 2016; **Acc date:** Jan 14, 2016; **Pub date:** Jan 18, 2016

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Introduction

There are many people who refer to themselves or are referred to by others as "experts on terrorism". The reality is that to be an expert on understanding terrorism (or anything for that matter), you arguably need to be engaged in terrorism. It is not uncommon for one to not know why (exactly) they do what they do. The Dunning-Kruger effect [1] goes some way to explaining this in that; poor performers often show little insight into the shortcomings in their performance. In an attempt to discover why we do what we do, the best we can hope for is to better study the mind, and in particular the many, countless factors that influence one's mind. For the purpose of this article, the mind is defined as the processes that give rise to thought.

Also, for the purposes of this discussion, terrorism will be defined as, 'an act of violence that serves a purpose of inflicting mass harm on others and that does not discriminate between intended targets and innocent civilians in order to achieve an idealistic (often controversial) objective'. When considering this definition of terrorism, there are arguably many groups around the world that could aim to achieve these objectives – and this, in part, is where the problem of 'terrorism' begins.

The bio-psycho-socio-environmental model of the mind

If one briefly analyses international events over the last several decades, Western society has engaged in battles to help so called 'minority groups or cultures' survive apparent persecution. In the process, war has often been the result. During war, many innocents are either directly or indirectly, detrimentally affected (killed, traumatized etc.), and families and individuals are often displaced. As a result, people caught up in this war of cultures (including children), have become traumatized – whether the children (now adults) are aware of this or not. The Sequelae for trauma, and many other factors, impact on shaping one's mind and life also. If we consider these traumatic events as our first possible explanation of the factors that cause – or better still 'trigger' – terroristic acts (or inspire terroristic thoughts), then we may begin the process of trying to operationalize the likely triggers (often referred to as 'causes') of terrorism. We can begin this process by considering a bio-psycho-socio-environmental model (BPSE-model) of the mind.

As we reflect upon a BPSE-model, let us first explore possible biological origins of a terroristic mentality and thus terrorism. The biological origins are the negative consequences of many kinds of physical or psychological trauma on the neuropsychological development and integrity of the mind (war, accidents, prolonged exposure to domestic/civilian violence, or upheaval - to name a few). Other biological factors, like genetic predisposition could contribute to

the countless biological triggers of a terroristic mentality. One might ask at this point, "how does genetics predispose one to terrorism?" Again the answer is, genetics alone does not predispose one to terrorism, it is a combination of factors, in which genetics plays a part. There is evidence to show how Monoamine oxidase A has been linked to antisocial behaviour [2].

Psycho socio environmental factors contribute too. Prolonged exposure to family violence, sexual abuse or a culture of violence sustained within an impoverished or a corrupt society could lead to a pathological mentality that feeds destructive thoughts. There is research to show how a child with a poor relationship with their biological father - for example, Adolf Hitler - is more prone to mental ill health [3] or at the very least, to develop a pathological hatred for something very specific and targeted. In Hitler's case, the Jews. After all, one does not usually invest much time and energy into fighting something with which they have no mental connection. Hitler was severely abused throughout his childhood by his Jewish father. Importantly, these factors alone are unlikely to predispose one to engage in so called acts of terrorism. However, if an individual experiences a combination of negative events throughout his or her childhood, like grows up in a world devoid of a positive father figure, encounters a range of prolonged negative experiences like poverty and neglect, and then engages in substance abuse, as well as experiencing the negative consequences of living in a society devoid of 'apparent' logic or fairness, it makes sense that this will corrupt one's mentality – in a most negative way. In addition to this combination of triggers, it remains a fact that some people have untreated mental illnesses, including serious personality disorders. Consider also other social factors, like peer pressure or social media, when added to the mix, may contribute to one's experiences. When all these contributing factors are considered, it may be possible to operationalize the origins of a terroristic mind.

Comments in the media about terrorism

When considering the BPSE model as a mechanism of operationalising 'some' of the potential triggers of a terroristic mentality, than comments like those of Dr Amy Zalman [4] and Dr Greg Barton [5] arguably require further elaboration, or at the very least, extra consideration. The comments I refer to are:

First, those comments made by Zalman [4] in About News, 2014

"...All terrorist acts are motivated by two things:

Social and political injustice: People choose terrorism when they are trying to right what they perceive to be a social or political or historical wrong—when they have been stripped of their land or rights, or denied these.

The belief that violence or its threat will be effective, and usher in change. Another way of saying this is: the belief that violent means justify the ends. Many terrorists in history said sincerely that they chose violence after long deliberation, because they felt they had no choice.”

And...

“...people always have the free will to seek another course of action. They do not have such a "free will" if they have 'lost their mind'”

Finally, Barton [5] has suggested that "Part of what they believe is they're joining the good guys, the freedom fighters,"- here Barton [6] is referring to youth jihadists, in an interview with the Sydney Morning Herald, 2015.

Barton has also referred to high levels of youth unemployment in France and how “it's hard to get a job if you have a Moroccan or Algerian name”. He added that this leads to “a real sense of alienation” as he discussed 'reasons' for terrorism in the Sydney Institute, 2013.

Critics of such statements could assume that terrorism has no ‘third or other motivational’ casual factor, like a lack of education to express disdain with societal values or historical wrongs over the use of behavioral aggression to correct a wrong. Although assumedly, such statements are not meant to be considered in isolation. Further, alienation is ‘apparently’ a reason for terrorism. Why disagree? However, are only 'Moroccan or Algerian youth' alienated in this world? Is it possible to list all the nationalities, or for that matter professions that are engaged in acts of terrorism? What about medical scientists (for example), many of whom work for a pittance to preserve life? Compare these people to individuals who devote their life to kicking a ball on a ‘manicured cow paddock’ who are spoiled with wealth, fame and everything else they need. On this basis, I suppose medical scientists are ‘alienated’ too.

In highlighting these comments from these two 'terrorism experts', two main points are being noted. First, it is easy to disregard the fact that a combination of factors (experiences) is required to inspire behaviour (an action). Secondly, some people who supposedly lead our fight against terrorism clearly demonstrate a difficulty in grasping the fact that a myriad of factors constitute a person's psychological makeup. No wonder the world is unraveling before our very eyes. Their comments are provided with the intention to help encapsulate triggers or causes of terrorism. However, they lack the appropriate consideration of the many other factors or triggers that govern one's mentality. Therefore, it is postulated that such propositions are incomplete and thus represent a somewhat limited view of the origins

of terrorism. This is a particular concern especially since such people are mantled with the responsibility of analyzing terrorism to better understanding it, so that we as a society can attempt to redress it.

Conclusion

Preparing for the 21st century using the BPSE model

Models like the bio psycho socio environmental model are imperative in assisting with operationalizing the potentially many factors and thus triggers of terrorism. As we progress through the 21st century, one cannot help but consider that this century will be a carbon copy of the previous. If there was some truth to this statement, then we could be forgiven for thinking that we were living in 1916 (rather than 2016) and that a ‘global atmosphere of terrorism’ was once again emerging to see another great depression, a labeled religion as a terroristic order and then a subsequent holocaust likely to occur before the middle of the 21st century – only to then see another phase of peace and prosperity in the second half of this century. It is with trepidation of such possible events, to argue for a greater appreciation of the psychological workings of the mind - greater than ever before - in order to ensure a more peaceful and sustainable humanity by fostering a greater understanding of one-another.

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