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Pathways into terrorism: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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Abstract

This paper contains the reflections of the first author as a forensic psychologist working with convicted terrorists in prison between 2008 and 2011, and subsequently as an academic and government consultant in this field. The task of making sense of this learning has been helped by a psychoanalytic understanding of the causes of terrorism by the second author who is a psychotherapist and group analyst. Psychoanalytic processes of defences, splitting and projection throw light on the potential unconscious thoughts, feelings and behaviour of those who resort to terrorism. Two broad groups are identified whose motivations are ostensibly noble cause and criminality respectively, but whose involvement also serves to avenge their personal humiliations and feelings of injustice that are projected into a political cause. A third group is also described of mainly lone actors motivated by pathological narcissism. It is proposed that terrorism manifests as a political phenomenon but is also a form of communication that reveals much about the state of mind of those who choose to become involved.

Key words: Terrorism, extremism, grievance, humiliation, splitting, projection, projective identification, paranoid schizoid state

Background

Following the London suicide bombings of the transport system in 7/7, the UK government passed legislation criminalising behaviours considered to be preparatory to terrorism or which glorified terrorism in an attempt to disrupt terrorist plotting within the UK.¹ This brought into custody a number of offenders who were in varying degrees engaged in jihadi ideology, not all of whom were intending to commit terrorist offences at the time of their arrest. It was important therefore to develop a transparent and defensible methodology for making discriminations between them so that they could be managed in a way that was proportionate to their risk of harm. With the country still galvanised by the terror induced by these attacks, levels of risk aversion in prisons were high. All terrorist prisoners were classified as high risk by default, and the bar for declassification was set very high.

¹ The Terrorism Act 2006.

Individual psychopathology

The literature about what engages individuals in terrorism and the evidence for psychopathology in terrorists is confused; there are many definitions of terrorism and suggestions for how terrorism or terrorists might be classified, but no single pathway or consensus about their psychology. Research by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts that tried to make sense of totalitarianism and the genocide of the Second World War focused on psychopathy, narcissistic personality disorder and authoritarianism as possible causes. In contrast, the political science literature concluded that terrorist violence was the product of rational decision making to bring about political change within asymmetrical power structures when other means were unavailable. Crenshaw (1981) famously concluded that *“the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality”* (p.390) and Hannah Arendt came to a similar conclusion in referring to the *“banality of evil”* in the title of her book referring to Adolf Eichmann’s presentation at his trial for his actions as the architect of the Holocaust.

In 2016, Corner et al collated multiple psychiatric epidemiological studies to calculate the prevalence of diagnosed mental disorders in the general population and compare them to the prevalence of the same disorders among lone-actor and group-actor terrorists. They identified higher recorded levels of schizophrenia, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and unspecified personality disorder in lone actors than in the general population, but lower recorded levels of any disorder at all in group actors. The latter, however, is likely to be a result of the absence of psychiatric assessment of group actors rather than an indicator of their superior mental health.

The disorders that are over-represented among lone actors are those associated with pervasive problems of personal and social adjustment, such as odd and eccentric behaviour, communication deficits, idiosyncratic beliefs, difficulties in relationships and social isolation. In earlier research Corner and Gill (2015) identified a high preponderance of single-issue ideologies in lone actors alongside highly personal grievances linked to political aims. Though a causal role between these difficulties and extremist violence cannot be assumed, for those who have failed to find their place in society, an ideology that provides an explanation for their difficulties and locates the responsibility elsewhere may be seized upon and become something of a fixation over time.

However, although helpful in dispelling the truism that there is no psychopathology in terrorists this says little about the larger proportion of group actors. In truth, studies have not been done that systematically assess the presence of diagnosable mental disorders in group actor terrorists, or more specifically in those fulfilling the different roles of leaders, followers, enforcers, funders, bomb planters or suicide bombers that are likely to attract different personalities and motivations. Self-evidently, socio-economic inequality and political oppression are insufficient explanations in themselves as this would apply to a much larger number than the few who become terrorists. As Miller (2006) asserts *"Something then beyond mere adversity, turns a person into a terrorist"*. (p.255)

Over time, the first author's casework in prisons identified vulnerabilities such as grievance and a sense of injustice, identity and status issues, thwarted ambitions, a breakdown in relationships (often with the father), poor social adjustment and a general lack of wellbeing. Dialogue revealed no defect of reason but a deep-seated sense of personal humiliation and injustice that was projected into an extremist cause. A study by Bartlett et al (2010) contrasting the views of radicals and terrorists suggested that they had different motivations and goals, and that radical views per se did not operate as a gateway to terrorism. Similarly, Meloy & Yakeley (2014) identified that *"...in the final analysis, acts of political violence, terrorism, or civilian massacres ... are personal – whether ideologically driven or not – in the sense that an individual decides to commit the act alone or within a closely affiliated group ... and the individual's own mind is what differentiates him from the many who are protestors or extremists who do not carry out acts of violence"*. (p 348).

This places the explanation firmly within aspects of the individual personality and emotional experience, albeit within a political context. The conclusion of the first author's work in prisons was that an extremist identity met needs for identity, meaning, belonging, safety, respect and status for those who had experienced personal humiliation, alienation, injustice and/or identity confusion and who harboured a deep sense of grievance. In psychoanalytic terms it allows a *good self* to be constructed and maintained through the construction and maintenance of a *bad other*. This defensive splitting involves regression to a simple internal world of good and bad objects rather than whole objects with good and bad qualities (Kernberg, 1976).

Although not formally assessed there were elements of personality disorder in many of those convicted of terrorist offences. Most had accomplished an extreme version of in-group/out-group splitting between the worthy and the unworthy, or the righteous and the unrighteous that is an element of both paranoid and narcissistic personality disorders. The over-idealisation of the in-group and devaluation of the out-group is a feature of borderline personality disorder, and the uncritical acceptance of the authority of a leader by their followers is consistent with dependent personality disorder. Those with a criminal history also evidenced features of antisocial personality disorder such as self-centredness, sensation-seeking, exploitation and disregard for others, underpinned by attitudes that justified violence; all characteristics that were consistent with anti-authority ideologies and that could usefully be deployed in a terrorist cause.

Psychoanalytic understanding

Psychoanalysis has always focused on the underlying causes of violence and aggression. Many psychoanalytical ideas about trauma and violence are relevant to the study of terrorism, especially in connection with individual and group identity. There are several useful psychoanalytical insights about the unconscious motivation for such violence which include trauma, loss, shame and annihilation anxiety. Early experiences that are not digested get replayed when triggered by a new trauma, injustice or insult to oneself, family or ethnic group. Terrorism is a potentially meaningful communication and may be a re-enactment of early trauma as well as a splitting off of the uncomfortable and painful parts of the self and locating them in others.

Terrorism has preoccupied many psychoanalysts and group analysts since Freud. More recently, De Zulueta (2006) has stressed that dehumanisation of the enemy is the result of allowing the dehumanised self to be projected on to the 'other'. Akhtar (2002) quoting Volkan (1997) writes that most major players in a terrorist organisation are themselves deeply traumatised individuals who, as children suffered chronic physical abuse and profound humiliation. Akhtar (2002) claims that the terrorist leader appeals to group members' infantile hunger for love and acceptance in offering what is, in effect a new family with himself in the role of the good father. Hopper (2003) also says that hope is essentially a wish to be heard and understood by a good parental figure. De Zulueta (2006) identifies that a recurring finding in the literature is that 'terrorists' are essentially 'normal' people who

experienced a lack of social ties or attachments, and she cites Gilligan's (1996) proposition that the basic cause of violent behaviour is the wish to ward off or eliminate feelings of shame or humiliation and replace them with their opposite, feelings of pride. She argues that the loss of cultural and Islamic pride due to centuries of colonialism and exploitation by both the West and their own leadership has been a powerful source of shame, particularly for young men.

Volkan (1988) describes how the role of large group identity shapes the terrorist's individual identity, arguing that it emerges from shared mental representations of large group history that include historical traumas and triumphs that become the source of both collective pride and shame. These events are unconsciously chosen and ritualised by the group to build cohesion and group identity, differentiating themselves from the enemy. Akhtar (2002) states that then *"feeling itself to be a victim, the group begins to victimise others in an act of externalisation"* (p. 91).

Political Context

These references to large group history stress the importance of geo-political and social contexts. Becoming a terrorist depends on events that expose an asymmetry of power and locate the individual in a power-poor apparently victimised group. The goal of a terrorist attack is to usurp power from the power-rich group, usually identified as government, and provoke a reaction from them. An overly oppressive response from government can escalate antagonism by exposing a lack of concern for the terrorists' cause and result in a loss of moral authority; a process exemplified in the escalation of conflict between the UK government and the provisional IRA in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Alderdice (2005), a psychoanalyst and member of the Alliance party at this time, identifies terrorism as a means of exacting revenge for the humiliations heaped upon the power-poor in Ireland over many generations. He suggests that this dynamic of the power-poor provoking the power-strong into counter-productive pathological reactions is commonly enacted in both the consulting room and on the world stage. Parallels can be drawn with the current wave of Islamist terrorism in the UK where grievance, experienced on both a personal and political level, cathected by apparent current political victimisation and in the absence of sufficient protective influences, can become a driver for terrorism.

Three main types of terrorist

It became clear from the first author's dialogue with terrorist offenders in the UK that despite their common vulnerabilities there were also some differences in terms of what they wanted to achieve and in what they would do to achieve it. At the time this work was done, none of those from the UK wanted to introduce Sharia law into the UK; most wanted to demonstrate against British and American foreign policy in Muslim lands. Some wanted to prepare themselves through attending training camps in the UK to fight in a prophesised 'final holy war', others wanted to help Muslims abroad by travelling to areas of conflict as insurgents. In addition, what each individual would do to achieve his goal also varied. Some were persuaded, particularly if they were thwarted in their goal to fight abroad, to carry out a terrorist act in the UK, but not all were prepared to target civilians; some would first seek out a military or government target and settle for a softer civilian target when this proved difficult. In retrospect, those with the most scruples were those who believed they were fighting a noble cause; criminals had fewer scruples. A smaller number occupy a different space altogether in which their narcissistic needs for power and revenge and the opportunity to fight an imagined 'just war' act as a toxic combination transforming them into sadistic killers.

Many of those who have speculated about typologies of terrorism in the past have identified three main types. Miller (2006) in his overview characterised these as comprising an ideologically-driven leader, a number of acolytes drawn to the group's ideals and a number of opportunists meeting personal motives. Hacker (1976) referred to crusaders, criminals and crazies, and Schmid (1982) to political terrorism, (organised) crime-linked terrorism and pathological (crazy) terrorism. In UK prisons we saw noble cause and criminal types (the Good and the Bad), and a third much smaller type that has recently emerged, that of the pathological narcissist (the Ugly). This describes a syndrome of grievance fuelled violence that is evident in the backgrounds of some school shooters, terrorist leaders and lone-actors: those with fixated and delusional beliefs, grandiose but unstable self-esteem, a sense of entitlement, lack of empathy and delusions of grandeur. It is associated with both extreme violence and pervasive psychopathology.

These three types are not mutually exclusive. Mental health difficulties can be present in both noble cause and criminal groups, though a functional link between mental health and

terrorist violence is more discernible in the Ugly category. All three groups find common cause in blaming a power-rich group for their apparent disempowerment and victimisation.

The Good: Noble cause

One terrorist offender was a university student when he first encountered Islamist ideology. From a traditional Pakistani family he found it hard to adapt to the freedoms of university life after a family-centred self-contained home life. He felt humiliated by his lack of sophistication in comparison with other students and found solace with other Pakistani students who were preoccupied by the plight of Muslims in the Middle East. Over time they abandoned their studies in favour of seeking evidence for their extremist beliefs, travelling to Pakistan with the intention of joining the struggle in Afghanistan. Frustrated in this they turned their attention to plotting a terrorist offence in the UK. Involvement in this provided him with a noble identity and allowed him to overcome his feelings of humiliation, gave him self-respect, a sense of destiny, a friendship group, and someone to blame for his difficulties.

Roberts and Horgan (2003) have identified that individuals are 'socialised into terrorism' by means of small steps that gradually overcome their initial inhibitions about becoming a terrorist. Push and pull factors eventually reach a tipping point that culminate in the decision to engage with a group, cause or ideology. Push factors among those convicted in the UK were broadly feelings of grievance and humiliation, exclusion, dissonance between host and heritage cultures, and a lack of agency, significance, identity, meaning, belonging and worth. Pull factors were broadly the opportunities to achieve an identity of significance, a way of making sense of the world that projected blame on to others, an opportunity to belong to a closely bonded proxy family, to exact revenge, to escape from cultural dissonance and perceived second class status; and for some an outlet for their violence and criminality. The experience of excitement, challenge, adventure and in the context of the emergence of the Islamic state, the opportunity for nation building, can also act as pull factors. Jihadi ideology justifies this attitude shift rather than constituting the prime motivation.

In addition to psychological gains engagement also provides moral superiority. As Meloy and Yakeley (2014) observe "*What distinguishes the predatory violence of the terrorist from*

other cases of instrumental violence is the moral sanctioning of the act. This is superego-driven homicidal aggression wherein the terrorist finds a mandate for his violence: the drive to punish those who are judged morally wrong and therefore disgusting, and the wish to establish an ideal state, or state of mind, that has heretofore eluded him". (p. 362)

These push factors are generic and one would expect them to be fairly widespread within diaspora Muslim communities in the West. To understand why extremist violence is not therefore more common it is necessary to understand the role of factors that protect against involvement. Most individuals are protected by a good enough life, positive relationships, secure friendships, adequate self-esteem, hope for their future and/or sufficient knowledge of Islam that they are not entrained by jihadi ideology. But for the few without sufficient protection, conditioning and grooming within a group or online can achieve an attitude shift that finally overcomes their inhibitions against taking action. The presence of in-group/out-group thinking reflects the accomplishment of a clear split between good and bad objects such that the in-group is experienced as good and worthy and the out-group as bad, unworthy and even inhuman, the reason for their difficulties and the source of their humiliation. The process is helped by the underground nature of terrorist plotting that forges close bonds that lock in loyalty and prevent disaffiliation, maintained through threat or force if necessary.

This pathway was taken by those whose motivation was characterised by 'noble cause'. These individuals did not have any conviction history or criminal motivation for their engagement. They became involved as a result of their grievance against the West for their invasion of Muslim lands in Iraq and Afghanistan and the West's apparent support for Israel and the victimisation of Palestinians. It is proposed that at root this grievance was personal, stemming from narcissistic wounds sustained earlier in life and mirrored on the political stage. Alongside idealism, sensitivity to injustice and a firm belief that they could make the world a better place for Muslims, this forged their justification for violence.

Some male offenders recalled racial abuse that mirrored the humiliations from the arbitrary abuse of patriarchal power within the family. In Asian and Arabic cultures patriarchal power holds sway and can manifest in violence towards women and children and fraught relationships with fathers, especially in boys who step into their power in adolescence. This splitting into the power-rich and the power-poor therefore becomes a fundamental

organising principle for children in these cultures. The work of the psychoanalyst Kobrin (2010) explores the Arabic Muslim culture that denigrates and victimises women in the home, causing the children to experience their early loved mother as a hated object such that their needs and thinking remain infantile and they find it hard to achieve independence. She believes that the terror in Islamic suicide terrorism is displaced murderous rage for the early mother, stemming from the projection of the hatreds developed through the blaming and shaming childrearing practices of their families.

Among those in prison convicted of terrorist offences, a breakdown in relationship with the father was an almost universal background factor, accompanied in many cases by strong feelings of hate and antagonism towards him. Those who espoused Islamist extremism spoke of being able to trump the authority of the father with their allegiance to Allah and the Muslim cause. *“What are you doing for the umma?² ...I am a better Muslim than you.”*

The Bad: criminal

In contrast, about 60% of those in custody at this time had a criminal history, which ran counter to initial assumptions about the political nature of terrorist offending. The link between terrorism and criminality is now widely evidenced, with Carrapico, Irrera and Tupman (2014) clarifying established links between terrorists and transnational and organised crime at the macro level. The Belgian offenders who undertook the Paris shootings in November 2015 and Brussels airport and metro bombings in March 2016 came from the impoverished, over-crowded and deprived area of Molenbeek in Belgium described by its Mayor as *“a breeding ground for violence”*. For them, no conditioning or grooming was necessary to develop attitudes supportive of offending; they already had them, as well as polarised beliefs dividing the world into ‘Us and Them’ or criminals and straight-goers, now labelled ‘kuffar’.³ They were able to deploy their criminal capability for apparent moral as well as financial gain, and launder their offending by a righteous affiliation. Involvement met their criminal needs for status, sensation-seeking, dominance, control, violence and revenge against the authorities, and promised redemption.

² The global Muslim community

³ Heretic, unworthy

Alderdice (2005), drawing on his political experiences, highlights the difference between those joining paramilitary groups before and after the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland. Earlier members saw themselves as taking up a noble cause, often as a response to personal loss or injury and were disparaging of those referred to as 'Ceasefire Soldiers' who joined to benefit from a culture of organised crime that took hold in the wake of the peace agreement, *"using the political cause as a flag of convenience for crude personal material gain."* (p 578)

In custody, terrorist offenders with a criminal background did not adopt ethnic dress, nor display an exaggerated religiosity. Their appearance was westernised; they identified with mainstream criminals and were scornful of those who presented as religious Muslims. In turn, those motivated by 'noble cause' were scornful of those they saw as criminals motivated purely by revenge. One in particular had a violent background and had committed several serious assaults in custody. He was considered to be the leader of a terrorist cell and had been involved in procuring arms for an Islamist terrorist attack, despite not sharing their ideology or aims. Personality assessment identified him as a psychopath, high on dominance, exploitation of others, sensation-seeking and extroversion, as well as alcohol and drug use. His profile was that of a violent and versatile criminal and his motivation purely opportunistic.

The Ugly: Pathological narcissism

Baumeister (1997), exploring the causes of 'evil', concludes that one of the basic causes is high but unstable self-esteem, sometimes referred to as insecure grandiosity. He says: *"I propose that violent, evil people tend to be marked by feelings of superiority but also a fear that they will lose their superior position."* (p152). Manne (2014) interprets this psychodynamically as the product of split parenting between an under-valuing (or absent) parent and an over-valuing parent that makes it difficult to integrate good and bad aspects of the self, such that the self is taken as the love object. Kobrin (2010) suggests that suicide terrorism among Arab Muslims is a product of a failure to integrate love of the father with love of a mother who is apparently hated by the father, with suicide achieving a longed for fusion. Similarly, Kernberg (2009), in discussing the evidence for the death drive, identifies the unconscious function of self-destructiveness as not simply an urge to destroy the self but also to destroy significant others, be it out of guilt, revenge, envy, or triumph.

The far-right terrorist Anders Breivik, convicted of the murder of 77 people including 69 teenagers in Norway, is an example of this type of narcissistic killer. Eventually diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, his father was absent from his life and his mother depressed and unstable, alternately smothering and rejecting him. He cultivated an image of hyper-masculinity and became obsessed with the political left and their support for multiculturalism and liberal values which he saw as robbing him of his birthright. He believed he was a modern incarnation of the Knights Templar, a 12th-century group of elite warriors during the Christian crusades. Yet as Buruma (2015), the reviewer of his biography, summed up: *“His is a story of family dysfunction, professional and sexual failure, grotesque narcissism and ... apocalyptic delusions.”*

Another potential example of pathological narcissism is Mohammed Emwazi, otherwise known as Jihadi John. His terrorist trajectory has been widely reported. His role as a guard and torturer for ISIS appeared to act as a ‘narcissistic supply’ in which he found satisfaction from inflicting pain and humiliation on those he judged to be unworthy. He not only carried out the beheading of eight individual hostages and oversaw the beheadings of 21 Syrian soldiers but he also was filmed doing so in videos released to the whole world, providing further gratification of his narcissistic needs.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper suggests that there are three broad pathways into terrorism, though it is not proposed that they are mutually exclusive. It is the case that many of those who take the noble cause pathway are also troubled, as are many of those with a criminal background. Depression and elements of personality disorder and substance misuse are not uncommon in terrorist offenders, as would be expected in those who have struggled to find their place in society. The inclusion of a clinical pathway in this model is for those few individuals, often lone actors, whose involvement is primarily driven by their often idiosyncratic clinical condition.

This pathway model is an attempt to make sense of the empirical situation that confronts us at a time when our collective understanding of terrorist offending is still in its infancy. Until recently there have been few opportunities to apply psychological analysis to those involved, and the prevailing belief has been that this form of violence is the product of

rational decision making in the pursuit of political aims. The UK correctional imperative to reduce future risk has provided a rare window into the subjective experience of those who have committed terrorist offences, and an opportunity to develop our understanding of the needs that are met by engaging with extremist ideologies, groups or causes.

Far from pathologising terrorist violence this exercise understands terrorist offending as the product of frustrated normal human needs for love, acceptance and reciprocal trust from infancy through to adulthood. Criminality appears to constitute a vulnerability to radicalisation in itself by virtue of its demonization by mainstream society and a reciprocal desire on the part of criminals for revenge and redemption. Those with higher levels of conventional psychopathology are found within the smaller group of lone actors with idiosyncratic grievances. In contrast, group actors present as hostile and aggrieved but are largely emotionally and cognitively intact, despite in some cases elements of personality disorder and accompanying depression.

Psychoanalytic interpretations are helpful in understanding terrorism as a form of communication driven by unassuaged primal fears and existential threats that through primitive mechanisms allow a persecuting group to become the repository for disavowed feelings, and thereby a target for annihilation. Group analytic interpretations also help to explain how large group history shapes ideology and individual identity, maintains group allegiance and sanctions terrorist offending.

Further experience and research may confirm the utility of this pathway model and provide additional clarification of the intersection between psychopathology and terrorism.

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