

How To Grow a Terrorist Without Really Trying.

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While significant research has accumulated over the past century about the developmental psychology of aggressive and violent behavior, few attempts have been made to apply this research to understanding what makes a terrorist. Not surprisingly only a very few empirical studies have been conducted of terrorist subjects (Merari & Friedland, 1985) and even fewer of suicide terrorists. The research that has been done suggests that terrorists are seldom psychotic and that situational factors and organizational psychology play an important role. However, the social-developmental theory that has evolved to explain aggressive and violent individuals in general can shed additional light on who might be most susceptible to these processes. Today, I propose to try to do that, not by presenting new empirical data, but by applying a wealth of existing data to the question of "what makes a terrorist."

I want to understand how individuals can deliberately, intentionally, and without

remorse commit acts designed to kill scores of very innocent children, women, and men who have never directly done them any harm. Regardless of whether such behavior is instrumentally motivated by supposed political ends, by monetary gains, or by other intangible gains, such behavior is not normal in the adult human. How then can it happen as frequently as it seems to have happened throughout history?

Situation and Person

Let me begin by pointing out a fundamental lesson derived from decades of research on aggressive and violent behavior. It is this. Every violent act is the product of the impact on the perpetrator of situational factors proximal in time to the act and within person factors that have developed over time in that individual. These within person factors in turn are the products of innate predispositions and socialization experiences dependent on the environmental context in which the person grew up.

This is not rocket science. These are very simple basic principles of psychology. Yet all too often they are lost in the media hype that surrounds violence and terrorism. The mass media and many otherwise intelligent science writers always want a nice sound bite explanation of why people kill. Where is the smoking psychological gun? The terrorist must have been abused as a

child, right? The terrorist must have had a traumatic experience -- perhaps seeing a relative killed, right?

Well, yes, some terrorists were abused as children and some terrorists saw relatives killed, but many did not. What is more likely true is that most grew up in ways that according to what we know about aggression placed them a little more at risk for behaving aggressively and that according to what we know about social influence placed them a little more at risk of being manipulated by charismatic individuals who have a political agenda that involves violence. When the situation was right, most were then seduced into committing their murderous acts by these political parent figures who understood the principles of manipulating others behaviors. What little data has been collected on failed terrorists supports this view, I think.

Social Influence

The importance of the immediate social context and the social influence process in most acts of mass violence against relative innocents cannot be underestimated I think. Whether it is a nation's designated leaders indoctrinating its patriotic soldiers to the necessity of mass bombing of enemy cities or it is the self-appointed leader of a power-seeking splinter group indoctrinating its followers to the necessity of killing innocent

members of its perceived repressors, the indoctrination process is central to most acts of mass violence.

However, I am not going to write extensively about this social influence process that ensnares these at risk individuals and points them down the highway to their violent act. Merari (2002) has recently documented this process well. The potential violent perpetrator, most often an impressionable youth who has expressed a public desire to act, is offered a chance to prove him or herself worthy of serving the "cause." Acceptance is made to seem to be a special honor and a test to be passed. The recruit must publicly volunteer, but is often required to "think about it first" and come back to volunteer, heightening both the value of the goal and the commitment of the volunteering act. Yet the situation is manipulated so not volunteering is almost impossible socially. In the Second World War potential Kamikaze pilots were brought together in a group and told that only those who volunteered could possibly be considered for acceptance in this sacred task; however, it was made very difficult not to volunteer. Those who did NOT want to volunteer were asked to step forward. In Palestine suicide bomber recruits are asked to volunteer in a similar way in groups where not volunteering will bring derision.

When everyone in the group pledges to each other to die killing the target people, a failure to act then becomes an act of betrayal to ones peers. Withdrawal of the commitment once made is not allowed and is not a possibility socially. It is reinforced by the standard social-psychological persuasive influence tactic of having the recruits make their commitment on videotape and watch the video tape themselves.

Not All Youth Can Be Influenced To Violence

All of these are standard social-influence techniques well-grounded in psychological science. But many individuals do not let themselves be recruited to kill innocents as soon as they realize what act is intended. Some, who are recruited initially, quickly balk. And some who are indoctrinated do not carry out the act anyway. The same was true in Hitler's Germany and it was even true in the Western democracies during the Second World War. Not every air force officer was willing to be a party to incinerating thousands of women and children in Germany and Japan with urban carpet bombing.

In the rest of my lecture I want to draw from the accumulated research on aggressive and violent behavior to address two questions related to these very important individual differences.

- 1) What are the situational factors that make it more or less likely that young men and women will succumb to urgings to commit violent acts against innocent individuals, and
- 2) What are the characteristics of the young men and women who are most likely to carry out violent acts against innocent individuals when urged to do so for political reasons?

Again, because situation and person INTERACT to produce behavior, there can be little doubt that almost anyone can be motivated to violence against innocents in sufficiently extreme situations; and there can be little doubt that some people will behave violently against innocents in almost any situation. It is the product of situation and person that is determinant.

Social-Cognitive-Emotional Process Model

To explicate this process in more detail, I need to turn to the emerging unified process-model that is gaining acceptance among social-cognitive theorists as a way to understand the commission of aggressive/violent acts. While three specific models have been proposed respectively by Anderson and Bushman (2002), Dodge (1986), and Huesmann (1988, 1998), these models all adopt similar premises about the processing of information in social problem

solving, the social-cognitive structures involved, the interacting role of emotions and cognitions, and the interaction of person and situation. These models have provided a coherent way to think theoretically about aggression, and have also stimulated substantial research. They now can guide us in understanding the situations that make political violence against innocents most likely and in understanding which persons are most likely to commit the violent acts.

These models begin with the assumption that human memory can be represented as a complex associative network of nodes representing cognitive concepts and emotions. Experience leads to the development of links among elemental nodes. Sets of concepts that are strongly interconnected are known as knowledge structures. If these concepts are relevant to social behavior, we call them social cognitions. The activation of a simple node or a more complex knowledge structure or emotion at any time is determined by how many links to it have been activated as well as the strength of associations among the activated links. When total activation is above threshold, the knowledge structure or emotion is activated and "experienced". It is given its "meaning" by the nodes with which it is linked that are activated when it is activated. Partial, sub-threshold

activation of a node by a stimulus is, of course, what is called "priming".

Research has suggested that three social cognitions are particularly important in explaining individual and situational differences in the likelihood of violent behavior ---

1) The world schemas that the individual has encoded to represent the world. For example, is it a mean world or a nice world? These influence the attributions the individual makes about external events. Are others' actions hostile or benign, for example?

2) The repertoire of social scripts that an individual has encoded. What do we mean by a script? We mean a sequence of conditions, behaviors, and expected outcomes that can serve as a program for a sequence of social behaviors. Does the repertoire include mostly aggressive and violent programs for dealing with social problems, or are other programs encoded?

3) The normative beliefs an individual has encoded about what kinds of social scripts are appropriate and acceptable. Is violent behavior thought to be acceptable?

What determines what world schemas, social scripts, or normative beliefs most influence behavior at any time? Of course, no cognition can be activated unless it has been encoded. Among the encoded

cognitions those most strongly linked in the past to the individual's current emotional state and to the current situational cues will experience the greatest increase in activation. The sum of this activation and residual activation from very recent experiences will determine which social cognitions and emotions dominate. While this theory is usually called a social-cognitive theory, it could just as easily be called a social-cognitive-emotional theory. The links between encoded cognitive structures -- scripts, schemas, and beliefs -- and emotional responses are critical in determining what cognitions are activated most highly.

How a Terrorist Decides to Act

What happens when a potential young terrorist is faced with a decision on whether to act?

The same process operates as operates for any other social problem.

To begin with that person's current emotional state primes world schemas, scripts, and beliefs that in the past have been linked to this emotional state. For example, negative, sad, angry emotions raise the activation level of encoded mean world schemas. Scripts emphasizing violence and death are also more likely to be primed by negative emotions.

These emotional primings are then complemented by the effect of situational cues in priming specific cognitions related to violence and in priming additional emotions. For example, even a momentary exposure to a smiling person may dampen the effect of the negative emotions in priming violent thoughts while the sight of a gun may directly enhance the priming of violent thoughts.

These primed cognitions and emotions then serve as input to an attributional process aimed at interpreting the situation. For example, the potential terrorist makes attributions about the meaning the situation to which he or she is exposed and these attributions depend critically on his or her currently activated world schemas. We know that attribution of hostile intent, whether correct or incorrect, is a frequent precursor of aggressive violent acts. The potential terrorist who perceives the world as a mean place and who is in a very bad mood may attribute hostility even to the most innocent acts of children and women of another ethnic group. This is all the easier if the potential terrorist has a distorted schema of the other group that enables him to "dehumanize" them. Derogatory names for the other group and segregation from the other group promote such dehumanization and make hostile attributions more likely.

In the next stage the potential terrorist must select a script to guide his behavior. The same negative emotions and situational cues that primed mean world schemas are likely to prime violent scripts. And the hostile attributions resulting from the initial processing of the situational cues will make the priming of aggressive scripts even stronger. At the same time the potential terrorist's mood may be turning more negative due to the hostile attributions he has made. This increases even more the likelihood that a violent script will be activated.

Finally we come to perhaps the most important stage for understanding differences in the propensity to commit violent acts against innocents -- the script evaluation stage. The script is considered and evaluated in light of the normative beliefs the individual holds and the expected outcome from the script. Normative beliefs are both moral prescripts and practical filters for behavior. If one's normative beliefs are that violence against children is unacceptable, a retrieved script for violence against children will be rejected. Again, this evaluation is not only a cognitive process but an emotional process. Even if the script does not violate a normative belief, it may be rejected because it "feels bad." The emotional tone linked to the expected

outcome of a script is activated when the script is activated and the outcome is imagined. That emotional value is combined with the cognitive value of the outcome for a total evaluative value. If it is not sufficiently positive, the script will not be employed.

Situational Influences

This model explains some well known pieces of data about situational influences on human aggressive and violent behavior. For example, a principle well established by Berkowitz and others is that "when we feel bad, we are more likely to act bad" (Berkowitz, 1993). It does not matter much what makes us feel bad, and the bad feeling does not have to start out being anger. Any negative emotion -- sadness, fear, anger -- can increase the chances that we will behave aggressively. It follows that aversive situations, regardless of whether they are frustrating, depressing, or angering, make violent acts more likely. Why? Because the "bad feelings" are linked to violent scripts and hostile world schemas. Thus, "bad feelings" prime violent scripts and hostile world schemas which makes a violent act more likely according to our model. Thus, the daily environments of many young terrorists in which aversive stimulation is constant are ideal situations for increasing the risk of violent behavior.

A second well known situational fact about human aggression is that when we are sufficiently provoked, we "enjoy" hurting others (Baron, 1977). While unprovoked persons will halt actions that they learn are hurting others, the highly provoked person will increase behaviors that they learn are

really hurting others. Hurting others is rewarding in such situations. Thus the perception of hostile intent in innocent others or those who care deeply about the innocent others becomes vital because it becomes the provocation that makes hurting the innocent others rewarding. The potential terrorist whose mean world schema is activated and who attributes hostile intent and provocation to innocent others or, more likely, to those who care deeply about those others can "enjoy" hurting the innocent others. Hurting them will hurt those who have provoked the terrorist. That is why killing innocent women and children can truly be rewarding to a terrorist.

Person Factors

But even when situational factors converge to promote political violence, some or perhaps even most youth do not behave violently. Our social-cognitive-emotional model also provides a guide to person differences that promote violent behavior and how these differences likely develop. What characteristics should a youth have or acquire to make them most at risk for being manipulated into these violent acts? How can we grow a good terrorist?

Well, as the title of this essay suggested, we do not need to try very hard to create the conditions in which this can happen.

To begin with, our model suggests that **individuals with low arousal and little negative emotional reaction to violence** will be more likely to kill innocents without much remorse. Remember every potential script must go through an evaluative filtering process, and this process includes imagining the outcome of the script and its emotional tone. If the activated emotional arousal is not intense, negative and aversive, the script is much more likely to be employed. In fact, there is now a significant body of research by Raine, Venables, and Williams (1990), Farrington (1997), and others showing that **youth with lower baseline arousal** are in fact more likely to behave violently. Furthermore, there is recent evidence that those youth **who show less negative arousal to observing blood, gore, and violence** are more likely to behave aggressively (Huesmann, 2002; Kirwil, 2002; Moise-Titus, 1999).

What creates such persons? **Innate abnormalities in arousal systems** undoubtedly predispose some individuals in this direction. However, more important in the case of many young potential terrorists may be childhoods that include **overwhelming exposure to blood, gore, and violence** in their communities, among their friends and family, and in the mass media they see. They become habituated through

repeated exposures and these stimuli no longer produce the negative emotional reactions they once did. Consequently thinking about the unthinkable -- the outcome of a bomb exploding among innocent women and children -- is not unpleasant anymore and such scripts are more likely to be evaluated positively.

Repeated exposure to violence around them has three other important consequences for the potential terrorist youth according to our model.

- 1) First, it teaches them violent scripts. They encode the scripts they see others using and repeated observations make the scripts well encoded and highly accessible. This is standard observational learning.
- 2) Second, repeated observations of the violence and aggression around them reinforces their views that the world is a mean place. Their schemas about the world and others emphasize hostility and conflict. Such hostile world schemas make hostile attributions about others intentions more likely.
- 3) Third, exposure to violence and aggression all around them makes violence seem normative and acceptable. The normative beliefs they encode and later use to evaluate scripts are more likely to be accepting of violence and aggression.

If we want our budding terrorist to be even more likely to carry out a violent act against a specific population, another kind of exposure would also be valuable according to our model. Constant exposure to derogatory stereotyping of the target population and derogatory nicknames for them ('gooks,' 'huns,' 'dinks') by those with whom the young terrorist identifies -- his family, teachers, peers, media personalities, and heroes -- would lead to the encoding of negative-valenced attitudes toward the target population. This makes dehumanization of the target population easier. Dehumanization of the target prevents identification with the target and reduces empathy; so the value of the violent outcome is not reduced by the experience of vicarious pain. Additionally, normative beliefs about actions toward sub-humans can be employed in filtering potential scripts rather than normative beliefs about humans.

Of course, there are other individual characteristics not directly tied to experiences in a violent environment that will also enhance the likelihood of a young male or female carrying out violent acts against innocents. Biological predispositions toward hyperactivity and impulsivity may increase the chances, for example, as may low CNS serotonin and an inability to delay gratification or deal with frustration non-

aggressively. In our model these factors can be thought of as reducing the depth of processing in searching for social-scripts and in causing a greater focus on immediate gains and losses rather than long term gains and losses. To a youth who sees little positive long-term outcomes in life, the short-term gains associated with what he or she thinks is an heroic act of suicide will seem more attractive. If the youth has higher than average impulsivity and a lower than average ability to delay gratification, the short term gain of this immediately accessible script may push them to action.

And what are the short-term gains of killing innocent women and children? As argued earlier, hurting people who have provoked a youth or hurting people the provoker cares about produces some gain for the youth. However, an additional source of gain for the perpetrator of political violence can be the perceived gain in recognition and power they can achieve from their act, rather than any tangible gain. The manipulators of terrorist youth constantly emphasize the recognition and adulation that the youth's act will bring to them just as great war leaders and generals try to make their soldiers believe that killing the enemy will bring them recognition as heroes. This is perhaps one of the most important distinctions between the

motivations behind violent acts for direct personal gain and violent acts for political gain. The social-cognitive-emotional model requires that any script that is executed produce perceived gain to the perpetrator. The consequence is that youth who have a greater need for recognition and a greater need for power will be more susceptible to the blandishments of terrorist leaders and more likely to carry out the killing act.

Let me try to illustrate better how both the situational and person factors I have discussed influence terrorists' behavior in accord with my model by presenting one short case study. Let us consider the case of Ariene Ahmed, a 20-year-old Palestinian woman who at the last moment on Wednesday, May 22, 2002 decided not to blow herself up and kill scores of men, women, and children on a pedestrian mall in Rishon le Zion, Israel (Bennet, 2002)

We know more about her than many suicide terrorists because she surrendered to the Israeli authorities and talked freely about herself. She grew up in a broken family and was raised by conservative relatives against whom she rebelled, revealing a stubborn, impulsive streak. She grew up during the highly violent years of the 1980s and 1990s on the West Bank where she observed many violent acts. From this alone we would expect her to have been

desensitized to violence, to have acquired scripts for violent behavior, and to have developed a jaundiced view of the world as a hostile, mean place. However, she also fell madly in love with a terrorist leader who became her lover and molded her normative beliefs toward the acceptability of violent acts against Israelis. Then a series of situational events occurred which shaped her behavior as she moved toward her own terrorist act. Her lover was killed by the Israel army which, of course, depressed, angered, and provoked her, but which also made her value the future less. Her verbatim words about this are, "So I lost all my future." In other words she began to value short-term outcomes much more than long term possibilities; she began to want genuinely to hurt the society that had provoked her by killing her lover, and her dysphoric mood primed hostile world schemas and aggressive/violent scripts. She volunteered to carry out suicide training and was accepted, but the training was not of the sophisticated type I described earlier. Little attempt was made to use social-influence processes to ensnare her. Perhaps she would have gone no farther in acting out a bombing, but then she quarreled bitterly with a relative which made her even more angry and depressed. When right

afterwards, her group proposed that she proceed, she agreed.

Now all this fits pretty much with just what our social-cognitive-emotional model predicts. Dysphoric mood and provocation creating a desire to hurt and priming hostile world schemas and violent scripts. A focus on short-term outcomes. A history of long exposure to violence that teaches aggressive scripts and mean world schemas through observational learning and desensitizes negative emotional reactions to violence. Some signs of impulsivity and difficulty in delaying gratification and some signs of a need for power.

So why did Arien not complete her violent act? In her own words she says, "As I walked down the pedestrian mall, I looked at the sky, I looked at the people, and then I remembered a childhood belief, -- that nobody has the right to stop anybody's life."

In psychological terms, the positive elements of the situation -- the lovely sky, the smiling people -- primed positive affective feelings that counteracted her bad mood. Also, her mood may have improved because more time had gone by since her lover's death and quarrel with her relative. With a better mood and less focus on the provocation of her lover's death, the value of a script that hurt others declined and the value of a script that involved future life

increased. But perhaps most importantly, her better mood and the sight of the women and children around her primed the retrieval of the normative belief that "taking a life is wrong." As a result, the script for a violent bombing was finally rejected and the search for an alternative script began. Arien decided to surrender to Israeli authorities. She even then rejected the script of returning to her home as impossible because of the expected reaction of her handlers. She plans to settle in Jordan when released from prison because "my people won't have me." Such a view suggests that her need for recognition within her society may not have been very strong which may also have contributed to her turning about according to our model.

Of course, this is just one case study. To confirm a theory such as the one I have presented, we need to collect substantial amounts of empirical data. However, I am convinced that such data would confirm the major elements of the theory I have proposed.

Summary

Let me try to summarize my main points.

The meager research on those who carry out political acts of extreme violence knowingly against completely innocent men, women, and children suggests that the

perpetrators are seldom psychotic or abnormal in a clinical sense. Most commit their act under the strong influence of organizations who manipulate them into the act with social influence processes.

Nevertheless, some situations increase the risk of such acts, and some people are much more likely to commit such acts.

The social-emotional cognitive theory that has evolved to explain aggressive and violent individuals in general also can explain who might be most susceptible to committing terrorist acts, what environments mold them, and what immediate situations make their violent acts most likely.

For one thing, the budding terrorist should display low baseline arousal and show little emotional reaction to observing violence. Some individuals may be predisposed in this direction, but others may become habituated and desensitized to violence by repeated exposures in their environment or even in the media. We know that such low arousal individuals are more prone to engage in proactive aggression (Moise-Titus, 1999; Kirwil, 2002). We know that individuals desensitized to blood, gore, and violence are more prone to act violently (Moise-Titus, 1999).

Second, at the time he or she is required to act, the budding terrorist should "feel

really bad." This feeling may be predominately frustration or rage engendered by repeated aversive stimulations but it could also be dysphoria. We know that feeling bad, whatever the reason, makes people more aggressive (Berkowitz, 1993). The situation should also make the potential perpetrator feel provoked by the targets or those who care deeply about the targets; so he or she has a desire to hurt them (Baron, 1977). These feelings will prime hostile world schemas and aggressive scripts and will increase the positive evaluation of scripts with violent outcomes. Of course, some of the best environments for producing such "feelings" repeatedly in youth are environments widely prevalent in less developed parts of the world where violence and injustice are rampant and are observed repeatedly by the budding terrorist.

Third, the budding terrorist should have a distorted world schema that represents the world as a "mean" place where hostile, evil forces thrive. Such a schema makes it easy to dehumanize objectively innocent victims and see them as "enemies" or as non-human entities (Zimbardo, 1969). We know that individually aggressive youth typically engage in such hostile attributional biases (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski & Newman, 1990); and we should expect to find the same

in young terrorists. Again the violent environments of undeveloped, non-democratic countries with unidimensional information sources and mass media are ideal for promoting such thinking.

Fourth, the budding terrorist repertoire of social scripts should be dominated by those that emphasize violence and aggression. Again, a childhood environment of violence and aggression would be ideal for promoting the acquisition of such scripts through observational learning (Huesmann, 1998).

Fifth, the budding terrorist should be someone who finds social recognition and feelings of power gratifying. Killing innocent others is the ultimate demonstration of power over them, and social recognition as a hero is perhaps the largest reward that can be expected to be gained with such killings.

Finally, the budding terrorist should have developed normative beliefs that what they are going to do is "right," just as the individually aggressive youth needs to develop normative beliefs that aggression is O.K. for them (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). The belief may be based on religious indoctrination, strong prosocial ties for a community with a belief that the act will help them, or a strong need for the approval that it is perceived will come from the act.

Alternatively, normative beliefs approving of aggressive acts may simply be a consequence of observational learning in a highly violent environment.

In most cases where individuals kill objectively innocent men, women, and children for political purposes, many, if not all, of these cognitive-emotional processes have combined to create an individual who is susceptible to the situational and organizational forces that are proximate stimuli for the terrorist act. At that point, unfortunately, the organizational forces driving the terrorist forward generally are too powerful to be overcome by fears, beliefs, or emotions that may be stimulated in the terrorist when the victims are proximate.

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