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## BECOMING EVIL: THE MAKING OF TERRORISTS

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### ABSTRACT

Recognizing that humans are the weapons by which terror, whether anti-state or state-sponsored, is inflicted, this article critiques four "commonsense," but flawed arguments for the extraordinary origins of the making of terrorists and then outlines an explanatory model of the transformation process through which ordinary people become terrorists. Building on ultimate evolutionary influences, the model emphasizes three proximate, here and now constructions that impact individual behavior in situations of collective violence. The *Cultural Construction of Worldview* examines the influence of cultural models that are widely shared by the members of a perpetrator group. The *Psychological Construction of the "Other"* analyzes how victims of terrorism simply become the "objects" of perpetrators' actions. Finally, the *Social Construction of Cruelty* explores the mechanisms used in creating an immediate social context in which terrorists initiate, sustain, and cope with their cruelty.

"While nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him."

— Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky I.  
"Little Mohamed in His Blue Flip-Flops"

On September 11, 2001, Mohamed Atta hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 out of Boston and piloted it into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. In the days after the attack, Atta's hard gaze — staring from countless television screens and newspaper pages — became, for many, the face of evil incarnate. While Osama bin Laden remains the sinister presence behind the plot, Atta — who turned 33 just days before the attacks — is thought to be the frontline coordinator of the team of hijackers that took the lives of 2,996 victims. What type of person was capable of overseeing such an atrocity?

In a front page story in the *Los Angeles Times*, McDermott (2002) gave the world a compelling examination of the details of Mohamed Atta's life. Born in rural Egypt in 1968, Atta was nurtured by a close-knit family with a strict, austere, and ambitious father at the helm. He was generally described as unassuming, serious, aloof, and conscientious. His father called him "Bolbol," Arabic slang for a little singing bird (Cloud 2001). A "good boy" who was always at the top of his class, Atta followed his two sisters (one of whom became a university

lecturer, the other a doctor) to Cairo University, one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. While there, he was chosen for a major area of study in engineering and eventually assigned to the architecture program. Atta, an average student at university, was neither politically active nor particularly religious during his college years.

In the summer of 1992, Atta went to Hamburg, Germany to continue his studies. Away from home for the first time, he immediately began a strict pattern of praying at the mosque and observing a regimented Islamic diet. Originally denied entrance to the graduate architecture program at the University of Applied Sciences, Atta sued for admission and was quickly admitted. Just weeks into his first term, he abruptly quit and enrolled in an urban planning program at the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg. During his years at Hamburg, Atta was known as shy and tender as well as intense and inwardly focused.

In 1995, Atta made pilgrimage to Mecca and returned even more fervently religious. His visits to Al Quds, the most radical mosque in Hamburg, became more frequent — both for prayers and to talk with friends. By the fall of 1997, Atta had lost contact with the university. Over the next few years, U.S. investigators believe that Atta made several trips to Afghanistan for training at a camp run by al Qaeda, Bin Laden's terrorist network. By November 1998, in Hamburg, Atta had formed a new al Qaeda terrorist cell — the cell that would become the central planning point for the September 11 attacks. At the end of 1999, Atta returned to Cairo, the German equivalent of a master's degree in hand. In a coupling arranged by his father, Atta got engaged and then went back to Germany to continue work on a PhD. There would, of course, be no marriage, no doctorate.

Through McDermott's depiction of Atta, a less mysterious, more mundane man emerges than most of us would expect. In nearly all recollections, Atta is remembered as utterly and completely ordinary. As McDermott concludes: "... the image that lingers is of a man who was far too small to accomplish the huge thing he did. This was a man too timid even to knock on a professor's open office door. There is something deeply unsatisfying about this. We want our monsters to be monstrous. We expect them to be somehow equal to their crimes. More than anything, we want them to be extraordinary, to allow us to think the horrible thing itself is unlikely to be repeated. When we go looking for people capable of inflicting such great destruction, the last thing we expect to find is little Mohamed in his blue flip-flops" (p. A13).

## II. THE NATURE OF TERRORISM AND TERRORISTS

Mohamed Atta is just one of the millions of weeds of extraordinary evil that strangle the field of human experience. The evil he committed represents what most of us quickly recognize as "terrorism" and it is self-evident when we describe him as a "terrorist."

In academic circles, however, such self-evident clarity is elusive as more than 100 definitions of "terrorism" and "terrorist" compete for attention. The task of precisely distinguishing "terrorism" from "criminal violence" or "military action" (state-on-state or guerrilla) or "freedom fighting" seems as semantically impossible as it is analytically essential. Moreover, even those definitions that gain relatively broad acceptance often find their usage short-lived as they change with policy and political relations. For instance, four men who were formally despised as "terrorists" (at least in some quarters) have become Nobel Peace Prize winners, and Gerry Adams may one day become the fifth (Zulaika and Douglass 1996).

According to Title 22 of the United States Code, section 2656f(d), "terrorism" refers to "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (U.S. Department of State 2004, p. xii). While this remains the most oft-cited definition of terrorism — and is the one employed, since 1983, by the U.S. State Department, Department of Defense, and Central Intelligence Agency for statistical and analytical purposes — it is helpful to augment this definition by delineating two varieties of terrorism.

First, *anti-state terrorism* refers to an effort by nonstate individuals and insurgent, "subnational," groups to effect sweeping political or ideological change by the deliberate use of violence against civilians. Such actions, often called terrorism "from below," are motivated by grievances against, or ideologies opposed to, an existing state. It is politics by other means. The point of anti-state terrorism is to impose indirect pressure on the state through the psychological impact of violence or the threat of violence against civilians — either of which undermines public confidence in the invulnerability of, and protection from, the state. Anti-state terrorists see no distinction between combatants and non-combatants. From their perspective, the nation behind an army is a legitimate target of war. Bin Laden's February 1998 *fatwa*, for instance, called on "every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill Americans and plunder their money whenever and wherever they find it" (Makiya and Mneimneh 2002, p. 20). All told, Rummel (1994) estimates 500,000 killed in the twentieth century by anti-state terrorism. As the twenty-first century unfolds, the tragedy of September 11, coupled with the recent rise in terrorist activity in the Middle East and the July 2005 attacks in London, has kept anti-state terrorism on the cover of our magazines and at the front of our minds.

The term "terrorism," however, actually first gained visibility during the French Revolution of 1793–1894 as a description of purposeful and planned acts by those in power (usually a government) to maintain that power, rather than as a description of non-state attacks on civilians. In this light, our understanding of terrorism must be broad enough to apply to governments (and their agencies and proxies) as well as to non-governmental groups and individuals (Barker 2003). So, we

must posit a second variety of terrorism – *state terrorism*, often called terrorism “from above,” which is directed at maintaining the political and social status quo through intimidation, the use or threat of violence, and repression. Rummel (1994) has conservatively estimated that, during the first 87 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least 170 million — possibly as many as 360 million — men, women and children were victims of state terrorism. His figures do not even include the immense post-1987 death tolls from mass killing and genocide in Bosnia, Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, and other countries. As has been true throughout history, state-directed terrorism imposed on its own citizens continues to be the much larger contributor to human suffering than does anti-state terrorism.

To be sure, the bureaucratic mechanics of the “retail terror” practiced by anti-state individuals and groups and the “wholesale terror” practiced by states may differ. Temporally, state terrorism involves large numbers of humans killing other large numbers of humans over an extended period of time, while anti-state terrorism generally involves both fewer perpetrators and fewer victims over a less sustained period of time. Ultimately, however, the effects of anti-state and state terrorism on people and politics are similar. Underlying both is the fact that *humans are the weapons by which terror, whether anti-state or state-sponsored, is inflicted.*

### III. THE EXTRAORDINARY ORIGINS OF TERRORISTS

In the aftermath of September 11, even as we celebrated and affirmed the ordinariness of people who did extraordinary good in the midst of that tragedy, we continued to retreat to our belief that the perpetrators of this extraordinary evil had to have indeed been extraordinary in some way. We did not want to humanize the terrorists because, in so doing, we would be brought face-to-face with the discomfiting reality of the ordinariness of those who perpetrate extraordinary evil. It was easier to flinch and dismiss all of the terrorists as monsters, too unlike us to be understood. To maintain our illusion that the majority of extraordinary evil has correspondingly extraordinary origins, we generally fall back on any of four “commonsense” explanations. Each of these explanations has an intuitive explanatory appeal and offers a certain degree of emotional comfort. Each, though, also have serious flaws that limit our understanding of who becomes a terrorist and why.

#### The Nature of the Collective

Intuitively, many of us recognize that group dynamics can, to some extent, alter the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals within a group. At times, there seems to be something about the nature of the collective — a small band of marauders, an army battalion, a mob,

a social or political organization, an office staff, a nation — that brings out our worst tendencies. We have to be careful with the idea, however, that it is the *group* rather than the *individuals* in it that best explains evil. Being in a group does not *inevitably* predispose us to commit acts of evil that we would never dream of doing as individuals. Rather, group interaction tends to intensify pre-existing opinions and behaviors. A group, interacting in isolation from moderating influences, becomes progressively more extreme than the sum of its individual members. Group interaction is best understood as a social amplifier that strengthens the preexisting signals of the individuals in the group — whether evil or good. The result is often extreme acts — evil or good — that the individuals, apart from the group, would never have committed. In groups, not only do bigots become despisers, but also givers become more philanthropic.

So, it is *not* the nature of the collective that makes terrorists; it is the nature of the individuals that make up the collective. There *is* a psychological continuity between people acting as individuals and people acting as group members. The dynamics of a collective are best understood by the wills and ideologies of the individuals within it. To divorce groups from the reality of the nature of the individuals within them is to misplace the blame for the origins of terrorism.

#### The Influence of an Extraordinary Culture or Ideology

Cultural characteristics are critically relevant in the making of terrorists and matter in an important way in explaining anti-state and state-sponsored terrorism. It is too easy to say, however, that *only* an extraordinary culture and *only* an extraordinary ideology can produce terrorists. We want to assume that terrorism is only inherited from cultures and ideologies because then we can believe that terrorism is curable. Simply change the culture or ideology and you can change the mindset that leads to terrorism. Admitting that culture or ideology may be simply the pretext by which we rationalize a more general wish to dominate and destroy is much more discomfiting.

Moreover, by ascribing the crimes and their perpetrators to a particular culture or ideology, *their* behavior becomes “unfathomable” and outside of “our” world. Only Islamist fundamentalists are capable of evil on the scale of September 11; nobody else. As a consequence, terrorism cannot — in theory — be repeated by someone else, somewhere else. Unfortunately, the reality is different. Terrorism has been, is being, and will be repeated by many other people in all corners of the globe.

#### Psychopathic Persons

Clearly, there are some terrorists who are deranged psychopaths or otherwise psychologically disturbed. For instance, Klaus Junschke, a mental patient, was one of the most ardent members of the Socialist

Patients' Collective (SPK), a German terrorist group working with the Baader-Meinhof Gang (Hudson 1999). Are there enough such people, though, to responsibly consider mental illness as a predominant cause of participation in terrorism?

In the state terrorism perpetrated by the Nazis, there is no evidence to show that either the commanders or rank-and-file personnel of the Nazi killing units were specially selected brutes or sadists. As a matter of fact, a systematic effort was made to weed out all those who might be psychopaths because of a fear that they would not be as efficient, effective, and dependable as killers. "Ordinary" and "sane" people, whose loyalty was to a worthy cause and who could be bent to the commission of evil in support of that cause, were thought to be much better candidates. Likewise, an early study on the psychology of terrorists in Northern Ireland concluded that "... there is no psychological evidence that terrorists are diagnosably psychopathic or otherwise clinically disturbed. Indeed, what little evidence there is on this topic tends to point in the opposite direction" (Heskin 1984, p. 92). A 1999 U.S. government report on profiling terrorists similarly concluded "... that there is little reliable evidence to support the notion that terrorists in general are psychologically disturbed individuals ... There is considerable evidence, on the contrary, that international terrorists are generally quite sane" (Hudson 1999, p. 46). Most recently, Atran (2003) also has concluded "... that suicide terrorists have no appreciable psychopathology and are at least as educated and economically well off as their surrounding populations" (p. 1535).

The lack of overt psychopathology among perpetrators shouldn't come as that great of a surprise. Clearly, psychopaths—not easily depended on, often rebelling against authority, out of touch with reality, consistently and extremely irresponsible — are not easily used in anti-state or state terrorism. Hudson (1999) even argues that "candidates [for terrorist groups] who exhibit signs of psychopathy or other mental illness are deselected in the interest of group survival... A member who exhibits traits of psychopathy or any noticeable degree of mental illness would only be a liability for the group, whatever his or her skills" (pp. 91–92). Similarly, Dietz (cited in Giese 2001) maintains that it was "unlikely that any of the terrorists [of September 11] suffered from a serious mental illness." In fact, quite the opposite may have been true because "in order to be chosen for such a mission, [the terrorists] would need to prove themselves trustworthy, reliable, and dedicated" to a cause.

In short, where they exist, terrorists characterized by psychopathology are far too few to account for the litany of atrocities that occurred in the name of terrorism. Indeed, as McCauley (2002) writes: "... terrorism would be a trivial problem if only those with some kind of psychopathology could be terrorists" (p. 6). The academic consensus seems to be that the only connection between mental illness and terrorism is an a posteriori one — the possibility that the stressors that occur because of long-term engagement in terrorist activity may

subsequently result in psychological disturbance in terrorist individuals (Weatherston and Moran 2003). As much as we may wish it to be true, terrorists cannot so easily be explained away a priori as disturbed, highly abnormal individuals.

### Specific Personality Profile

But wouldn't it stand to reason that terrorists *would* at least be characterized by a homogenous, nonpathological personality profile? Moreover, wouldn't this personality profile — though not abnormal in a clinical sense — be noticeably different from the rest of us? In short, isn't there a single terrorist personality profile? Decades of research on perpetrators of terrorism suggest not. As a matter of fact, it appears that the variations from person to person are much more striking than the similarities (see, for instance, Fields, 1986 and Merari, 1994).

Even where there is limited homogeneity of personality characteristics, we are still faced with another, equally important, question. Are these commonalties in psychological functioning *unique* to terrorists as a group or do we also find these characteristics in non-perpetrator groups (for example, high-level, successful business executives and bureaucrats, non-killing military personnel, lawyers, teachers, psychiatrists, etc.)? In other words, do these characteristics discriminate, or differentiate, terrorists from non-terrorists? Clearly, the answer is "no." The few personality structures that describe the psychological organization of a majority of the terrorists are also common to millions of other individuals who may have done nothing more criminal in their lives than commit a parking meter violation.

Today, the search for a specific personality profile of terrorists remains elusive. To bluntly suggest that all terrorists have a common, homogenous extraordinary personality profile that predisposes them to the commission of terrorism is an obvious oversimplification. Just because they share, to some degree, a common pattern of behavior does not mean that they also shared a common underlying personality. We cannot justifiably speak of a single personality profile that is inevitably expressed among all, or most, terrorists. Terrorists are not a homogenous group of individuals who have more in common with each other than with any other group of people. As Hudson (1999) concludes: "People who have joined terrorist groups have come from a wide range of cultures, nationalities, and ideological causes, all strata of society, and diverse professions. Their personalities and characteristics are as diverse as those of people in the general population. There seems to be a general agreement among psychologists that there is no particular personality attribute that can be used to describe the terrorist or any 'personality' that is distinctive of terrorists...The personalities of terrorists may be as diverse as the personalities of people in any lawful profession" (pp. 67, 91).

#### IV. THE ORDINARY ORIGINS OF TERRORISTS

A myopic focus on the extraordinary nature of the collective, the influence of an extraordinary culture or ideology, the alleged psychopathology of terrorists, or on their supposed extraordinary personalities, tells us more about our own personal dreams of how we wish the world to work than it does about the reality of perpetrator behavior. In that role, such explanations satisfy an important emotional demand of distancing *us* from *them*. The truth seems to be, though, that the most outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality, not their abnormality. An examination of their lives reminds us that most terrorists are extraordinary only by what they do, not by who they are. The majority of terrorists are not distinguished by background, personality, or previous political affiliation or behavior as having been men or women unusually likely or fit to be mass executioners. Recognizing the ordinariness of terrorists does not diminish the horror of their actions. It increases it. As we look at terrorists, we need no longer ask who these people are. We know who they are. They are you and I.

There is now a more urgent question to ask. *How* are ordinary people, like you and me, made into terrorists? The importance of this question is only matched by the complexity of its answer. The precise “how” of the transformation process remains veiled from us, as it may have remained veiled from the men and women who experienced it. The multiplicity of variables that lead an ordinary person to commit terrorism is difficult to pin down. It is impossible to establish general “laws” that apply to all individuals in all contexts and at all times.

Regardless, we are now in a position to advance some hypotheses that may offer a solution more right than wrong. The remainder of this article outlines a general explanatory model (see Figure 1; modified from Waller 2002) of the making of terrorists. The model — drawing on existing literature; eyewitness accounts by killers, bystanders, and victims from a wide range of both state and anti-state terrorism; and classic and contemporary research in social and evolutionary psychology — is not an invocation of a single broad-brush psychological state or *event* to explain the making of terrorists. Rather, focusing less on the outcome, it is a detailed analysis of a *process* through which the perpetrators themselves — either in committing atrocities or in order to commit atrocities — are changed.

The model recognizes that human behavior is multiply influenced and that any answer to the question “Why did that person act as he or she did?” can be examined at two levels of analysis — the proximate and the ultimate. As Pinker (2002) describes, “A *proximate* cause of behavior is the mechanism that pushes behavior buttons in real time, such as the hunger and lust that impel people to eat and have sex. An *ultimate* cause is the adaptive rationale that led the proximate cause to evolve, such as the need for nutrition and reproduction that gave us the drives of hunger and lust” (p. 54). In other words, proximate

influences refer to those immediate influences closest to the present moment; “how” a behavior occurs in the here and now. Ultimate influences, conversely, refer to those deeper influences from our evolutionary past; “why” a behavior evolved by natural selection. It is these ultimate influences that reveal the nature of human nature and, in so doing, help us understand the “why” behind “how” ordinary people become terrorists.

The concept of a human nature has returned to the front of the academic conversation in the social sciences. Leading this charge is the field of *evolutionary psychology* (EP) — a marriage of the cognitive revolution in psychology of the 1950s and 1960s and the revolution in evolutionary biology of the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, EP is a multidisciplinary approach within the Darwinian paradigm that seeks to apply theories of evolutionary biology in order to understand human psychology. The specific goal is to understand the design of the human mind in terms of Darwinian evolution. This is really engineering in reverse. In forward-engineering, we design a machine to do something. In reverse-engineering, we figure out what a machine — in this case, the human mind — was designed to do.

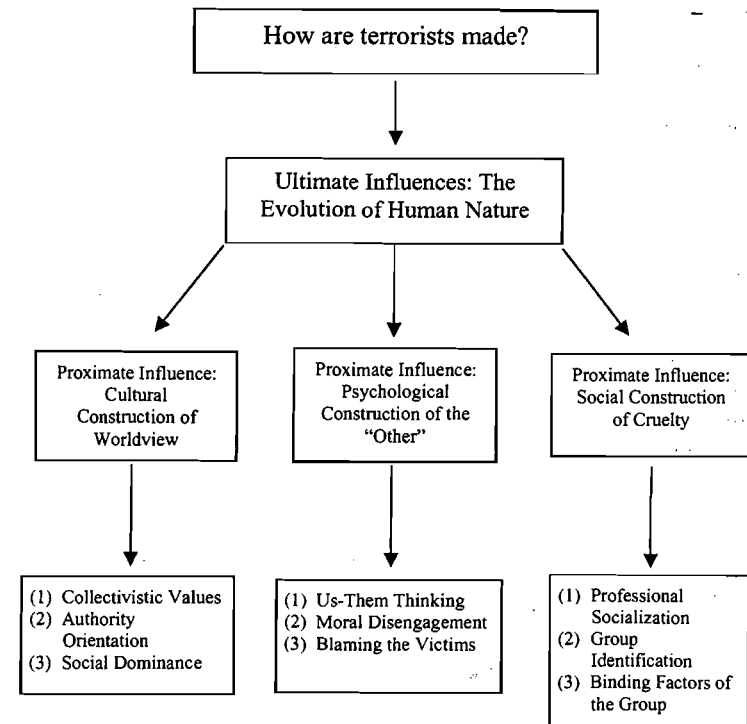


Figure 1. A Model of the Making of Terrorists

This approach says that human nature consists of a large number of evolved psychological mechanisms, or adaptations, that give rise to our natural instincts and tendencies. It reminds us that we are part of the natural world and, like other animals, we have our own particular psychological tendencies that animate many of our behaviors. We are obligated to examine the impact of *what* we are upon *who* we are in understanding how ordinary people commit extraordinary evil. As Singer (1999) has argued, "We are the first generation to understand not only that we have evolved, but also the mechanisms by which we have evolved and how this evolutionary heritage influences our behaviour.... For the first time since life emerged from the primeval soup, there are beings who understand how they have come to be what they are" (p. 63). To not seek such evidence is like failing to search a suspect for a concealed weapon.

At first glance, some of the evolved psychological adaptations appear to support our capacity for cooperative, caring, nonviolent relations—love, friendship, cooperativeness, preferential and reciprocal altruism, nurturance, friendship, compassion, communication, a sense of fairness, and, even, self-sacrifice—in short, the things that hold society together. In many ways, we owe our success as a species to these prosocial adaptations. EP warns us, however, that self-congratulation about our human nature is premature. Beneath our social surface is a seamy underside of human nature that is much less flattering. For instance, our prosocial adaptations are qualified by the reality that we tend to reserve major doses of "goodness" either for close kin or for non-kin who show signs of someday returning the favor. Underlying our acts of "charity" for other organisms are a strain of selfish and aggressive traits that are part of our inherently self-centered human nature; sometimes altruism and cooperation turn out to be the most effective ways to compete. Moreover, our Swiss Army knife of adaptations also include some darker ultimate motives — such as intergroup competition for dominance, boundary definition, and fear of social exclusion — that often tear society apart.

In short, we have been endowed by evolution with a host of needs and desires, such that it is often difficult for one person to pursue his or her needs and desires without coming into conflict with other people. However deeply buried, the capacities for evil are within all of us. We have a hereditary dark side that is universal across humankind. Acts of evil are not beyond, beneath, or outside ordinary humanness. Natural selection has left deep traces of design in our minds and at least some of those designs leave us evolutionarily primed with the capacity for evil — including the perpetration of terrorism.

While EP describes the ultimate evolutionary capacities common to all of us, this understanding must be couched in the context of the more proximate and immediate cultural, psychological, and social constructions that converge interactively to activate these capacities. Building on these ultimate influences, the model emphasizes three proximate, here and now constructions that impact individual behavior

in situations of collective violence. The *Cultural Construction of Worldview* examines the influence of cultural models that are widely shared by the members of a perpetrator group. The *Psychological Construction of the "Other"* analyzes how victims of terrorism simply become the "objects" of perpetrators' actions. Finally, the *Social Construction of Cruelty* explores the mechanisms used in creating an immediate social context in which terrorists initiate, sustain, and cope with their cruelty.

### Cultural Construction of Worldview

All cultures leave their fingerprints on the members within them — most often through the transmission of a worldview. A worldview includes the presuppositions, intentions, meanings, rules, norms, values, principles, practices, and activities through which people live their lives. Cognitive anthropology understands worldview in the rich theoretical context of cultural models. As Hinton (1998) describes, "cultural models are largely tacit knowledge structures that are both widely shared by and mediate the understanding of the members of a social group" (p. 96). In other words, cultural models are the constituent elements of a worldview which give us the background, or lens, through which we interpret our social world and make judgments about appropriate responses. There are three specific cultural models — related to *collectivistic values*, *authority orientation*, and *social dominance* — that are particularly relevant to understanding the making of terrorists.

*Collectivistic values* of obedience, conformity, tradition, safety, and order form a worldview in which group membership shapes and completes individuals. Group-based identity — whether centered on race, ethnicity, tribe, kin, religion, or nationality — becomes a central and defining characteristic of one's personal identity and overshadows the self. Group goals become indistinguishable from individual goals. Conflict in a collectivistic culture is intergroup since group membership (often based on mythic blood ties or shared history) is enduring, stable, and permanent and has an existence beyond the individual. When group membership is seen as impermeable and fixed, the potential to view other groups as perpetual threats is heightened.

Historically, terrorist groups have emphasized collectivistic values that make group membership central to personal identity. Terrorist groups have been particularly adept at using such collectivistic values to highlight boundaries between in-groups and out-groups by making extreme categorical judgments based on the polar opposites of "good us" versus "bad them." Our cause is sacred; theirs is evil. We are righteous; they are wicked. We are innocent; they are guilty. We are the victims; they are the victimizers. It is rarely *our* enemy or *an* enemy, but *the* enemy — a usage of the definite article that hints of something fixed and immutable, abstract and evil.

A cultural model of collectivistic values often is cultivated in concert with a highly salient cultural model of *authority orientation*, a

way of ordering the social world and relating to people according to their position and power in hierarchies. This is a cultural model exemplified by a preference for hierarchical, vertical relationships with a clear delineation of spheres of power. Such a cultural model cultivates individuals who enjoy obeying authority and exercising power over those below them; who prefer order and predictability. While a certain degree of authority orientation is required in all social systems, a culture that inculcates an excessively strong authority orientation nurtures individuals who are less likely to oppose leaders who scapegoat, or advocate violence against, a particular target group.

We also should recognize that religion is the part of culture that, for many, promotes the strongest model of authority orientation. In the making of terrorists, religious commitment — including the extreme of martyrdom — is especially potent. Handwritten copies of a five-page Arabic document found by the FBI after the September 11 attack made repeated mention of martyrdom as a pure act of worship, pleasing to God, and part of a larger sacred drama. In the document, the hijackers are reminded to repeatedly recite invocations silently to fortify their resolve at each stage of the mission. Afterwards, they are told to “Smile and feel secure, God is with the believers, and the angels are guarding you without you feeling them” (Makiya and Mneimneh 2002, p. 18). Lest they waver, they are reminded of the “Paradise of Eternity” and “heavenly brides” that await them in the afterlife. They are even told what their last words should be seconds before the target: “There is none worthy of worship but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

Finally, given the role of hierarchical systems in cultural models of authority orientation, it is necessary to examine the ultimate origins of hierarchies and how such hierarchies are perpetuated and legitimated. Aside from the sexual drive, evolutionary psychology suggests that one of the most universal and powerful motivating forces in animals is the desire for *social dominance*. This desire, leading to differences in rank and status, can be defined as the set of sustained aggressive-submissive relations among individual animals. In a group, these relations form a hierarchical structure, commonly called a social dominance hierarchy. In a social dominance hierarchy, some individuals within a group reliably gain greater access than other individuals to key resources — particularly resources that contribute to survival and reproductive success.

In addition to recognizing the ultimate adaptive value of social dominance hierarchies, it is important to understand the real-time behavioral consequences of a psychological adaptation for social dominance and the ways in which cultural models of social dominance are often perpetuated and legitimated by ideologies, myths, and symbols. Occasionally, our desire for social dominance has prosocial consequences as we realize that helping others creates friendships and coalitions that are useful in our struggle for power. At other times, however, our evolved desire for social dominance means that we have a predisposition to respond to certain kinds of situations aggressively

(sometimes even violently) to get our way. Violence works as a means of getting some contested resource by increasing the cost of that resource to another individual. Moreover, once we get past initial inhibitions against aggressive and violence behavior, such behavior rapidly escalates and increases over time and seems, in part, to become self-reinforcing. In short, aggression and violence often function to increase our status and power within a social dominance hierarchy.

### Psychological Construction of the “Other”

Implied in these cultural models, and certainly inherent in a terrorist worldview, is the obliteration of a common ground between perpetrators and victims. How do victims simply become objects of the perpetrators’ actions? How do perpetrators define the target of their atrocities in such a way as to “excommunicate” them from a common moral community? There are three mechanisms central to understanding the psychological construction of the “other” — *us-them thinking*, *moral disengagement*, and *blaming the victims*.

Human minds are compelled to define the limits of the tribe. Kinship, however defined, remains an important organizing principle for most societies in the world. Knowing who is kin, knowing who is in our social group, has a deep importance to species like ours. We construct this knowledge by categorizing others as “us” or “them.” We have an evolved, universal capacity for *us-them thinking* in which we see our group as superior to all others and may even be reluctant to recognize members of other groups as deserving of equal respect.

Us-them thinking, does not lead us to hate all outgroups. Social exclusion, let alone anti-state and state terrorism, is not an inevitable consequence of us-them thinking. We are reminded, however, that, once identified with a group, we find it easy to exaggerate differences between our group and others, enhancing in-group cooperation and effectiveness, and— frequently —intensify-ing antagonism with other groups. This process helps us understand how the suggestive message of us against them can be ratcheted up to the categorically compelling kill or be killed.

The *moral disengagement* that often results from us-them thinking is not simply a matter of moral indifference or invisibility. Rather, it is an active, but gradual, process of detachment by which some individuals or groups are placed outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. How do terrorists regulate their thinking so as to disengage, or not feel, their moral scruples about harming others?

There are a variety of disengagement practices used by perpetrators to make their reprehensible conduct acceptable and to distance them from the moral implications of their actions. For instance, there is a moral justification in which terrorism is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. Perpetrators may believe this rationalization

to such an extent that their evil is not only morally justifiable (right to do), but becomes an outright moral imperative (wrong not to do it). As Della Porta (1992) concluded from a study of Italian and German militants, perpetrators using moral justification may "began to perceive themselves as members of a heroic community of generous people fighting a war against 'evil'" (p. 286).

Moral disengagement also is facilitated by the dehumanization of the victims — categorizing a group as inhuman either by using categories of subhuman creatures (that is, animals) or by using categories of negatively evaluated superhuman creatures (such as demons and monsters). Dehumanization is most likely when the target group can be readily identified as a separate category of people belonging to a distinct racial, ethnic, religious, or political group that the terrorists regard as inferior or threatening. These isolated subgroups are stigmatized as alien and memories of their past misdeeds, real or imaginary, are activated by the dominant group. The terrorist acts of September 11, for example, were animated by a depiction of all Americans as the purveyors of all that is wrong in the world. Osama bin Laden often spoke of the decadent culture and imperial government of America that was responsible for polluting and oppressing the Islamic world.

The dehumanization of victims helps perpetrators to justify their hurtful behavior. A common form of dehumanization is the use of language to redefine the victims so they will be seen as warranting the aggression. The surreal gentility of the euphemistic labeling of evil actions central to the moral disengagement of the perpetrators is complemented by a barbarity of language that dehumanizes the victims. Perpetrators so consistently dehumanize their victims that the words themselves become substitutes for perceiving human beings. Before the Japanese performed medical experiments on human prisoners in World War II, they named them *maruta* — logs of wood. The Greek torturers studied by Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros (1986) referred to their victims as "worms." The Hutu extremists called the Tutsi *inyenzi*, meaning cockroaches or insects. Interestingly, a synonym for cockroach in Polish is *prusak*, meaning Prussian, and the German equivalent is *Russe*, meaning Russian. Victims of Italian and German militants were called "tools of the system," "pigs," or "watch dogs." There is even a quantitative process of dehumanization in which victims become mere statistics — bodies to be counted and numbers to be entered into reports. Reduced to data, dehumanized victims lose their moral standing and become objects requiring disposal. Such dehumanization often leads to an escalation of the brutality of the extraordinary evil.

Terrorists further facilitate moral disengagement by using euphemistic language to make their atrocities respectable and, in part, to reduce their personal responsibility for it. By masking their evil in innocuous or sanitizing jargon, their actions lose much of their moral repugnancy. Mass murder becomes "ethnic cleansing," "bush clearing," or "liquidation." The camouflage vocabulary used by the Nazis to cover

their extraordinary evil was especially striking — "final solution," "special treatment," "evacuation," "spontaneous actions," "resettlement," and "special installations," among many others.

Finally, the psychological construction of the "other" feeds on itself and is driven by our brain's remarkable capacity to seek, and find, explanation in the events surrounding us, our actions, and the behaviors of people with whom we interact. We recognize that victims can be grouped in two broad categories — those who deserve their suffering and those who do not deserve their suffering. We know that bad things do happen to good people. To a large degree, we recognize the reality is that it is not a just world.

But we do not so easily relinquish our hopeful illusion of a world that is fair and just. We hold on to that notion, however misguided, to give us the courage to go out into the world and to send our children out into the world. Our need to believe in a just world overwhelms our recognition that bad things can happen to good people. As a result, we often assume that victims deserve, and can be blamed for, their fates. Indeed, we show a hardy cognitive tendency to search for ways to blame individuals for their own victimization. On the whole, the general tendency of *blaming the victims* for their own suffering is a central truth about human experience. For perpetrators, this tendency is invaluable in our striking propensity to devalue victims and their suffering. We will rearrange our perception of people and events so that it seems everyone is getting what they deserve. Victims must be suffering because they have done "something," must somehow be inferior or dangerous or evil, or because a higher cause is being served. The belief that the world is a just place leads us to accept the suffering of others more easily, even of people we ourselves have harmed.

### Social Construction of Cruelty

In addition to the cultural construction of worldview and the psychological construction of the "other," a thorough understanding of how terrorists are made requires an analysis of the real-time power of situational influences on individual behavior. A social construction of cruelty makes each terrorist believe that all people are capable of doing what they do. It is an inverted moral universe, shaped by a process of brutalization, in which right has become wrong; healing has become killing; life has become death. A social construction of cruelty envelops terrorists in a social context that encourages and rewards evil. We must borrow the perspective of the terrorists and view their actions, not as the work of "madmen," but as actions with a clear and justified purpose — as defined by a social construction of cruelty. There are three momentum-inducing features of a social construction of cruelty that enable terrorists to initiate, sustain, and cope with their cruelty — *professional socialization, group identification, and binding factors of the group.*

Newcomers to a social context of cruelty are typically in the position of someone who does not know his or her way around and knows it. It is natural for them to seek information from others to learn which behaviors are acceptable or not acceptable in the organization. *Professional socialization*, usually institutionalized in military or paramilitary organizations, often takes the form of a sequence of seemingly small, innocuous incremental steps — a series of escalating commitments. From 1967 through 1974, the process of escalating commitments was used by the military regime then in power in Greece to train torturers (Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros 1986). In a systematic process of escalating commitments, recruits underwent physically brutal initiation rites. At the same time as they were cursed, punched, kicked, and flogged, they were told how fortunate they were to be invited into such an elite organization. They were then subjected to torture themselves (as if were a normal act), then assigned to guard prisoners, then to participate in arresting squads, then ordered to hit prisoners, then to observe torture and, finally, to practice torture in group beatings and a variety of other brutal methods. Once the training was complete, a carrot-and-stick strategy of special benefits coupled with threats and punishment for disobedience kept the perpetrators committed to their tasks.

Perhaps most relevant to professional socialization, however, is a merger of role and person through which evil-doing organizations can change the people in them over time. When one performs the behaviors appropriate for a given role, one often acquires the attitudes, beliefs, values, and morals consistent with that role and its behaviors. Seen in this light, the egregious brutality of terrorists does not automatically indicate an *inherent*, pre-existing brutality; not everyone playing a brutal role has to have sadistic traits of character. Rather, brutality can be a consequence, not only a cause, of being in a duly certified and legitimized social hierarchy committed to evil. In other words, the nature of the tasks of atrocity may have been sufficient to produce that brutality even if the perpetrators were not initially sadists. It may be a vicious social arrangement, and not the preexisting viciousness of the participants, that lead to the cruel behaviors exhibited by terrorists.

The merger of role and person has tremendous capacity for internalizing evil and shaping later evil behaviors. Most of us easily slip into the roles society provides us. A person who becomes invested in the logic and practices of an evil-doing organization becomes owned by it. In a self-perpetuating cycle of evil-doing, our behaviors and attitudes feed on each other as this altered psychological framework produces further changes in behavior that lead to more profound alterations in our psychological framework.

As we saw in our discussion of collectivistic values, *group identification* — an emotional attachment to a group — is a potent influence on an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Group identification, whether centered on race, ethnicity, tribe, kin, religion, or nationality, can become a central and defining characteristic of one's

personal identity and may even overshadow the self. We can identify with a group, and against other groups, to such a degree that group identification comes to dominate our individual thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, often against the interests and welfare of other groups.

As one negative example of the social amplification in groups, McCauley and Segal (1987) analyzed terrorist organizations around the world and found that terrorism arises among people whose shared grievances bring them together. As they interact in isolation from moderating influences, they become progressively more extreme — both as a group and as individuals. The result is violent acts of evil that the individuals, apart from the group, likely would never have committed — at least not to the same degree. Similarly, Sprinzak (1990) notes: "It appears that, as radicalization depends, the collective group identity takes over much of the individual identity of the members; and, at the terrorist stage, the group identity reaches its peak" (p. 79).

Why do terrorists tend to submerge their own identities into the group? In a context of cruelty, there are two specific mechanisms that extend and amplify the power of group identification — repression of conscience and rational self-interest. Group identification carries with it a repression of conscience where "outside" values are excluded and locally generated values dominate. Such a repression of conscience serves a self-protective function, as well as having a progressively desensitizing effect on the perpetrators, and is facilitated in social contexts that promote diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation.

Diffusion of responsibility is accomplished by bureaucratic organization into cells and columns as well as by a routinization of bureaucratic subroutines — a segmentation and fragmentation of the killing tasks — in which responsibility for evil is divided among members of a group. Such division of labor, in addition to making the killing process more efficient and effective, allows terrorists to reduce their identification with the consequences of their evil. Once activities are routinized into detached subfunctions, perpetrators shift their attention away from the morality of what they are doing to the operational details and efficiency of their specific job. They are then able to see themselves totally as performers of a role — as participants *in*, nor originators *of*, evil. It is easier for terrorists to avoid the implications of their evil since they are focusing on the *details* of their job rather than on its *meaning*.

The segmented activities of bureaucratic organizations also provide a cloak of deindividuation that facilitates the commission of evil. Deindividuation refers to a state of relative anonymity in which a person cannot be identified as a particular individual but only as a group member. The concept usually includes a decreased focus on personal identity, loss of contact with general social norms, and the submergence of the individual in situation-specific group norms. These are conditions that confer anonymity and increase the likelihood of evil as people partially lose awareness of themselves as individuals and cease to evaluate their own actions thoughtfully.

In addition, it is important for us to examine the ways in which group identification fulfills, and shapes, perpetrators' rational self-interests. Generally speaking, most perpetrators of terrorism work within the context of a military or paramilitary organization. In that context, there is a logic of incentives enmeshed with professional self-interest — ambitions, advancement, and careerism — that certainly plays a role in understanding their behavior. Moreover, there often is a mutually reinforcing, and deadly, compatibility of one's professional self-interests with a larger political or social interest in annihilation of a specific target group.

In terms of personal self-interest, the very concrete and material rewards (for example, acquisition of land, money, goods) of committing evil are augmented by symbolic, psychological returns. Serraj, a psychiatrist in Gaza who has studied the effects of the occupation and resistance on young Palestinians, states: "When you join one of these militant organizations, you suddenly have access to guns and grenades and all these symbols of man's power. This brings back to the children their early traumatic experience and puts them in a position to say: 'I am not powerless like my father was. I am in control'" (cited in Rubin 2002, p. 54).

Finally, a social construction of cruelty relies on *binding factors of the group*, or cementing mechanisms that endow a social context with at least minimal stability. Such binding factors are the pressures that work to keep people within an evildoing organization or hierarchy. They constitute the social authority of a group and hold the individual tightly to a rigid definition of the situation, closing off the freedom of movement to focus on features of the situation other than its authority structure.

One significant binding factor is the explicit, or implicit, dynamic of conformity to peer pressure. Military science is replete with assertions that the cohesive bonds soldiers form with one another in military and paramilitary organizations are often stronger than the bonds they will form with anyone else at any other point in their lifetimes. Among people who are bonded together so intensely, there is a powerful dynamic of conformity to peer pressure — or "mutual surveillance" — in which the individual cares so deeply about his comrades and what they think of him that he would rather die than let them down. Conformity to peer pressure certainly helps sustain terrorists' involvement in evil. It is difficult for anyone who is bonded by links of mutual affection and interdependence to break away and openly refuse to participate in what the group is doing, even if it is perpetrating atrocities.

What are the ultimate influences from our evolutionary past that make conformity to peer pressure so potent an influence on human behavior? A wealth of psychological research supports the idea that conformity, while it may vary in degree across cultures and eras, is a human universal. Research on the socialization of children suggests that we have an innate capacity to perceive and conform to group norms and

behaviors. Asch's (1955) classic studies on group pressure gave us a compelling illustration of the degree to which people will conform — even when the correct, nonconforming response is unambiguous and there is no pressure (in the forms of rewards or punishments) to conform. As Logan and Qirko (1996) conclude: "There is considerable support for the suggestion that conformity is an evolved, nonrational human universal ... ethnographic studies provide cross-cultural evidence for the importance of conformity" (pp. 625–626).

Another significant binding factor is kin recognition cues that allow us to move from a biological definition of kinship to a social definition of kinship (that is "fictive kin"). Such cues are important because kin recognition is so strongly related to altruistic behavior in many species. Johnson (1986) has suggested that altruism for the benefit of non-kin can be fostered by cues of *association*. In other words, we are evolutionary-primed to define kin as those with whom we are familiar due to living and rearing arrangements. So, genetically-unrelated individuals can come to be understood as kin—and subsequently treated as such—if introduced into our network of frequent and intimate associations (for example, family) in an appropriate way. In addition, Johnson suggests *phenotypic matching* as another indirect kin recognition cue. By assuming a correlation between genotype (internally coded, inheritable information) and phenotype (outward, physical and behavioral characteristics), we can recognize likely kin by comparing our own phenotype with theirs. Though somewhat less reliable than the primary kin recognition cue of association, perceived phenotypic matching is still capable of eliciting altruistic behavior on behalf of non-kin.

Because the kin recognition cues of association and phenotypic matching are indirect, they are subject to errors — as well as manipulation. It is the manipulation of kin recognition cues that gives us a new lens through which to view the mechanisms that military and paramilitary organizations use to bind individual members to the group and, subsequently, evoke the type of loyalty and emotional bonding that promotes the altruistic and self-sacrificing behaviors that are normally reserved for genetically-related kin. The kin recognition cue of association is manipulated by military and paramilitary organizations through the training of recruits in extremely close and intense physical proximity that replicates natural kin contexts. In addition, the use of identifying and rhetorical language characterized by such kin terms as "motherland," "fatherland," the "homeland," "brothers-in-arms," and "sisters-in-arms" encourages a social redefinition of kin through association. The supplemental kin recognition cue of phenotypic matching is manipulated by having individual members of a military or paramilitary organization resemble each other as much as possible by means of uniforms, emblems, accouterments, identical haircuts, weaponry, habits and mannerisms, tattoos, and so on. In such ways, military and paramilitary organizations manipulate kin recognition cues to bind individual members to a larger group and, in so doing, to

maintain and reinforce altruistic behavior (such as volunteerism, risking one's life in combat, and altruistic suicide) in a non-kin setting.

## V. CONCLUSION

To resist the compelling cultural, psychological, and social constructions that influence our behaviors requires a rare degree of individual strength — psychological, moral, and physical. Regardless, we know that some people do resist, and it is in that knowledge that we both take hope and reserve the right of condemnation for those who perpetrate terrorism of any type. To offer a psychological explanation of how ordinary people commit terrorism is not to forgive, justify, or condone their behaviors. We must not confuse explanation with exculpation; to explain behavior is not to exonerate the perpetrator. There are no “perpetratorless” acts of terror. Terrorists are not just the hapless victims of human nature, culture, psychology, or their social context. On the road to committing atrocities, there are many choice points for each terrorist. Sometimes the choosing may take place without awareness or conscious deliberation. At other times, it is a matter of very focused and deliberate decision making. Regardless, what terrorists decide to do makes a great difference in what they eventually do. In this way, the terrorists, in willfully failing to exercise their moral judgment, retain full moral and legal accountability for the atrocities they committed. No explanatory model, or “psychological insight,” will ever take that away.

As September 11 reminded us, it is arrogant to believe that we sit anywhere near the beginning of a world in which human evil — resulting either from anti-state or state terrorism — is dissipating. As conventional and unconventional warfare escalate across the globe, our hope for an increase in cooperative, caring, nonviolent relations continues to fade away. We are left with the humbling and painful recognition that the persistence of inhumanity in human affairs is incontrovertible. It is hard to argue that we can do something beyond merely make the world a little less horrible.

My argument — that it is ordinary individuals, like you and me, who commit terrorism — is not an easy sell. None of us likes to be told that we are capable of such brutality. It is a pessimistic point of view that flies directly in the face of our sincere, but misguided, optimism that human evil can be obliterated by reforming society. We must not, however, avoid the hard task of trying to extract the comprehensible from the unthinkable. We must not let “evil” be a throwaway category for the things we are afraid to understand. We must not let it be the impenetrable term we use when we come to the limit of human comprehension. We must not consider terrorists so irrational, so atavistic, as to be beyond human understanding. We must not place human evil beyond human scrutiny. To do so is to give it the benefit of our ignorance. In this sense, our refusal to attempt to understand

human evil is a willful failure to know our own hearts and, if anything, only facilitates the continuation of evil in human affairs.

The lesson that ordinary people commit terrorism need not be compartmentalized only as “bad news” — a disturbing, unsettling, disquieting truth about the human condition. The lesson does contain potentially “good news” as well — the making of terrorists need no longer be a mystery. We are beginning to understand the conditions under which we can be transformed into killing machines. The more we know, and the more open we are to seeing ourselves as we are, the better we can control ourselves. It is only in accepting the limits of who we are that we have a legitimate chance to structure a society in which the exercise of human evil is lessened. Civility, after all, is a chosen state, not a natural condition. Ultimately, being aware of our own capacity for evil — and how to cultivate the moral sensibilities that curb that capacity — is the best safeguard we can have against anti-state and state terrorism.

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## ABSTRACT

This investigation raises a critical question in the sociology of knowledge: How does a dramatic event affect the development of a previously neglected social science research topic? A working hypothesis suggested the reactive nature of our discipline: After-the-fact enthusiasm about a publicly dramatized event. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington heightened awareness about apparent lack of terrorism theory and research in sociology. A preliminary literature search through a dozen major American sociological journals and an equal number of textbooks dating back to 1995, supported this impression. The search was subsequently expanded to compare pre- and post-9/11 (end of 2003) American sociological output on terrorism with similar output reported in non-American sociological as well as other social science journals. The British output surpassed the American output in the pre-9/11 period. But a reverse trend is visible in the post-9/11 period. Despite an overall post-9/11 surge in terrorism research, there is little evidence as yet of any emerging social science research centers, or that of a systematic body of theory, on this topic.

## INTRODUCTION

As an inclusive phenomenon, terrorism may be defined as a planned individual or collective violence against innocent victims or targeted individuals, groups, or property, committed before an audience in order to make a point, create fear, inflict punishment, seek monetary gains and/or force compliance to the perpetrators' political and other demands (Hoffman 1998; Tuman 2003). Terrorism as a means of gaining social, economic, and political advantage has been around for a long time. With the rise of globalization, it has acquired an international dimension in terms of both its goals and means for achieving these goals. With rapid cross-national movement of information, ideas, people, and technologies, modern terrorists' ideologies and activities can now easily permeate across national boundaries. Sympathizers and followers can be found in distant lands. Enemies can be targeted in far-off places. Terrorism in the modern world has indeed become a complex,