



Psychology of Lone-Actor Terrorists

Clark McCauley & Sophia Moskalenko

Bryn Mawr College and START

September 19, 2014

This research was supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs and Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences Division (HFD) through START. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations presented here are solely the authors' and are not representative of DHS or the United States Government.

The Puzzle of Lone-Actor Terrorism: It's Rare vs. Radical Opinion

- 50,000 U.S. and U.K Muslims agree that suicide bombing of civilians in defense of Islam is often or sometimes justified
- Only hundreds attempt violence
- Few of the hundreds are lone-actors
- Conclusion: Radical opinions not useful for identifying lone-actor terrorists.
- Larger conclusion: Two-pyramids model of radicalization

The Puzzle of Lone-Actor Terrorism: It's Risky

- Doing violence is risky, alone very risky
- Rational choice is not to take risks and losses for a group or cause: “free rider” problem
- Rational choice view of individuals accepting risks and losses depends on group and organizational contingencies.
- E.g. Soldiers fight for their buddies
- But lone-actor terrorist has no organization or buddies!

Psychology: Emotion vs rational choice?

- Personal grievance: target is seen as having insulted or injured me or mine—anger/shame
- Group grievance: target is seen as having insulted or injured a group or cause I care about—outrage/shame
- Seeking excitement, status, power
- Escaping prison, personal problems, debt--fear

Possible Profile of Lone-Actor Terrorists?

- Research shows no useful profile for terrorists
- But most terrorists belong to group or organization, only recently looking separately at lone-actor terrorist
- Seems likely there is a profile for lone-actor terrorists, because individual differences more important for terrorists acting as individuals
- Look especially for EMOTIONAL profiles

School Attackers and Assassins: Lone-Actor Violence Perpetrators (Mostly)

- Common characteristics: personal/group grievance, social disconnection, mental health problems esp depression, weapons experience outside the military
- “Disconnected-disordered profile” – Escaping loner’s depression, fear, shame, humiliation
- All one problem? If grievance “political”, we call lone-actor violence terrorism? Or something special about lone-actor terrorists?

Another Profile?

- Vera Zazulich
- Clayton Waagner
- Solid social connections, no sign of mental disorder, no personal grievance
- Moment when political becomes personal, moral obligation to strike back against those seen as harming group identified with
- “Caring-compelled” profile: high empathy

Conclusions

- Two possible profiles of lone-actor terrorists: Disconnected-Disordered and Caring-Compelled
- DD: Personal negative emotions (anger, shame, humiliation, depression) and weapons experience
- CC: Negative emotions by identification (outrage, shame, humiliation) and seek weapons
- Limitation: Individuals implicated with undercover agent or informant are psychologically group terrorists not lone-actors

In Practice, No Pure Types

- DD/CC Maj. Nidal Malik Hassan: disconnected, personal and group grievance, no disorder, high empathy for Muslims. Forced choice. Maybe purchase/practice with cop-killer pistol a key indicator of action?
- DD Spc. Ivan Lopez 2014 Ft Hood: disconnected, personal grievance, depressed. If he had been Muslim? Purchase of pistol key indicator?

DD and CC beyond lone-actors?

- Abu-Malal al-Balawi in Jordan: no disorder, not disconnected, group but not personal grievance, high empathy, no weapon experience. CC type but no action.
- After Jordanian intelligence sent him to Pakistan: ~disconnected, new personal grievance. DD on top of CC, finds a weapon needing no experience. Nb. forced choice.

Implications for Security Services

1. Avoid forcing action choice on individuals with radical opinions and strong empathy.
2. More attention to means and opportunity vs motive for understanding terrorism? One answer to the puzzle that so few with radical opinions move to radical action.
3. Another answer: Emotions key to getting an individual past the free rider problem? Not just for lone actors?

Contact

Clark McCauley
cmccaule@brynmawr.edu

www.start.umd.edu