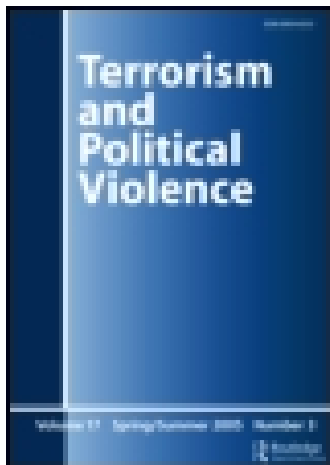


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H.-G. Tittmar ^a

^a Reader in Psychology in the Department of Psychology, University of Ulster, Newtown Abbey, Northern Ireland

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Urban Terrorism: A Psychological Interpretation

H.-G. TITTMAR

Explored are some psychological mechanisms by means of which it may be feasible to explain some of the terroristic activities so prominent today. The thrust of the argument is that lowering of Self-Esteem and increased frustration mobilize a defensive response, which results in aggression.

Background

Attempting an 'understanding of one's enemy' is an ancient practice taught to many a budding general. The classical thrust of this premise is to attempt to understand the fundamental logic of the opposition, and then to outmanoeuvre the impending move.

Such a cognitive approach to battlefield logic is most essential, but recent concepts recommend to also take cognisance of cultural elements' submerged in battlefield ideology. When, however, being confronted by terroristic activities, such an analysis is not always fruitful, and, since often dealing with individuals, a psychological analysis needs to be incorporated.

Ignoring the more obvious variable, such as low IQ, and Psychoticism, this thesis explores the terrorist's ego problems surrounding Self-Esteem set mainly in the Northern Ireland perspective.

Aggression

Mankind must put an end to war or
war will put an end to mankind.

John F. Kennedy (1962)

And yet we continue to have wars! It is generally argued that only mankind, and not the animals, have acts of war. Yet a colloquial expression, on observing terrorist atrocities, is to relegate them to the animal level. Ardrey (1969)² and Etkin (1967)³ both argue that killing by animals is not meant for sport, or gain, except in terms of the immediate provision of a meal. All the same, Ardrey does comment on a warlike

activity sometimes observed in the African Wild Dogs, who may go into a killing frenzy, wherein a killing rate far in excess of normal feeding requirements is achieved – as if the ‘stop killing’ feedback mechanism had been switched off. Or is it that a pleasure mechanism has been switched on?

Winston Churchill,⁴ describing the two outstanding Confederate generals of the American Civil War, admits that they both habitually decried the bloodshed and destruction in which they were engaged, yet loved war as a technical art! Direct evidence for this is taken from two of their quotations. On a long night march to a desperate battle at dawn, Lieutenant General Thomas J. ‘Stonewall’ Jackson muttered to his companion: ‘Delicious excitement!’

And General Robert E. Lee, surveying a field of carnage at the Battle of Fredericksburg (1862), observed reflectively: ‘It is well that war is so horrible – we would grow too fond of it.’

A popular psychological interpretation of aggression has been: that it is the result of frustration. It is considered by Coville *et al.*⁵ that there are two sources of frustration: personal and environmental. Personal frustrations result from personal insufficiencies such as: inadequate intelligence; lack of physical strength; disabling disease; or other handicap. Environmental frustrations result from obstacles existing in the environment, such as: parentally imposed restrictions; lack of money; lack of opportunities; physical restraint. Frustrations, resulting from the clash of two motives that exert their force in different directions, produces the psychological state of Conflict. There are three major patterns of conflict.

In the double approach conflict, an individual must choose between two attractive goals (e.g., for a woman it could be: marriage v. a career; for any individual in Northern Ireland: working towards a military v. a political solution). In the double avoidance conflict, an individual needs to choose between two evils (e.g., doing distasteful work – such as psychology, or failing the summer exams; obeying the local sub-cultural group norms, or being knee capped). In the approach avoidance conflict a decision has to be made, whether or not to move toward a pleasurable goal, the attainment of which involves painful consequences (e.g., most mixed marriages entail this, which, across Northern Ireland religions, can have dire consequences).

The majority of conflicts that are significant in personality development involved opposition between drives, which tend to be in conflict with moral and social codes. Typical of such conflicts is the adolescent’s adjustment to his sexual drives in the face of cultural and

social restrictions. Because frustrations and conflicts are unpleasant, tension-loaded states, they motivate the individual toward activity which will reduce, or eliminate, the discomfort thus engendered. Such activity, called the Adjustment Process,⁶ may be undertaken either consciously or unconsciously. If frustration is prolonged, or severe, and a threat to the Ego is experienced, consequent feelings of anxiety and stress will push the individual towards the classic 'fight' or 'flight' reactions. The specific form, by which this reaction will show itself, is determined by previous learning experiences, perhaps socially-approved patterns, and, more or less, motivated by his desire for social acceptance.

John Dollard has described this manifestation as the primitive 'fight' response, a destructive physical act directed against the frustrating person or object. However, since there may be social disapproval attached to such behaviour, and even punishment and counter-aggression, an individual may seek more devious methods of fighting back. In some instances it is impossible to direct aggression towards the frustrating people (e.g., British Parliament), or situation (economic depression, and hence unemployment), and feelings then tend to be vented by displacing them onto members from another group (Security Forces), or those that cannot retaliate (as was the case for the German Jews). Implied is that the nationalistic terroristic activities have neither their logical foundations in ideology, nor in a military campaign, but, according to Dollard's theory, are no more but an extreme frustration-induced fight reaction, typical of psychotic behaviour in children and immature adults.

In extreme cases, the aggressive impulses arouse such feelings of guilt as to become completely inhibited (e.g., the numerous Christian conversions of ex-activists in Northern Ireland). Frequently, such blocked aggression, and the accompanying need to reduce the feelings of guilt, arouse patterns of self-directed aggression, including accidents and suicides.

The most characteristic 'flight' reaction literally is by running away, for example, moving away from one's natural home to a new suburb or even emigrating. For those, who are not fortunate enough to do so, alternative escape mechanisms can be called upon: such as day-dreaming, disinterest and apathy. Extreme forms of these responses are seen in regression, religious conversions, and substance abuse. Particularly concerning the latter, a study by Tittmar⁷ of local stress responses correctly predicted in 1978 that there would be a major increase in substance abuse in Ulster within the next five years.

The reactions of 'fight' or 'flight' constitute Acting-Out responses to frustration and conflict, and must be differentiated from Defence Mechanisms, which are indirect and unconscious efforts at adjustment.⁸

The most commonly-employed conscious attempts at adjustment in the face of frustration or conflict are:

1. Increasing the effort to overcome the obstacle;
2. Lowering, or changing, the goal;
3. Realistically reappraising the frustrative or conflictive situation.

In some instances, conscious adjustments may resemble the pattern of a Defence Mechanism. The difference between them lies in the person's degree of awareness, or insight; a true Defence Mechanism always functions unconsciously.⁹ For example, most alcohol abusers know exactly why they drink, but the reborn Christian has not got a notion.

Norman Maier, an experimental psychologist, insists that there is a third reaction to frustration or conflict, which is shown in the development of rigid and repetitive patterns of behaviour.¹⁰ Under some stress most people do show mild forms of such responding, for example, Prince Charles tends to play with his cuffs. In extreme cases of frustration situations, variability of response and goal-directed behaviour give way to fixed and stereotyped behaviours. Such experimentally induced neurosis can be created quite easily in animals, and was first shown by Pavlov.¹¹ Perhaps, such responding is not at all a third type of reaction, but one of the 'flight' reactions?

The Adjustment Process

Defence Mechanisms are the unconscious attempts of the individual to protect himself against threats to the integrity of the Ego, and also to relieve the tension and anxiety resulting from unresolved frustrations and conflicts.¹² When this effort is designed to avert conflict, it is best explained by the Dissonance model of interaction, originally explained by Lazarus, with reference to coping strategies,¹³ and later adapted by Festinger, who created the model.¹⁴ Most people employ such Self-deceptive measures, in an effort to maintain their Self-Esteem, and to soften the impact of failure, deprivation, or sense of guilt. This approach is best explained by Attribution Theory.¹⁵

Healthy coping with Life Events is reflected by the individual's use of a wide range of Defensive Mechanisms, whereas the persistent usage of a singular mechanism can lead to abnormal modes of adjustment. The two major types of Defence Mechanisms, that are available, are based on the origins of anxiety. Freud distinguished between Objective Anxiety (fear of an external threat) and Neurotic Anxiety, which stems from an internal, unconscious conflict.¹⁶

Direct methods of coping with anxiety (previously referred to as:

conscious attempts at adjustment), involve attempts to modify the anxiety-producing situation. In defensive coping one is always concerned with reducing feelings of anxiety. The two basic defence mechanisms are:

- a. Denial – a distortion of external reality so that it is perceived to be less threatening.
- b. Repression – an attempt to keep painful impulses and emotions from conscious awareness.

Other Defence Mechanisms found in everyday behaviour are:

Rationalisation
 Projection
 Intellectualisation
 Displacement

While these defensive responses, made by an individual, do provide positive protection in the short term (e.g., at the death of a loved one), continuous usage can be detrimental. Adjustment mechanisms are entirely positive in their outcome, when not used as defence mechanism, but as coping mechanisms instead. These are:

Concentration
 Suppression
 Logical Analysis
 Empathy
 Objectivity
 Substitution

So, what has all this got to do with war? Anxiety may be induced by unconscious conflicts and frustration, but also by threats to Self-Esteem. Depending on our perceived need to respond to the frustrating situation (and this can be coloured by the Defensive Mechanisms), aggression may result. Much of the beginnings of the two world wars had little to do with nationalism, or territory even, but more with bruised Egos, who used the territorial arguments as an excuse.

Similarly, the objections of minority groups to majority governments have little to do with Human or Civil Rights. Instead, it is more about being on a low power base, thereby having a lowly Self-Esteem. On this basis, peace in Africa will always be elusive. The African believes in his tribe. Because of this belief, party politics must be tribal politics. He is not concerned with tribal culture, but with tribal Self-Esteem. ZIPRA had the better fighters in the war for Zimbabwean independence, based on better training (than ZANLA) and the Zulu heritage. So, when offered

second best (i.e., the Zimbabwean Presidency), Joshua Nkomo felt a distinct degree of demotion and fought back in order to maintain his executive power base.¹⁷

By the same token, not only is the Blacks' leader of the highest Self-Esteem, but his power is likewise – absolute. This is not only accepted by the tribe, but expected of the leader. To be any lesser leads one open to abdication. The tribal leader necessarily is an autocrat, who has all the advantages of a dictator, and may indeed become one, as most have. Democracy is therefore not a tribal cultural institution. For a leader to maintain his absolute position indefinitely, the only acceptable governing institution is that inherent in Marxist communism, by means of which he can have his dictatorial power base indefinitely, or as long as he can maintain his power.

For Prime Minister Comrade Robert Mugabe, the maintenance of such power is an easy task, as the Shona outnumber the Ndabele by 2:1, control parliament, and all executive posts that matter. In Swaziland, only one tribe, one culture, matters – that of the Zulu. In Mozambique, where a similar political idealism was being pursued as in Zimbabwe, there has been a return to civil war, since there is an even split between the two major tribes. The same fate seems to be in store for Angola.

Kenya, on the other hand, being multi-racial and multi-lingual, has too many small tribes. For them a more democratic type government is the only way forwards. Here changes will occur, too, once one tribe moves towards being significantly larger than the others.

Similarly, one can establish the existence of a well-patterned response by Northern Ireland terrorists to any statement by the Security Forces that they are winning the military campaign. Such statements only serve to injure the opposition's Self-Esteem, which leads to aggressive venting of their frustrations. Also, when one side has a display of strength, be it overt (by marches, shooting parties, or armed attacks), or covert (culvert bombs, mortar attacks), this not only stimulates greater Self-Esteem amongst their own supporters, but also decreases the existing Self-Esteem for the other side. It is the attempt at recovering this lost Self-Esteem that mobilises the backlash.

If this analysis of terroristic activities is true, then these activities have nothing to do with romantic idealism, fighting for liberation, or for reunification, but is no more than the subconscious response of a Defensive Mechanism coming into play. If this is true, then these actions are no more than conditioned responses, which have nothing to do with free will. If this was not so, sooner or later, coping strategies would emerge, instead of the paranoid attachment to Defence Mechanisms.

Aversion to Aggression

Previously it was stated that animals appear to kill for the immediate necessity of food only. Ants actually will kill and store the corpses in anticipation of requirements; and so do spiders. Parasites do not kill the host, but use him over a period of time – they do not bite the hand that feeds them! – they just nibble at it.

Intra species aggression has fixed rules by which outcome tends to be determined. Fighting exists to sort out rank orders, or to settle disputes of dominance. The invader usually loses; the loser is seldom pursued, and not for long. If the help of a third animal is solicited, as is frequent amongst primates, then he will invariably side with the loser.¹⁸

Some such rules still exist with head-hunting tribes in New Guinea. Despite the laying of ambushes, a way out has to be left for the enemy. Not all those trapped would be successful in gaining this escape, but it always must be present. By the same token, the samurai had strong codes of combat, wherein the loser was allowed to escape, and having lost, would not challenge again. A similar code of fighting was prevalent amongst Anglo-German dogfights of World War I. The aim was to disable the plane, not to kill the pilot. Tittmar has implied that similar rules operate in crowd violence in Belfast, wherein natural laws seem to operate, and can be brought into play.¹⁹

In face to face combat there are tell-tale signs (apart from a knock out) by which the loser signals his surrender. It is argued, and generally accepted, that with the introduction of distant weapons (from the bow and arrow onwards) such signals no longer were visible.²⁰ Consequently, the normal potential of guilt could no longer work to subdue the killing machine that man had now become. An important question remains: If animals have control mechanisms, where aggression is concerned, why has Man come to ignore these? Do we not have any? Or do animals not have the problem of bruised Egos?

Postscript

The initial impetus for this thesis came from a set of lectures to social science students, whose response was, naturally, quite sceptical. Unfortunately, realism intervened in so far that during delivery of the same, Michael Stone did just what the topic was all about: he was venting his frustrations on the (Catholic) public by causing mayhem at the Belfast Milltown cemetery, killing and maiming during a 1989 funeral. His subconscious reason for doing so, seemed to be an expression of frustration, and a low perceived Self-Esteem, since, apparently, he had been rejected as a Protestant paramilitary.

Moreover, it is sad to see when Church publications make positive statements ('Bullets, not ballots, ultimately change governments'),²¹ albeit in the context of Chile's history. For these may be taken out of context by various organisations to justify the tacit approval by 'the Church' for their actions.

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