



Why Are They so Cruel?: A Psychological Exploration of Terrorist Crime

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Abstract

In recent years, terrorist crime brought about great threats and enormous challenges to the stability of international communities and safety of people. From the perspective of criminal psychology, this paper combines “breeding soil for terrorist crime”, “psychological mechanism of individual evolution” and “rational mechanism of inhibitory process”, analyzes the causes of terrorist crimes. The analysis of the causes gives us some enlightenment: The root to solve terrorist crimes needs to address the problem of potential injustice so as to win over more people, and once the government wins public support, terrorist crime will inevitably reduce until go to demise.

Key words: Terrorist, Criminal behavior, Psychological mechanism

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the new year, France broke out a terrorist attack which shocked the world. A group of terrorists broke into the headquarter of French satirical

comic magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, shot to ordinary people and caused 12 deaths. This tragedy is only a microcosm of the terrorist “cancer” affecting international communities and people in recent years, so terrorist crime brings about great threats and enormous challenges to international social stability and people’s lives. Therefore, analyzing the causes of terrorist crimes from the perspective of criminal psychology is imperative.

1. DEFINITION OF TERRORISM

The prototype of terrorism can be traced back to several thousand years ago in ancient civilizations such as Greece, Rome, China and India, etc., but modern terrorism was originated in Europe (White, 2002). The British conservative philosopher Edmund Burke calls the reign of Robespierre from 1793 to July 1794 as the reign of terror and uses the word “terrorism” to generalize the behaviors of the new government. However, the occurrence and developmental process of the concept of terrorism, in fact, reveals that terrorism is historic which exists along with specific historical circumstances, and changes along with environmental changes. Therefore, the concept of terrorism is actually a vague definition, which only reflects the discourse rights of different powerful groups (Ji & Xu, 2009). The definition of terrorism has always been a controversial issue, due to the differences among ideologies, values and interests, the judgment standard is different. Some terrorism experts and scholars have made definitions with certain international influences, such as the famous anti-terrorism expert Brian Jenkins in American Rand Corporation holds that terrorism is “the behavior to use or threat to use violence to bring about political change”. Many governments have also made definitions of terrorism. The British *Anti-Terrorism Law* defines terrorism as “due to political, religious or ideological reasons, in order to exert influences on government, intimidate the public or some

people, take or threat to take certain behaviors including severe violence against individuals, causing serious property damages or posing a serious threat to public health or safety” (China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, 2002). Although many international experts, scholars and governments have made definitions of terrorism, there is still not a widely acceptable definition despite of the divergent viewpoints, but this does not prevent our understanding to terrorism. Comprehensively considering, the definition of terrorism should include the following elements: (a) Due to political, ethnic or religious purposes; (b) Use premeditated, organized and sudden force or violence; (c) There are direct victims and indirect victims. Direct victims are usually civilians or the symbolic sign of social norms, and indirect victims are the real objects to be expected to affect; (d) Create an atmosphere of terror, trigger panic psychology, especially create extreme fears among ordinary people. The perspective of criminal psychology focuses on describing and explaining the formation, function, characteristics and laws of individual psychological factors leading to crime, namely what factors make a person become a terrorist to carry out terrorist atrocities.

2. BREEDING SOIL OF TERRORIST CRIME

2.1 Nationalist Soil in Pursuit of Independence

In the long course of history, national struggles triggered by national conflicts have emerged after another, and this kind of terrorist activities in the forms of special violence or threat of violence including assassination, kidnapping, hostage-taking, bombing and hijacking, etc. which are based on the recognition of national language, territory, religion, culture, psychology, customs and lifestyle, and caused by the pursuit of national independence (or high degree of autonomy) are called as nationalist terrorism (Hu, 2001). This kind of terrorist activities are the most common and most serious type, and about one-third of the world's terrorist organizations belong to the nationalist type (Hu, 2011, p.48). In essence, nationalist terrorism hopes to achieve the ultimate goal of national independence with the help of terrorist activity. Therefore, under the banner of nationalism, based on a wide appeal of nationalist theory and emotion as the ideological and psychological foundation, terrorists can be unafraid of death and risk their own lives for the so-called “national interest”. They believe that suicide terrorist attack can bring huge damages to their enemies, produce fear, anxiety, and then reach their purpose of national liberation. They themselves will also be treated as national heroes in the nation (Ganor, 2005, pp.5-11). Struggle for national independence can be divided into national liberation movement and national separatist

movement, these two different struggles give different connotations for terrorism.

A wave of national liberation movements have risen after the two world wars in the 20th century, and the fundamental cause of the terrorist activities in the national liberation movements is colonialism and hegemonism. During the brutal fights between colonies and colonial big countries, due to strength disparity, taking terrorist activities to exert pressures on colonial countries is a reluctant but valid means. Meanwhile, due to political pattern changes and fights for interests, hegemonism represented by the United States and former Soviet Union continued to intervene the national liberation movements of other countries and regions, leading to the intertwinement of nationalism, colonialism and hegemonism, so the problems were more complex and contradictions became more prominent. In the national liberation movements, colonialism and hegemonism exacerbated severity and persistence of struggles, making terrorism a powerful tool for national struggle. With the drastic changes in Eastern Europe and disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the third wave of nationalism broke out after the end of “cold war”, mostly due to the ethnic minorities' negation to history, destruction of sovereignty independence and territorial completion (Ji & Xu, 2009). They even made the extreme claim to integrate national boundaries with national borders (Hobsbawm, 2000, p.161). The representative national separatist terrorist organizations are IRA, ETA, Chechnya and the Corsican National Liberation Front, which implemented destruction by taking assassinations, explosions and other terrorist activities. In a multi-ethnic country, the nationality advocating splitting and independence is often the weak minority, and because of injustice and illegality of their political pursuit, they could not achieve their goals by means of war or peace, so they expanded international influences to draw public concerns, produced panic to other domestic nationalities to win international sympathy and support, or even obtained international intervention to force the government to make concessions on their ultimate goals. Terrorism can only be their effective and indispensable means (Hu, 2011, pp.103-104).

2.2 Extreme Religious Soil for Mind Control

Although the doctrines of the three largest religions in the world are positive, it is undeniable that religious fanaticism really can make some persons discard rational thinking, and disregard basic behaviors of human society, as well as carry out terrorist activities with violent means (Yang & Mei, 2013, p.67). In fact, this kind of terrorist activities was induced by the fanaticism of emerging religious sects or worshiping groups (mainly heresies), which are not religious organizations but with obvious religious fanaticism or making activities under the signboard of religion, it is called extreme religious

terrorism. At present, the terrorism crimes of this terrorism are more and more rampant, which have become the main forms of the current terrorism crimes. Extreme religious terrorism is divided into two subclasses: Religious fundamentalism terrorist activity with obvious religious fanaticism and heresy terrorist activity (Hu, 2011, p.73). The terrorists of religious fundamentalism have perverted cognitions to religions, they against any development of the fundamentalism, and they think that every development is the blasphemy to the fundamentalism. And they want to defend the fundamentalism by the way of weeding out heretics, such as “East Turkistan” terrorist organization, which is a typical example. Heresy terrorism borrows the cloak of religion to implement the ideological and spiritual control with socialized means, so that to achieve ulterior motives, such as Japanese Aum Domsday Cult, Peoples Temple and so on.

In general, extreme religion gradually changes people’s rational cognition starts with spiritual control. Firstly, let terrorists have such a cognition for starting point of own actions, that is religious fundamentalism is the only truth, the actual laws and standards have no constraining force for them (Yang & Mei, 2013, p.67). Secondly, let religious fanaticism strengthen the distorted cognition by group dynamic mechanism. That is, with continuous deepening relation between terrorist organization and individual, individual consciousness would be occupied by group consciousness, and there would be greater probability for general legal norms and moral request to be refused. However, they only have great sense of identity to the thought of terrorist organization (Combs, 2000, p.58). Finally, not all people with distorted cognition would become terrorists and execute terrorist activities. And only when maintain the present status is thought more terrible than appeal to force, they would think they use violence were compelled against their wills, in other words, terrorists think that use violence at the moment has already become a necessary means (Cooper, 1977).

2.3 Political-Social Soil of Rights and Interests Inequity

Quite a number of researchers hope to find sources in political-social factors of rights and interests unfair distribution, such as political oppression, poverty, education lacking and so on, it is unable to deny that many terrorists are absolute poor people (Hu, 2011, pp.42-43), but it’s very difficult for them to adjust imbalance in mood caused by survival rights damage through their own efforts due to particularity in status of vulnerable groups, many people in vulnerable groups undertake development cost but never share profits due to the attention on efficiency in social development and the ignorance of justice and equity, a great contrast is formed between resource possessor, interest getters and these

kinds of vulnerable groups, the sense of relative deprivation has reinforcing effect on imbalance in mood; then, the objective disadvantage conditions (lack of abilities and opportunities) of the weak also make them hard to get rid of weakness situations through legal means, and they are caught in a vicious circle that the weak is even weaker, and the appearance of imbalance in mood has a certain inevitability and reasonability; at the same time, the usualness of social exclusion and suffering from setback also make them more used to attribute the production of weak to external social reasons, the resentment and dissatisfaction on government, society and powerful groups is caused based on it; At last, their imbalance in mood has characteristics of usualness and compositionality, the strong pressure is enough to shake their original ideas and behavior patterns, thus to plant hidden troubles for the terrorism crime (Ma & Le, 2004).

3. MENTAL MECHANISM OF INDIVIDUAL TRANSMUTATION

According to Anomie Theory, crime is the result of eternally inflating of individual desires and demands and meeting the demands with modes which are not conform to social requirements in states of the lack of suitable social regulation adjustment (Ma, 2010, p.2). So no matter nationalist soil, religious extremism soil or political-social soil, they all must be combined with individuals.

3.1 Personal Features Which Are Good for Crime

Scholars at home and abroad reach a consensus on personality research of terrorists basically: terrorists are not psychopathic personality people, and there is not much difference between them and ordinary people in personality (Zhao, 2007). At the same time, although terrorists have different classifications, their nation, religion and culture are also different, and they have common features in demography. In aspect of age structure, the ages of many leaders of terrorist organizations are very young (Russell & Miller, 1978, pp.81-95), the reason for terrorists to be the profession of “young people” is that people in this age group are very idealist and radical relatively, they don’t receive socialized education completely and their discontent emotions are easy to be encouraged. In aspect of sex, most terrorists are males due to they dare to take risks and more invasive. In aspect of education levels and economic status, after entering the 21st century, the whole literacy level is improved with the development of education and wide application of high and new technology. Globally many terrorists change taking part in terrorist organizations into a kind of mode to improve their poor economic conditions. Seeing from demography similarities of terrorists, it is not hard to find that

absorbing young, unmarried and extreme poor males with certain education as terrorists also form advantage conditions for implementing terrorism crime indeed.

3.2 Action Mechanism of Stair Model

The mental mechanism during the transmutation process from ordinary people to terrorists is always the focus

concerned by researchers, and there are many theoretical models which make explanations on it. Among them, Moghaddam compared the process of a man taking part in terrorist organization and implementing terrorism crime as the process of climbing stairs (see Figure 1) (Moghaddam, 2007, pp.69-80).

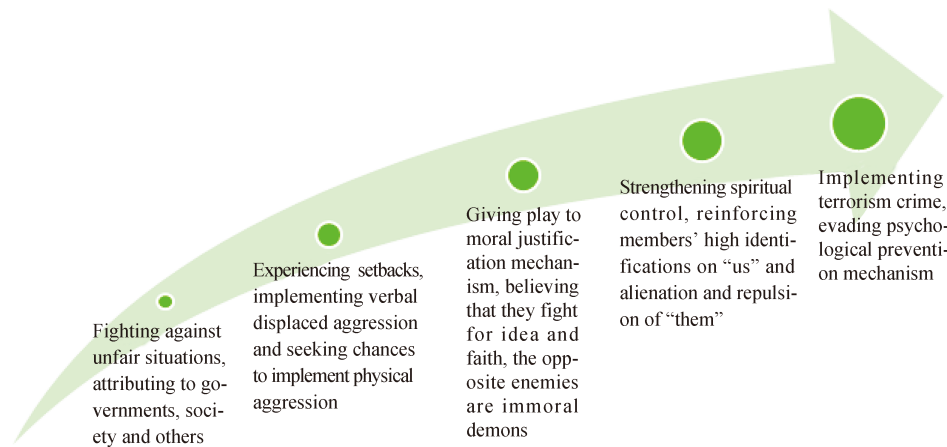


Figure 1
Moghaddam Stair Model

Firstly, the bottom of the stairs model is talk about the influence of material conditions on people. It is not necessarily that good or bad individual material conditions will give rise to the terrorist crimes. And people who think that they are suffering unfair treatments will be motivated to look for means to solve these unfair situations, in that way, these people will enter the first layer of the stairs; in the first layer, people start to seek and search the ways for fighting with unfair situations. Some people found the ways for replying the unfair treatments, and the other people shift the responsibility the government, society and others due to the problems, which intensifies the self-rationalization mechanism when they making outside-occurring attacks. These people will enter the second layer of the stairs; since they shift all the responsibilities to the government and society, which assuredly make them experience setbacks. However, the sources of setbacks are too strong, and they have to turn the objects of attack to the common people. But most people only implement the displaced attack in words, only people who try to implement the displaced attack by attacking the objects' bodies will enter the third layer; in the third layer, moral legitimate mechanism plays a role, terrorist organizations will do everything for making the members to believe that what they have done were ethical, and there were righteous struggles for ideas, they were the "martyrs" for belief. And however, the opposite government and society and so on are the immoral demons; in the fourth layer, terrorist organizations strengthen mental control to the members, intensify the classification of "we and they", and make the members

highly identify with "we" and exclude "they". Moreover, when a person enters this layer and takes part in the secretive agency of the terrorist organization, their actions and spirits will be controlled strictly by terrorist organization, and they almost impossible to leave this organization successfully; after entering the fifth layer of the stair, terrorists execute will terrorism crime, and evade the happen of psychological prevention mechanism (Jia & Shi, 2010).

4. RATIONAL MECHANISM OF INHIBITORY PROCESS

Terrorist crime is completely anti-human and anti-ethics atrocity, according to descriptions of stair model, and terrorists receive the function of psychological prevention mechanism before they implement criminal atrocities (super-ego), however, it is evaded by inhibition, Albert Bandura thought that rational mechanism inhibits occurrence of psychological prevention mechanism, the rational mechanism of terrorism is a kind of cognitive process of terrorists in nature (as shown in Figure 2), three aspects of "behaviors should be condemned", "harmful consequences" and "victims" are involved. Rational mechanism includes the following seven as (Yang & Mei, 2013, pp.92-103).

The first is moral justification. In rational mechanism process of terrorist crime, the first thing is to make moral justification, which means to rebuild moral cognition on behaviors of crime and murder, treat themselves as fighting against ruthless autocratic tyranny, when the

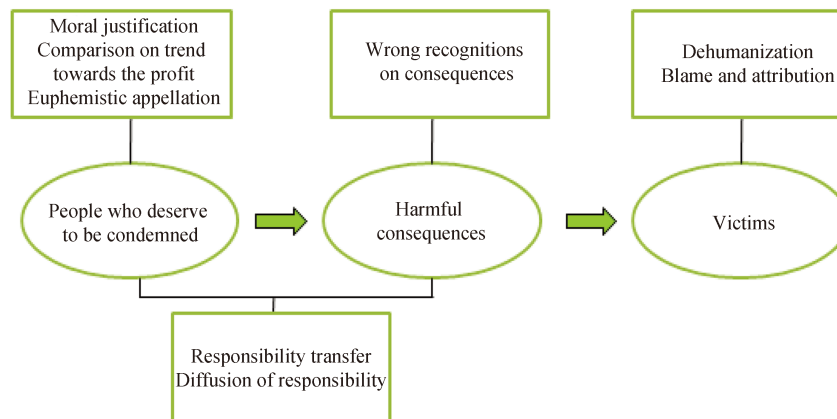


Figure 2
Inhibitory Process of Rational Mechanism on Psychological Prevention Mechanism

violence damage adopt by them is much smaller than harmful consequences of “enemies”, this kind of violent means is reasonable and moral. The second is comparison on trend towards the profit. It means to choose behavior reference system which is good for them, for example, people can make different interpretations on behaviors with same nature from different ideologies. The third is euphemistic appellation. Terrorists may shield some vocabularies which are not conform to cognition out of consciousness due to that they don’t think they violate the morality, for example, they call themselves “freedom fighters” and so on, and they call killing people as “consuming enemies”, the moral mark stuck to terrorist crime is cleaned up through these euphemistic appellations. The fourth is responsibility transfer and expansion. Under the function of responsibility transfer mechanism, terrorists realize responsibility transfer through affirming that they only execute superior orders unilaterally, condemning social political system, factors of specified contexts and so on, in another words, responsibilities of occurrence of terrorism are not rested with them. The fifth is wrong recognitions on consequences. The wrong recognitions on consequences of terrorists are mainly realized by three modes of ignoring consequences, diluting harmful consequences and distorting consequences. The sixth is dehumanization. It means the psychological process that criminal offenders treat victims as nonhuman, thus to deny or obliterate the nature that the victims belong to the same kind of people as them in order to explain that they are sure of the rationalization of their criminal behaviors in mental (Kang, Wang, & Feng, 1995). The seventh is blame and attribution. Terrorists often attribute terrorist crime to social economic factors, take inequalities in social economy as the excuse of crime; or the political factors, they attribute the origin to the ignorance, even restraint of governments on public political expressions; they also attribute to the individual factors of victims, they think that they are in wrong places in wrong time.

CONCLUSION

At present, terrorist crimes take place frequently, which are very harmful to the public, how to deal with terrorist crime effectively should become the research focus. However, hitting the snake is hitting the seven inches point, and shooting the arrow at the target, making sure how ordinary people are transmuted into radical terrorists and why terrorists implement tyrannical terrorist crime is a crucial important question in preventing and combating terrorist crime. In perspective of criminal psychology, the discussion and analysis on causes of terrorist crime with the combination of three aspects of “the breeding soil of terrorist crime”, “psychological mechanism of individual evolution” and “rational mechanism of inhibitory process” is a new attempt (as shown in Figure 3). Among them, nationalist soil in pursuit of independence, extreme religious soil for mind control, political-social soil of rights and interests inequity makes up the evil soil which breeds terrorist crime; some personal features and stair models present the psychological mechanism that ordinary people are transformed into terrorists and implement terrorist crime finally; at the same time, psychological prevention mechanism (super-ego) before terrorist crime can be inhibited successfully through rational mechanism of moral justification, comparison on trend towards the profit, euphemistic appellation, responsibility transfer and expansion, wrong recognitions on consequences, dehumanization, blame and attribution and so on.

It’s worth noting that there are some common replying means for anti-terrorist in each country of the world, including legislating targeted anti-terrorism law, resolving relevant issues through dialogue and consultation, set up professional anti-terrorism organization, implementing specific incarceration policies and detention policies, supervising media and implementing repression and blow with military or police and other armed forces (Silke, 2011, p.3). However, no matter the terrorism crimes

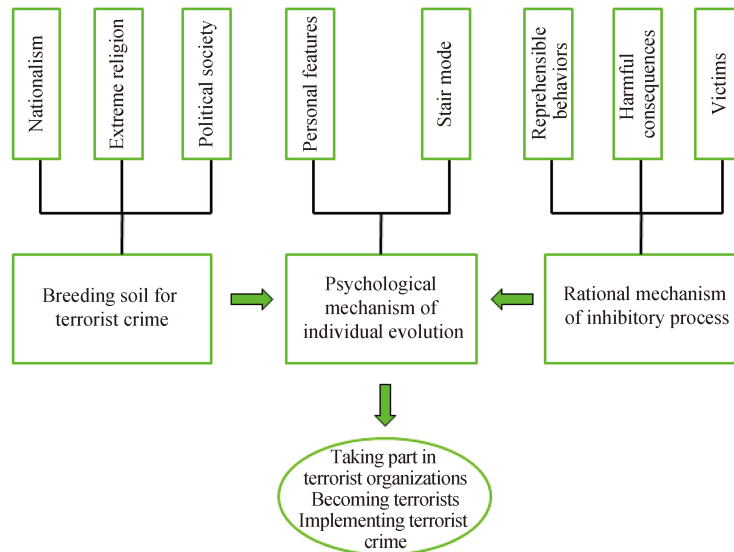


Figure 3
Causes of Terrorist Crime

caused by national religious factors or political social contradictions, and the meeting conflict of interest and suffered unfair situation, all of them give us the enlightenments: the potential unfair problems should be solved if the root causes of violence are wanted to be solved, thus to win the support of more people. Once the government wins the sincere support of the people, the terrorist crime will be reduced until die out necessarily.

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