

The Application of the Social Learning Theory to Domestic Terrorist Recruitment

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In the law enforcement community, we have multiple theories as to how a criminal act can be prevented or reacted to once committed. Likewise, we have begun to design strategies and tactics to better understand and deal with the impacts of terrorist attacks as we continue to advance further into the new millennium. While all can debate the odds of where or when the next terrorist attack will occur, very few of us have taken the time to consider who will actually execute these acts of martyrdom in the name of Allah. In studying the who, we must consider the how. The how refers to how an individual, a member of our society, becomes entangled in this form of antisocial deviance. In questioning the how, it's necessary to examine the social interactions of individuals and weighing their vulnerabilities to the recruitment of local domestic and international terrorist cells through varying venues.

To better facilitate the application of the social learning theory as it applies to terrorist recruitment of the average American, the following scenario is offered:

John Smith is a typical nineteen year old American male who was raised in a family environment conducive to spouse abuse since the age of twelve. Prior to his parents divorcing, John unwillingly watched his father mentally and physically abuse his mother on a regular basis. As a result of his father's ongoing abusive acts towards his mother, John noted how his mother always treated his father with absolute respect through innate fear and grew up identifying extreme violence with power, respect, and reverence. After beating his mother to near death one night, John's father was finally convicted and sentenced to prison. It was about that time John began to identify violence and fear with respect and domination.

At the age of nineteen, John found himself alone after his mother died from a severe beating from her second husband. John spent his entire adolescent life watching other men physically and emotionally control his mother. The end result is a maturing adult male viewing violence as the answer to several important social interactions and subsequent acceptance by his surrounding community. It's this social learning that ultimately led John down the path to prison and subsequently becoming vulnerable to the recruitment of either a domestic terrorist organization or a jihadist organization while he was serving a two year prison term for assault on one of his female companions. This newest American terrorist recruit has just been propelled into a life of radical extremism through several social variables that ultimately paved the way for what began as an innocent impressionable child subjected to multiple violent family issues to an individual seeking social acceptance from anyone who offered a perception of understanding and personal involvement. John's situation could be viewed as a by-product of the social learning theory.

Bridging the Criminology and Terrorology Gaps

The social learning theory is the persuasion that people learn to be aggressive by observing others acting aggressively to achieve some goal or being rewarded as a direct result of committing violent acts, and terrorology is an advanced study specifically dedicated to the areas of terrorism, antiterrorism, and counterterrorism as the basis for the understanding, identification, prevention, and elimination of terrorism.¹ When first developed, the social learning theory

directly associated criminal behavior with individual learned traits through varying and dynamic human interactions in an environment conducive to violent and unrestrained behavior. In the twenty-first century when acts of terrorism have become more prevalent in the United States, this psychosocial theory can further be used to examine and explain how domestic recruits decide to seek out acceptance and understanding from a religiously or politically motivated terrorist organization. The organizational handlers actively seek to befriend, recruit, and exploit others to assist in destroying all those who either oppose or differ from their affiliation's manifesto, all in an effort to create a solidarity undertaking towards a different, "pure" state.

Here's how the social learning proves relevant to those of us in the law enforcement and correctional communities. In understanding the personality of individuals determined to execute terroristic acts against their own society, those of us trying to prevent such attacks will have a greater potential of identifying and dealing with the psychosis that accompanies these aggressors. Without a much needed profile – either qualitative or quantitative in nature - such as the ones we've managed over the years with various criminal minds, our ability to identify potential terrorist recruits will increase over time.

International Terrorism

The global Salafi jihadist recruiting movement within the United States seeks those who desire acceptance from society. Individuals such as Johnny Walker Lindh, "The American Taliban", Timothy McVeigh, Adam "Pearlman" Gadahn "The American Azzam", and Jose Padilla are but a few of the better known American's who have sought out this social approval through the acceptance of extremist Islamic terrorist organizations. It's with varying personality dispositions requiring social acceptance, complete communal acceptance, which draws individuals towards terrorist organizations and those who carry out these unpredictable acts of martyrdom against a peaceful society of innocent civilians. Once drawn into this culture of radical Islamic extremism, people begin to lose sight of their individualism and are overwhelmed by the collective group personality due in great part to the organization's internal dynamics.

In the modeling of aggressive actions observed through the two parental males in his life, John's adult social interactions with women led to imitated behavior and subsequent conviction for his criminal acts. What John was unable to see, or in this case feel, was how his male models adapted once incarcerated in their new environments. Once placed in a controlled environment, John becomes institutionalized and his need for social acceptance is exponentially increased over time. This level of acute neediness and highly developed anger towards our society could lead to a modeled vulnerability sought after by those who are charged with recruiting for local terrorist organizations within our state and federal correctional systems.

Prison Gangs and Active Terrorist Recruitment

The social learning theory applies to the recruiting techniques of various prison gangs just as it does to the daily molding and personal development of life skills in the free world. Gang members are recruited and reared through the very essence of violence and overly aggressive social tendencies towards others, including members of their own clique. This type of antisocial behavior establishes a solid foundation ideal for terrorism recruitment and with the dominating

social structure of prison gangs; terrorism has an extended and more prevalent reach towards those within the United States corrections system who seek personal acceptance through a union of safety, solidarity, and fellowship.

While there are several gangs inhabiting our prisons, one of the most predominate and violent organizations is the Aryan Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, with their outside ties to the Aryan Nations and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), are an earmark for domestic terrorism. The Aryan Nations is best known for teaching members urban terrorism and guerrilla warfare while serving time for criminal acts, and all three organizations are known for their violent, criminal activities which include their unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the United States government. The Aryan Nations has had long standing ties with extremism and domestic terrorism and an extensive element of their recruitment process is established in the penal system through their offspring, the Aryan Brotherhood.

Implications to Operators

Understanding the mindset of any perpetrator, especially a terrorist, could prove essential as solving for the "X" variable in any given tactical situation. While forensic psychologists have been profiling felons for decades, we have not been able to accurately depict the qualitative values of a given terrorist. Through the use of sociological theories used in criminology, we can begin to identify advanced personality signs that might prove as valid indicators to those who know what to look for.

For individuals like Jose Padilla and Timothy McVeigh, joining organizations such as gangs and militias was not enough to satisfy the lust of their personality disorders. They needed more and seeking to destroy targets in the United States became their feeding frenzy. We were fortunate with Padilla since we detained and imprisoned him prior to his planned dirty bomb attack on residential apartment, but fell short in McVeigh's case. Regardless of who commits these heinous terrorist acts, there are psychosocial indicators, no matter how subtle, we can and should be looking for in our pursuit to prevent future attacks.

This can be accomplished through our various neighborhood programs such as D.A.R.E., Neighborhood Watch, etc. Furthermore, our daily patrols can also play a critical role in identifying these indicators while working the streets. Once a person has been indentified, the intelligence must be sent up to the collection manager, filtered, and determined credible before it is sent on for additional action. This further action might include more intel collection or an actual tactical (counterterrorism) mission requiring the capture and further interrogation of said subject(s).

Final Thoughts

Law enforcement is an art mixed with common sense, motivation, dedication, and persistence. To place us in a better position to win this new war that's being fought on our streets, we must find innovative ways to identify and deter our newest enemies. Terrorism is no longer just something we read about in other countries, it is alive and well in our streets and we are the first-line defenders. Should we fail... Well that's just not an option!

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The views expressed herein are those of the author's and do not purport to reflect the position of the US Air Force Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Notes

¹ Terrorology is not a commonly used term, but Extreme Terrorism Consulting has come up with this definition as a foundation from which we can build a stronger understanding of the current threat of terrorism and identify operational techniques that can be mastered and employed by law enforcement and other first responders throughout the United States.