The Terrorist Mind

II. Typologies, Psychopathologies, and Practical Guidelines for Investigation

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Part I of this two-part article presents a psychological and political analysis of the terrorist mind. Part II describes the major current psychological classifications and typologies of domestic and foreign terrorism. Explanations are offered in terms of our current understanding of the personality and psychopathology of terrorist violence. A heuristic model of classifying terrorism in terms of personality and psychopathology is presented. In addition to guiding further research and theory on the psychology of terrorism, this model has immediate practical application to the investigation and interrogation of terrorist suspects.

Keywords: counterterrorism; personality and psychopathology; psychology of terrorism; suicide bombers; terrorism; terrorism investigation

The Psychology and Politics of Terrorism

Until quite recently, psychological factors have figured little in most terrorist analyses (Silke, 2003d). Aside from such simple expletives as “They must be crazy” or “They’re evil,” traditional terrorist typologies have focused less on individual psychology and more on social, cultural, and demographic factors. Much of this research emerged from the 1960s and 1970s social science philosophy that viewed human behavior as largely shaped by societal and cultural forces, particularly those of economic inequality and political oppression. But obviously, violent extremism is not the inevitable natural consequence of imposed injustice. In fact, many such individuals devote themselves to peaceful and constructive forms of social change, whereas the overwhelming majority pursue the more modest goal of working to improve their own lot, simply struggling along and praying for better days.

Something, then, beyond mere adversity, turns a person into a terrorist. By examining the sociology and psychology of terrorism, we will be able to identify the conditions that predispose some individuals to embrace violence as an ideological strategy. Furthermore, we will come to understand the kinds of persons most prone to become the adherents and practitioners of terrorism. Of course, just as psychology influences the politics of people in small and large groups, the nature of a society’s social and
political forces correspondingly affects the psychological dynamics and the behavior of the people in it. This is especially true for societies in which there are extreme imbalances in economic status and political influence. In science, the first step toward understanding is classification. Accordingly, the following sections summarize what we know about the kinds of people most likely to kill for a cause and how we can apply this knowledge to deterring and discouraging terrorist actions.

**Terrorists and Psychopathology**

A frequent comment heard among people following a suicide terrorist attack is something along the lines of, “Bad enough these suicide terrorists throw their own lives away, but don’t they care that they’re killing innocent people? That proves that only a crazy person would do such a thing.” As a counterpoint to our reflexive revulsion at terrorists’ seeming inhumanity, there are three basic forms of rationalization the terrorist mind-set takes (Butler, 2002). First, no target population is entirely innocent, either because their own acts have targeted innocents as well or simply because they are evil by association with the enemy group, by exemplifying or supporting the corrupt values and actions of the hated group. Thus, Palestinian bus bombers of women and children are only playing tit for tat with Israeli killings of Palestinian civilians. As far as we know, al-Qaeda has avoided children per se and concentrated on strategic targets or at least primarily adult populations, such as a marine barracks, a battleship, the Pentagon, the World Trade Center, and other U.S. and worldwide targets. But in the terrorists’ mind-set, the noncombatants at these sites are not innocent because they represent and support, however remotely, the unholy occupation of Muslim lands by alien colonizers or the defilement of the sacred by infidel acts and philosophies.

Second, the victims may in fact be innocent in the direct sense, but war is hell, and in all noble struggles, there is always collateral damage. As much was plainly spoken by Timothy McVeigh to justify the Oklahoma City bombing, and this is generally the attitude of military personnel who are tasked with pacifying hostile civilian populations, whether in Northern Ireland, the Gaza Strip, Baghdad, or elsewhere. This is clearly the position of paramilitary assassination teams that seek to eliminate hostile terrorist leaders to prevent further violence—they are certainly not targeting civilians per se, but if civilians are in the vicinity, then they die with the terrorists for the greater cause of peace and security. So it is not surprising that terrorist organizations themselves would seek to further legitimize their actions by adopting the political and military terminology of their better-armed adversaries.

Third and more grotesquely practical, if pure coercive terror is the goal, then the greater the number of innocents slain, the better. In fact, sophisticated terrorists know that responsibility for tragedy tends to affix itself to targets of proximity and opportunity, and populations will ultimately blame their own leaders for not protecting them if terrorist strikes continue to occur. Thus, in this latter mind-set, targeting innocents is not a side effect or a regrettable necessity but a deliberate strategic goal.


As for the issue of mental illness, it is tempting to view wicked behavior as crazy because doing so helps take some of the malevolent sting out of it. If someone commits a horrid, atrocious act out of pathology or insanity, the intentionality of it is diluted—on some level, they are “driven” to it. Such explanations are routinely proffered for the causes of street crime, serial killings, workplace violence, and school violence (Miller, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002). Reducing something to an anomalous scientific curiosity, no matter how perverse, gives us some intellectualized control over it. Detached clinical understanding inserts a psychological barrier between our knowledge of the act and the hideous feelings that knowledge provokes. It also gives us a motivational escape clause: If only we can determine the causes of these pathologies, we can potentially eliminate the danger.

Finally, pathologizing a violent act against us delegitimizes any traces of justification we may uncomfortably suspect underlies the act. If they are just crazy, then they would have attacked us no matter what, and nothing we could have done to assuage their alleged grievances would have dissuaded these delusional killers. But if it is not a sickness, if someone could coldly, rationally, and with full intention and self-justification commit such horrendous acts, then they are all the more frightening because maybe something we did, however remote, is partially responsible for our fate. Better to just regard them as a bunch of malevolent psychos.

Some authorities have pointedly disputed the idea that serious psychopathology underlies most terrorist activities (Horgan, 2003b). For example, a few studies have explicitly compared politically motivated offenders with common street criminals (Lyons & Harbinson, 1986) whose activities included various forms of violence, including murder. The political subjects ranged from Irish Republican Army members to Italian left-wing and right-wing terrorists. In general, although the psychological profiles of the ordinary criminals tended to resemble that reported in the criminal psychology literature—low verbal IQ, impulsivity, poor planning and poor self-control, exploitive interpersonal relationships, and frequent alcohol and drug habits (Miller, 1987, 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1998)—the political criminals tended to be of at least normal intelligence and free of serious mental disorder or substance abuse.

These political terrorists lacked the early developmental antisocial pattern characterizing many chronic offenders as well as any significant history of lawlessness prior to their involvement in violent political activity. They were better educated overall and capable of cooperative and collaborative decision making, organization, and action. They did not believe themselves to be mentally ill or to require psychiatric attention, yet they generally complied with the forensic examinations. When confronted with the human consequences of their acts, the political convicts showed steel resolve, but unlike the coldblooded remorselessness of the true psychopath, these political terrorists seemed to be able to rationalize and compartmentalize their violent activities, believing that these were necessary actions in fighting for their greater cause—the collateral damage concept (Horgan, 2003b).

In this respect, then, psychological strength, not weakness, may underlie the characters of the most effective terrorists. A certain psychological resilience and philosophical resolve may be required for becoming a successful career political activist,
whether this involves terror or nonviolent resistance. For example, nonviolent political activists who have been physically tortured by their regimes have been found to show milder posttraumatic psychological disturbance following their ordeals than ordinary civilians who were merely rounded up for questioning (Horgan, 2003a). Indeed, because of their rebel status, the known activists typically underwent more prolonged and more brutal torture than the civilians and yet showed less severe reactions. One reason is an obvious selection factor: Only those with a certain innate mental toughness and sense of loyalty are likely to opt for and stick with a style of life that offers few tangible rewards and many dangers. Yet it works the other way, too: An intense religious, philosophical, or political belief in what you are fighting for helps you fight all the more ferociously and resist interrogation more doggedly.

Thus, whatever else one might say about the terrorist lifestyle, clearly, it is not an easy one, and being a successful career terrorist seems to require a combination of several positive psychological qualities (Horgan, 2003a). Terrorist members must be reliable, trustworthy, and loyal to the ideals of the group and to the directives of its leaders. They must cope with the pressures of living an underground or double life and must forswear gratification of normal human desires for material comfort, family, friendships, and all the other taken-for-granted perks of a normal life. They may have to withstand imprisonment, interrogation, and torture—or the seduction of a large cash reward—without betraying the group. Ultimately, they may have to give their lives. In this sense, full-time terrorists share many of the characteristics of undercover police officers, government secret agents, organized crime operatives, witness protection program clients, and others who spend some or all of their lives in the shadows (Miller, in press).

**Terrorist Typologies**

Although what we can call the “modern” literature on terrorism is barely three decades old, the sheer number of attempts to ideologically, politically, and sociologically classify and categorize terrorist subtypes far exceeds the scope of this article. Accordingly, this section will summarize a few of the representative taxonomies of terror that have the greatest bearing on our attempts to get inside the terrorist mind. A later section will present a personality-based taxonomy of terrorism that can be practically applied to law enforcement and criminal justice.

**“Crusaders, Criminals, and Crazies”**

As in any complex organization, different roles are filled by different members of terrorist and other extremist groups, each with their own individual contributions to the goals and strategies of the organization (Horgan & Taylor, 2001; Pitcavage, 2003). One early classification system (Hacker, 1976) divided terrorists into “crusaders, criminals, and crazies.” The crusaders are the most ideologically driven of terrorists, motivated by their devotion to their cause, whether Islamic jihad or neo-Nazism. These individuals serve as the focal points of the group, rallying the group’s commit-
ment and planning strategic operations against the group’s enemies, however those are defined.

The criminals are essentially violent individuals in search of an excuse to express their antisocial impulses through an ostensibly acceptable and noble cause. They are typically the least ideologically committed to the group and may easily change venues under the lure of new and better opportunities to practice their aggressive and sadistic craft. These are the odious, if necessary, thugs of the group who carry out the organization’s dirty work, largely because they are good at it and enjoy it.

The crazies are laboring under some mental disorder, which may either rivet their loyalty to the group or result in dangerous instability in terms of their commitment and behavior. Rootless, anomic, and disgruntled individuals of this type are commonly attracted to the anchoring philosophical certitude of many extremist groups and, if their psychopathology can be channeled for the group’s purposes, they may play useful roles within the terrorist organizational structure.

American and International Terrorists

Another prominent classification of terrorist group members grew out of Strentz’s (1988) study of the highly motivated and well-trained American and international terrorist organizations that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. For certain groups of modern terrorists, the substance of this analysis still applies today.

In this model, the leaders of terrorist groups usually exhibit an egocentric slant on reality, which may extend to the level of paranoia. They tend to see the world as a web of plots and conspiracies, especially by inferior cultures or religious infidels who are polluting and poisoning the purity of the self-defined chosen group. Rarely overtly psychotic, these leaders’ characterological paranoia may be well hidden to the outside world, cloaked by the superficial persona of charismatic self-confidence and commanding presence—thus their emergence as messianic leaders.

Another subtype of terrorist organization member is the activist-operator, who typically has an antisocial or psychopathic personality structure. These types are frequently former or current mercenary soldiers or ex-convicts with long and varied rap sheets. They often have been recruited from a prison population by the terrorist leader, who then allows these opportunists to take the spotlight while the leader remains behind the scenes as the brains of the organization. For their part, the activist-operators exploit this opportunity to lead a thrillingly violent and hedonistic lifestyle with the tactical support and doctrinal blessing of the leader and the organization. However, activist-operators are rarely truly committed ideologically to the group’s mission and may secretly harbor contempt for the abstract philosophies and lofty goals of the leader and his organization. Yet they stay in for the rush and the power trip they get from their role as organizational “muscle.”

A third personality type in most terrorist organizations is the idealist, who may be genuinely dedicated to a better world, is willing to give his or her all, and is therefore eagerly co-opted by the terrorist organization for its own ends. Ever the faithful servants, these idealists are often initially assigned routine maintenance and support
duties until they prove themselves worthy of more sophisticated and dangerous operations. They are often desperate, dependent young people who are seeking truth and philosophical guidance and have fallen victim to the leader’s rhetoric and the opportunist’s deceit.

Secret Service Profiles of Terrorists

Although the above analyses may appear overly theoretical and academic, another terrorist typology is based on the practical profiling needs of U.S. Secret Service agents and executive protection specialists who have the daily task of guarding political, corporate, and media figures (June, 1999).

In this classification, crusading terrorists are ideologically motivated by their religious or political convictions.

 Ultraconservative political terrorists espouse a firm belief in individual rights over the intrusive strictures of a repressive, ultraliberal government. These groups are characterized by an ultraconservative, right-wing political orientation and an authoritarian, quasimilitary organization, often involving an independent militia.

The political anarchist has an ultraleft orientation, which may paradoxically reject the intrusion of government as strongly as the ultrarightist, but for opposite reasons—that the government is racist, elitist, and economically oppressive.

Religious terrorists believe they are accountable to no one but God and therefore justify killing in His name and for His purpose. These are also the most likely types to sacrifice their own lives to earn their places in Paradise.

The criminal terrorist is typically more an opportunist than an idealist and commits terrorist acts for personal gain rather than for a cause.

Terrorist Subtypes: Commonalities

What all these typologies concur on is the identification of certain common subsets of terrorist group members, including:

- An ideologically driven charismatic leader
- A passel of acolytes who are drawn to the group’s goals and ideals
- One or more “dirty work” operators who are likely to be in it for the thrill, the profit, or some combination of personal motives

Terrorism, Fanaticism, and Destructive Cults

In fact, insular organizations of many types seem to contain many of these same characters, whether they explicitly espouse violent terrorism or not. For example, in their core features of ideological certitude, charismatic leadership, and thorough indoctrination of members, terrorist groups share many of the features that are known to characterize cults. Bohm and Alison (2001) analyzed the characteristics of various cult groups and identified several features that marked what the researchers call destructive cults; that is, cults that are willing and able to commit violence, including
murder. Not surprisingly, such destructive cults typically follow a charismatic leader who may claim to be specially chosen or uniquely qualified to lead the group to glory; he (less commonly, she) may even claim to be an incarnation of a religious or historically significant figure. The leader and his lieutenants commonly enforce loyalty by severe discipline and by physically preventing members from leaving the group. The destructive cult has a well-spun paranoid conspiracy theory and a siege mentality, typically stockpiling weapons, building defensive barricades, and carrying out regular “doomsday drills.” The cult may openly or tacitly endorse individual killings or mass murder, which may be accompanied by mass suicide, either as a further symbolic instrument of their cause or, more commonly, as what they perceive to be justified self-defense, a last resort when the hostile world starts closing in and the leader’s authority is threatened.

**Terrorist Personalities: Traits, Types, and Disorders**

As noted earlier, most theorizing on terrorism has either ignored individual psychological factors or else has conceptualized the terrorist mind as mentally disordered by definition. But an analysis in terms of psychology need not automatically imply severe psychopathology. In this section, a terrorist typology is presented, based on current psychological insight into personality theory (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Miller, 1990a, 2004; Millon & Davis, 2000; Sperry, 1995). Tactically, such a formulation can be useful both for profiling and identifying terrorist suspects and for developing targeted interrogation strategies for gathering intelligence and other information. A psychological approach to terrorism or any other kind of violent behavior does not imply that such behavior is committed only by mentally disordered persons. Rather, psychological traits occur along a continuum, from normal variations on the theme of human diversity to extreme aberrations of thought, feeling, and action. Accordingly, an individual’s personality may influence the course and direction of an otherwise perfectly rational and volitional choice to commit harmful acts in the name of either self-gratification or some higher purpose. The varying elements of thought, feeling, and action are encoded in the genetic structure of each individual, but the personality that emerges is molded and hardened by the familial, social, economic, and political context in which the person develops.

When features of character become more than minor variations, psychologists regard them not just as personality traits but as personality disorders. The official definition of a personality disorder is “an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). It is thus the extremes of their self-perception and conduct toward others that distinguish personality disordered individuals from those with milder traits (Millon & Davis, 2000; Sperry, 1995).
Again, it must be emphasized that conceptualizing terrorist mentalities within an established behavioral science context is not an attempt to clinically sterilize atrocious behavior by psychologizing or pathologizing it. Rather, the more we study deviant acts and life patterns with the lens of behavioral science, the better we may be able to understand how they affect us in the various venues of our daily lives, and—more important—how to manage them (Miller, 1990a, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, in press).

**Terrorist Leaders: Narcissistic and Paranoid Personalities**

_Narcissistic personality_ is a pattern of grandiosity, sense of entitlement, arrogance, need for admiration, and lack of empathy for others’ feelings or opinions. These are the classic cultic terrorist leaders, convinced of their own authority and infallibility and regarding themselves as above the law because of their special powers of perception, insight, and judgment in matters of absolute truth and justice. They are often quite engagingly charismatic and able to ensnare impressionable devotees with their unshakable certitude, conviction of infallibility, and infectious zeal for the cause. These are the leaders who give the orders and expect the followers to obey without question.

_Paranoid personality_ is a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness so that others’ actions and motives are almost invariably interpreted as deceptive, persecutory, or malevolent. Aside from the narcissistic personality style, these are the other main group of quintessential cult leaders, and indeed, it is not uncommon for such leaders to combine various proportions of narcissistic and paranoid features in their personalities. The paranoid is less of an inviting charmer than the pure narcissist who, as noted above, wants to be liked and admired above all. Instead, the paranoid leader’s philosophy is more likely to have a racial or religious exclusionary focus as well as a darkly conspiratorial tinge, in contrast to the expansive narcissist’s universalist philosophy that is often broad enough to encompass the whole wide world. The paranoid leader is already convinced that it is him or her against everyone else and thus feels no compulsion to ingratiate oneself with the mass of inferior underlings except insofar as this will cement whatever allegiance among in-group members is necessary to accomplish the aims.

The paranoid person may be the most dangerous type of terrorist leader or group member because perceived external threats and the group’s holy mission justify committing any kind of violent act to further his or her absolutist religious or political philosophy (Bohm & Alison, 2001). Thus, terrorist acts against religious infidels, political rivals, or racial inferiors are justified as perfectly legitimate defenses of the faith, social structure, or ethnic purity. As such, violent acts continue, and the world actually does come to hate the terrorist group and everyone connected with it, thus confirming the paranoid conspiracy theory in a vicious cycle.

The combined narcissistic-paranoid type seems to correspond to Strentz’s (1988) definition of a leader and may be exemplified in religious terrorist or cult leaders who believe they are manifestly chosen to lead the masses to their own versions of salvation
and spiritual perfection, which may well involve the annihilation of their enemies in the name of absolute religious and/or political truth. These are also the leaders who, when threatened, are most likely to lead their followers to mass suicide, believing that without their own divine guidance, the underlings literally have no further reason to exist.

Paranoid terrorist leaders or group members are not likely to alter their fixed beliefs, which at extremes may attain a frankly delusional quality, and this renders them essentially impervious to logic or intimidation. These are individuals who would rather go out in a blaze of glory than surrender their principles. Narcissistic underbosses or lieutenants may cooperate with law enforcement authorities if they can be persuaded that their own superior knowledge or talent has been squelched by less worthy leaders who have unfairly thwarted their rise to power in the group. Potential narcissistic leaders may be convinced that even greater fame and notoriety can be achieved by using their gifts in the service of a new noble cause, for example, such as becoming a courageous crusader of antiterrorism. The key is for authorities to allow the narcissist to perceive a new and improved outlet for his or her own self-importance that involves cooperation with the authorities. Indeed, it remains unknown as to how many middle-level terrorist operatives have been “turned” in this manner. However, paranoid or combined paranoid-narcissistic leaders may well view their capture and interrogation as proof of their martyrdom, and this will only stiffen their resistance.

True Believers and Unstable Deceivers: Borderline and Antisocial Personalities

Borderline personality is a pattern of erratic and intense relationships, alternating between overidealization and devaluation of others; self-damaging impulsiveness; emotional instability, including inappropriately intense anger and/or depressive mood swings and suicidality; persistent identity disturbance in self-image and interpersonal relationships; and a chronic feeling of emptiness that may lead to the quest for stimulation through provocation or escalation of conflict. Initially, borderlines may form ferociously powerful allegiances to group leaders and ideologies. Although the characteristic changeability of their attachments makes them unreliable long-term loyalists, their intervals of intense idealistic devotion and their willingness to take great risks in its service may make them useful—and expendable—functionaries for dangerous terrorist missions.

The very mutability of the borderline’s attachments may work to the advantage of law enforcement authorities should the borderline member become disillusioned with the terrorist group’s ideals or feel slighted by the leader. Then, the fierce devotion may turn to rabid resentment and the borderline will loathe the group with the same intensity as he or she once adored it. This is the place for authorities to step in and convince the borderline that his or her cooperation will right the wrong that has been done. If an interviewer can form a strong attachment bond with the respondent, this may encourage the borderline to reveal intimate details of the group’s plans and activities. The
only caution here is that the respondent may later “turn on” these same authorities with equal intensity if he feels misused or rejected by them. Several such oscillating love-hate cycles may occur in the course of intelligence gathering and may prove frustrating to authorities who are impatient for straight answers. Also, borderlines’ brittle and fragile emotional stability means that they are probably the terrorist subtype most at risk for impulsive suicide and so should be kept under careful observation while detained.

Antisocial personality is a pattern of consistent disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others. It is typically associated with impulsivity, criminal behavior, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, and an exploitive, parasitic, and/or predatory lifestyle. Although possessed of similar qualities of entitlement and self-importance as the narcissist, antisocial personalities are distinguished by their complete lack of empathy and conscience, which allows them to treat other people simply as sources of their own gratification. They may join terrorist organizations for the sheer thrill of being able to wreak destruction on inferior, helpless citizens, and they are often the skilled assassins or bombers of the group (Meloy & McEllistrem, 1998). They can also be quite shrewd in a cunning or conning type of way, and the more intelligent among these types may accumulate considerable fiefdoms of wealth and power or rise to positions of great authority within the terrorist organization. This personality type seems to most closely parallel Strentz’s (1988) cynical and hedonistic activist-operator terrorist subtype.

Unlike the narcissist or paranoid type, however, for the antisocial terrorist, there is no true loyalty—it is all a game. True identification with, or commitment to, any person or idea is entirely alien to his or her nature and, when squeezed by authorities, the antisocial will qualmlessly betray compatriots to save his or her own skin. Tactically, authorities may exploit this self-serving character by offering a deal in exchange for intelligence. The only drawback is that antisocials tend to believe that they are cleverer than everyone else and may try to outmanipulate the authorities by planting misleading information or trying to use law enforcement to strike back at their own enemies. This is further aggravated by the tendency of most antisocial personalities to be pathological liars in general. Information so obtained should therefore be viewed skeptically until independently validated.

Good Soldiers and Worker Bees: Avoidant and Dependent Personalities

Avoidant personality is a pattern of social inhibition, feelings of inadequacy, and hypersensitivity to criticism. Even relatively neutral interpersonal interactions or confrontations are approached with trepidation. Although it is unlikely that many individuals with this personality pattern would choose a murderous vocation such as terrorism, some members may have initially been attracted to the helping and social justice aspects of some religious and political movements as a form of self-therapy or to garner good will and admiration from citizens and comaraderie from fellow group members. Indeed, the structure, order, predictability, and ideological certainty offered by
many terrorist political and religious organizations are sublimely comforting to avoidant personalities, affording them respite from the moral ambiguities of the outside world while allowing them to perform an ostensibly useful function within a group of supportive comrades. Only later do they realize that these seductively benevolent organizations have a more violent side. In such groups, avoidant members are unlikely to be on the front lines but may provide valuable assistance in support and supply roles that do not require physical confrontation.

Earning the investigatory cooperation of avoidant suspects will usually occur in proportion to the amount of security and safety that law enforcement authorities can provide for these individuals. Many disillusioned avoidant suspects will actually be relieved to free themselves of the terrorist group and will be happy to provide information in exchange for safety. A collaborative and supportive interview style, rather than a cold and confrontational interrogation, will be the most productive approach with these individuals.

Dependent personality is a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior stemming from an excessive need for care and nurturance. Whereas avoidant suspects fear people and prefer to be away from them, dependent personalities desperately need people and fear only their rejection or insufficient support. Dependent personalities cling to others to provide guidance and direction, and a charismatic cult leader is the perfect object of this desire. Dependent members of terrorist groups may actually be good, dedicated soldiers, so long as independent decision making is kept to a minimum. Interactions with colleagues or leaders are apt to be taken more personally than with other group members, as dependents are always hungry for validation of their usefulness and worthiness. This need can be exploited to great effect by group leaders, because although the daringness of dependents will not likely be as great as with borderline or antisocial members, dependent personalities’ loyalty and perseverance will likely be more dogged and persistent.

Facing questioning by authorities, dependent personalities may retain their loyalty to the terrorist group because of the sense of meaning, purpose, and validation the group has given them. Presenting them with evidence that they have never really been regarded as respected group members but rather have been duped and exploited by group leaders may loosen their allegiance to the terrorist organization, or it may entrench it through denial to protect their own fragile self-image. A more effective strategy is to assume a supportive, collaborative approach to interview and interrogation, similar to that with avoidant personalities, but in this case, allowing the dependent individuals to gradually see themselves not as a criminal suspect in a hostile environment, but as a valued part of an important new team or family—the law enforcement agency and the accepting community it represents.

Borderline and dependant personalities probably define the ranks of many of the idealist terrorist subtypes in Strentz’s (1988) classification. The political or religious group provides them with meaning and validation, and they will be fiercely loyal to that group unless and until law enforcement authorities can provide a new focus for their dependant allegiance.
Limelight Seekers and Loose Cannons: Histrionic and Schizoid-Schizotypal Personalities

_Histrionic personality_ is a pattern of excessive emotionality, attention seeking, need for excitement, flamboyant theatricality in speech and behavior, an impressionistic and impulsive cognitive style, and the use of exaggeration to maintain largely superficial relationships for the purpose of getting emotional needs met by being admired and cared for by others. These are the “showboats” of any organization who enjoy being at the center of attention. They are less strong on discipline and less willing to get their hands dirty than other types, but terrorist organizations may solicit these individuals as front men or women in the legitimate worlds of entertainment, the media, or politics to take their case to the larger world or to infiltrate mainstream organizations. The risk is that histrionics’ hunger for recognition may eclipse their loyalty to the group, in which case they may draw too much attention to the group’s activities and thus become an expendable liability.

This may prove an advantage to law enforcement authorities, who may be able to barter the promise of heroic media exposure for valuable information on the terrorist group (“I was a double-agent for al-Qaeda!”). Less theatrically, histrionic members may be the most likely type to drop out when “it’s just not fun anymore.” Then, similar to the narcissist, the promise of a positive public spotlight, combined with credible security against retaliation from the group, may render the histrionic individual a cooperative participant for law enforcement. Once again, information thus obtained should be independently validated, given the histrionic personality’s propensity for embellishment and self-aggrandizement.

The central characteristics of both schizoid and schizotypal personalities include avoidance of other people, severe deficits in social skills, generalized withdrawal from life, and sometimes impairment in perceptual and cognitive skills. _Schizoid personality_ is a pattern of aloof detachment from social interaction with a restricted range of emotional expression. These are people who do not need people and are perfectly happy being left to themselves. The _schizotypal personality_, in addition, includes more serious disturbances of thinking and more bizarre behavior. It is thought that these two personality disorders really represent points on a continuum from schizoid to schizotypal to outright schizophrenia; the latter characterized by severe distortions of thought, perception, and action, including delusions and hallucinations. In fact, schizoid and schizotypal personality disorders may episodically deteriorate into psychotic states, especially under conditions of stress.

Although such individuals are typically not joiners, the unstable identity structure of many schizoids and schizotypals may lead them on philosophical and spiritual quests that end up in social and religious movements with terrorist ties. They will be the “oddballs” of the group who mainly keep to themselves but may show fierce commitment if the movement’s philosophy appeals to their idiosyncratic world view. However, they may have a tendency to decompensate and become delusional under prolonged, intense stress, and are then more likely to become an expendable liability to the group.
If the goals and beliefs of the terrorist organization fit in with the schizoid or schizotypal’s idiosyncratic worldview—especially if they contain fixed, delusional elements—these individuals may be as stubbornly resistant as the paranoid member to betraying the group. Even when they choose to cooperate, the sometimes bizarre and delusional nature of the information they provide may compromise its validity and usefulness. Overall, a firm and directive but not overtly hostile approach may be most effective in focusing the schizoid member’s attention on simple, precise questions. These should be designed to yield specific, concrete bits of information that can then be fitted together to create a coherent narrative of useful information and intelligence.

Conclusions

Psychological principles will not, in themselves, solve all the problems of criminal and terrorist intelligence gathering but, inasmuch as interview and interrogation are uniquely human processes, their success will be informed by a mastery of the practical psychology of the criminal or terrorist mind. Indeed, practical psychology is a skill that is vital for all aspects of law enforcement and criminal justice (Miller, 2006; Zulawski & Wicklander, 1993).

References


