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## Introduction

### 1.1 Psychology and Terrorism Research – The State of the Art

In the years since 9/11 terrorism has been touted as an existential threat to the nation state, liberal democracy, and civilization itself. Anxiety about the potential use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorist actors dominated security planning in the early 2000s and featured heavily in academic analysis on terrorism and political violence. The conceptualization of terrorism as an existential threat depended on the political mood, the nature of political leadership, and the occurrence of large-scale attacks. The obvious retort to advocates of this approach is to cite examples of causes of death that exceed the death toll from terrorist attacks: shooting accidents by toddlers in the USA, shark attacks in Australia, and so on. But this of course is missing the point. Terrorism's success is not about, as Jenkins said, "the many dead," but in fact "the many watching" and the power of terrorism is in the message and its ability to threaten, if not deliver, violence to a particular population. After many years of attempting to understand terrorism and a sustained academic effort to conceptualize the phenomenon, we now recognize that understanding terrorism, and in particular the impact of terrorism, is as much about the psychology of the audience and the politicization of the act as it is about the behavior of the terrorist actor or group.

In thinking about terrorism, it is clear that there are a number of openings where psychological research may contribute to developing our understanding of political violence: The violent act itself, the oppositional/deviant behavior of the group, the impact of the attack on the victims, and the creation of an enemy are all issues that are fundamental to understanding terrorism. However, while these may seem like the key areas for psychological investigation, they are not the research areas that dominate the field. Unfortunately, as Horgan (2009b) points out,

That psychological perspectives on terrorism are synonymous with speculation on the existence of a terrorist personality is a regrettable testament to how little psychology as a discipline has to say about terrorism. (Horgan, 2009b, p. 5)

Perhaps more problematic is the (arguably) poor application of psychological science to the phenomenon of terrorism (Horgan, 2009b). Much of the psychological literature on

terrorism could be described as tokenism and would be readily disputed, perhaps even rejected, if attempts were made to publish it in key psychological journals. That is not to detract from the excellent work of some scholars in the field, but, on the whole, given its potential, psychology has not contributed what it might to the field of terrorism studies.

The contribution of psychology to terrorism studies was stalled by an early fixation on the terrorist personality or profile. This approach was eventually dismissed by academics working in the field, as there was a lack of evidence to justify pursuing such an approach but also it highlighted the weakness of taking a mono-dimensional deterministic psychological approach to understanding terrorism and *the terrorist* (Horgan, 2006a). However, despite the move *away* from a profiling and/or personality approach, some authors continue to adhere to the notion that there is in fact a “type” of individual who is a terrorist and that you can in fact “know” terrorists by discovering these elements (see Navarro, 2005). While this is not a useful, testable, or causal feature of terrorism, its simplicity has insured its popularity. There was a shift from a personality type, to the existence of *certain traits*, as well as a prioritization of the notion of *vulnerability* and the existence of *subclinical* symptomology. Regardless, these individual approaches failed to garner evidence to support a global theory of “the terrorist personality” (King & Taylor, 2011; Silke, 2002) yet much time and effort were expended in the pursuit of the illusive and distinctive *terrorist typology* (Silke, 1998; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006).

Similarly, early on, researchers hypothesized that an underlying psychopathology within the terrorist actor population would account for their deviant behavior (Silke, 1998). While oftentimes these claims were generally disregarded, there remains a tendency to assume that individuals involved in terrorism suffer from *elements* of a clinical condition, if not the condition itself, therefore protecting such claims from rebuttal from those involved in clinical practice (King & Taylor, 2011). It is worth noting that we cannot categorically refute claims that there is a “terrorist profile” or a high incidence of psychopathology (or elements of) in the terrorist population; equally we lack evidence to support such claims. What we can support is the fact that there is an abundance of research that demonstrates the importance of *both* individual and situational factors in influencing behavior (King & Taylor, 2011). However, the issue here is not the existence of profiles or quasi-syndromes but the inability to demonstrate their existence, or not, within the boundaries of scientific research. The insistence on a terrorist profile or psychopathology within this population is based on poor data, absent data, assumption, or “expert” opinion and therein lies the problem. More important, however, is that the issue of mental illness or subclinical symptomology as a *cause* or *antecedent* to terrorist activity misses the point. Mental illness is not a significant indicator of violent behavior and lessons from criminology (a discipline that has been down this road before!) demonstrate that the application of mental illness frameworks is less about the presence of pathological symptomology in the individual and more about societal expectations around how we might understand incidences of extreme violence (Hiday, 1995).

Another issue that has stymied the contribution of psychology to terrorism research is the desire to establish a linkage, or causality, between factors, all the while failing to understand the appropriate research methods to employ and the appropriate research questions to ask given the complex nature of terrorism. This is a particular issue amongst those approaches that seek solutions for the counterterrorism field; in

particular the use of uni-causal arguments and the aim to produce tools (particularly psychometric tools) in an effort to identify individuals involved in terrorism. This is problematic given that terrorism is a complex social and behavioral phenomenon and so not governed by linear means–ends connections. Therefore, seeking out definitive causal relationships may not be an appropriate strategy for coming to know about the terrorist, given the importance of context as a variable and the notion that chance and opportunity play a key role in an individual’s involvement in political violence (Zulaika, 1991).

However, this has not stopped researchers from pursuing mono-dimensional explanations for why individuals engage in terrorism (e.g., personal attributes, age, gender, ethnicity, mental illness, or religious denomination). However, these aspects of the individual cannot be the *cause* of someone’s actions in their own right (Bouhana & Wikstrom, 2011). Furthermore, given the conceptually ambiguous nature of such phenomena, such *profiling* approaches cannot predict or prevent terrorism (Sageman, 2004) but only serve to construct individuals and groups as suspect. Indeed, these simplistic mono-causal approaches serve to distract from more desirable multilevel interdisciplinary accounts. Problematically, this linear-causality type of intellectual strategy is widespread in terrorism research. There seems to be a disciplinary assumption that knowing the roots or causal factors that contribute to the behaviors associated with the terrorist will lead researchers to the foundations of the problem (Zulaika, 1991). However, any investigation that simplifies the phenomenon and focuses on causal factors suffers two major weaknesses: (a) that there are categorical differences in types of causation (Zulaika, 1991) and (b) that it relies on an assumption that there is some real identifiable cause independent of the experience of the process of involvement in terrorism.

As mentioned, these criticisms should not be seen to detract from the exceptional work of some contributors who have spent their careers researching terrorism and political violence. The pioneering work of some of the most prolific contributors to the field (e.g., Horgan, 2006a; Silke, 1998; Taylor, 1988; Taylor & Horgan, 2000) and some of the more recent contributions by authors who are increasingly using new methodologies to investigate the phenomenon of terrorism (Bartlett & Miller, 2011; Githens-Mazer, Lambert, Baker, Cohen, & Pieri, 2010; Lambert, 2011; Spalek, 2009) and question existing discourses (Breen-Smyth, 2009; Bouhana & Wikstrom, 2011; Jackson, 2005) have ensured the field has overcome some of its significant foundational problems. However, regardless of the quality of individual research projects (see Bouhana & Wikstrom, 2011 for a review of the quality of contributions on radicalization and terrorism), the field of terrorism studies lacks a coherence and conceptual and methodological rigor that can only be overcome by a recognition of the fluidity of the notion of terrorism, the importance of separating the notion of terrorism and the terrorist, a contextual specificity, interdisciplinary cooperation, and increased interaction with the actors involved in carrying out and supporting terrorism.

## 1.2 Moving Forward

This volume does not pretend to offer solutions to overcome the many problems we encounter in the field of terrorism research—after all, as Max Taylor (2014) states, “we are where we are,” and we are working within and without the parameters of a

complex multidisciplinary field. What this volume offers is a considered, grounded, empirical method of how we might apply existing psychological theory to the individuals, groups, and communities involved in and related to terrorism and politically violent activity. In seeking to *apply psychology* to terrorism research, particularly the terrorist actor, the authors are not naïve to the limits of this approach. It has long been recognized that, in many cases, psychology is too easily and too loosely applied (Lévy-Leboyer, 1988). However, the strength of applying psychology to the case of terrorism research is that it requires a change in traditional representations of the topic. In other words, the approach recognizes the complexity and plasticity of psychological process as emergent in each case study scenario. Such an approach accounts for what might be called normal psychological process in an, at times, exceptional situation. Such an application, according to Lévy-Leboyer (1988), avoids the “othering” of terrorist groups or individual actors and is more likely to lead to success when applying psychology.

We also argue that in order to successfully apply psychology to terrorism research, it's necessary to return to the core principles that are the foundations of the discipline. Perhaps one of the strengths the discipline of psychology brings to terrorism studies is its ability to inform the core scientific principles of the field by reinforcing the need for scientific principles to be at the center of all research endeavors. This is due to psychology, from its inception, having been plagued with criticism from within and outside of the discipline from those who question its validity as a science. As a result, and in order to counter these claims, the core principles in psychology relate to the importance of scientific rigor and are based on the notion that all claims to knowledge in psychology must be replicable and falsifiable. In order for research to be replicable, methods and procedures have to be reported in sufficient detail so as to determine whether the findings are accurately reported, as well as the context contingency of claims made. Much of what has been written in psychology about terrorism deviates from these foundations in ways that do not reflect well on the discipline or the subject of investigation.

By adhering closely to the foundations of psychology as a discipline, it may also be possible to avoid the tendency to generalize theory beyond the bounds of the methods of the original psychological research. This could pose a problem in terrorism research where the expectation, particularly from funders and policy makers, is that psychology can make global points about the predictability of terrorist behavior across groups, cultures, and social contexts. However, even everyday observation can consistently demonstrate that individuals are guided by norms that govern behavior which is continually shifting depending on the context. Rather than fall into the trap of attempting to create a framework to understand issues of terrorism en masse, we will embrace the variability of the subject matter by examining distinct issues within particular research contexts and populations who participate in, or experience, terrorism.

Having briefly reviewed the core principles in psychology, we will establish a few parameters for the research discussed in this volume. Firstly, from the outset, we need to be clear about what level of abstraction is most appropriate for considering terrorism-related phenomena. Taking a global perspective on terrorism and attempting to access all levels of analysis to formulate a theory of terrorism is not our aim here. However, it is necessary to understand that terrorism is more than its constituent parts. Both

all-encompassing theories on terrorism and those that identify component parts do not provide a useable framework for conceptualizing the phenomenon. A reciprocal relationship exists between these levels of abstraction both at a macro and micro level—the failure to understand the integral components in their own right deprives researchers of the opportunity to theorize more generally. Therefore, in terms of the first parameter we will not be attempting to develop any global theories on terrorism but instead we will isolate and accurately conceptualize the individual elements that constitute the act.

To further unpack this notion, the issue here is not what terrorism is (or is not), in terms of a global analysis, but what psychology can tell us about how terrorism happens. Some of the questions we could consider are: Who are the individuals involved? How do they work together? What are their aims? How does the organization function? It is through an examination of the processes of action that the *doing* of terrorism comes into focus. Our understanding of the phenomenon can then develop, and our analysis becomes linked to the nuanced and complex realities of being *a terrorist*. In an effort to create deeper understanding of what is essentially a complex social and individual phenomenon, the elements of this phenomenon need to be better understood, drawing on available theories that could help examine particular aspects of terrorist-related phenomena.

This brings us to the second parameter of the research undertaken in this volume: We will not attempt “reinvent the wheel” in terms of the creation of new theories on behavior, organizational structure, and politics. In academia, there are already a vast number of well-established and empirically verified theories in existence. These theories can help explain social occurrences and individual action on par with the types of behavior that we might expect in what we refer to as terrorism. Examples include theories of crime, deviance, gang studies, social identity, and so on. There are also a number of frameworks that exist through which we could view terrorism. We can, for example, view terrorism as immoral action, terrorism as millenarianism, terrorism as a social movement, terrorism as antisocial behavior, terrorism as crime, and so forth. Situating elements of terrorism into these theories or frameworks means identifying which elements of terrorism we prioritize, but also situates the phenomenon within the complex contexts in which it occurs.

To this end, this volume draws on some key frameworks from social psychology and other closely related areas. For example, postconflict intergroup relations are described using social identity theory as an explanatory framework, and the meaning making model is used to explore how former political prisoners in Northern Ireland make sense of their experiences, postconflict. In addition, identity management strategies are used to explain the process of moving from paramilitary to peacemaker and, finally, we draw on existing psychological theories to better understand how Muslim youth construct their identity in the UK in the aftermath of jihadist terrorist attacks. All of these frameworks are applied to research conducted by the authors based on data collected from current and former terrorist actors, victims of terrorism, suspect communities, and practitioners in the field. Importantly, we use existing theories from psychology to better understand terrorism-related phenomena rather than search for overarching theories and psychological explanations to explain “terrorism” or “the terrorist” as a whole.

Third and relatedly, we do not claim that we, or indeed psychology as a discipline, have all the answers. Most applications of psychology to broad issues must draw eclectically on a wide range of concepts from across related disciplines. But importantly, it must be recognized that social psychology cannot answer all questions related to complex social phenomena. Multifaceted issues such as terrorism necessitate conceptualization that draws on different disciplines and vantage points as a means to view what is a very complex issue. For example, we can look at the micro level in terms of how individuals use language to construct their identities, sense of belonging to a movement, and their broader social world (see Chapter 5), while we can also begin at a macro level applying existing theory to participants' interview transcripts to explore consistencies and contradictions between theory and how individuals talk about their lived experiences (see Chapter 6). Being able to apply a variety of methods with different epistemological underpinnings to unpack the complexity of terrorism is the hallmark of the potential that social psychology brings to the field.

Fourth and finally, we will provide a working definition of the term "terrorism" as it applies to the research conducted in this volume. However, we will also acknowledge, as is the case with other social phenomena, the difficulty of creating anything beyond an academic consensus definition. According to these recent guidelines published by British Psychological Society Division of Forensic Psychology, practitioner psychologists are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the definitions of the terms terrorism, extremism, and related constructs (Al-Attar, Bates-Gaston, Dean, & Lloyd, 2017). We adhere to this guideline here and second the notion that responsible research begins with an operationalization and definition of the concept. The following section will deal with the difficulties inherent in the use of the term "terrorism" and "terrorist" and will conclude with a working definition as it applies to the research conducted here. Later, in Chapters 5 and 7, we will also contextualize the definition of terrorism and flesh out the intricacies of its use in social context, through a discussion of paramilitaries in Northern Ireland and Muslim youth in the UK.

### 1.3 Defining Terrorism

To start, a *reformulation* of the issue of terrorism is not the same as *redefining* terrorism as part of an academic debate. As a research issue, the definition of terrorism has received a tedious amount of attention from academics and practitioners across a range of disciplines, and debates still rage regarding the nature of the phenomenon, the inclusion of certain perpetrators within the definition, the characteristics of the act, and so on. Terrorism is, to state the obvious, a socially constructed notion; that is to say, terrorism is not a material fact, but is understood based on our perceptions of society, politics, history, and intergroup relations. While numerous well-thought-out definitions exist within academia, like other social phenomena, terrorism remains and is likely to remain a highly politicized and contentious term.

Indeed, if ever we were to achieve a broad consensus definition of the term terrorism, we must also consider its pejorative nature (Horgan, 2006a) and the rhetorical processes (Jenkins, 2003) at play by the major stakeholders (government, media, opposition groups, etc.) in their use of the term. Primarily due to the vested interests at play but also due to the power to normalize sensational language and to construct those who we

deem to be terrorists as the societal other (Lynch, 2013), defining and indeed understanding the term terrorism involves peeling back many layers of complexity.

More problematic in our attempts to define terrorism is, as mentioned, the changing conception of what terrorism is. The conceptualization of terrorism has constantly evolved, due in part to its manifestation in more (or less) “societally acceptable” forms: for example, its emergence in the face of oppression, as an effort at self-determination, and as a lever against “evil” opponents. In effect, terrorism as a singular phenomenon is not a tangible entity because those who seek to eradicate it do not control a dominant narrative (despite their best efforts). Therefore, constructing a definition of the term “terrorism” means understanding an evolving, societally rooted, historically situated, politically complex behavior. Further complicating matters, defining “terrorism” involves a sensitivity to context and a familiarity with sophisticated moral and political narratives based on notions of victimization, deprivation, and the primacy of particular identities.

As with other social science concepts, understanding what terrorism is and adequately defining the concept depends largely on the context, the local history, and politicization of the topic, but also on the discipline in which it is situated. Terrorism as a field of studies is situated in the gray areas between many popular established disciplines. Psychology, sociology, politics, law, and international relations may seem like the appropriate homes for research on terrorism; however, some insightful work has also come from epidemiology, criminology, and history. It is precisely the multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary nature of terrorism research that strengthens the field yet also contributes to the difficulties we encounter in our attempts to understand and define the parameters of terrorism research and the term “terrorism” itself.

## 1.4 Defining Terrorism or “the Terrorist” in Psychological Terms

Regardless of the definitional issues, in considering how psychology should be relevant for our understanding of terrorism we need to consider in the first instance if terrorism is in fact a *psychological issue*. Can and should psychology be applied to the study of terrorism? This brings us to the issue of reformulation as outlined above (Lévy-Leboyer, 1988). In the case of terrorism, psychology can only be useful in specific circumstances; not all social problems can be understood through the application of psychological theory given that not all social problems have a psychological component. In the case of terrorism, trying to understand how psychology can be applied to *terrorism*—a complex political manifestation—is not a question of *fit*, but in fact a question of *framing*.

As such, it is perhaps worth considering whether the focus should be shifted from seeking to understand and define “terrorism” to researching the *terrorist*. A former colleague and mentor, Prof. Max Taylor, often spoke about the need to separate the label and the object of concern. In the case of terrorism, he advocated for an analysis of the actor and the behavior rather than the politicized phenomenon as a whole. If we are to think about what terrorism is (as opposed to what and who the terrorist is) it appears there are a number of elements of the phenomenon that are prioritized. Primarily, the desired outcome is key, not the motive, for that is different; we focus on the end that the actors seek, whether it is political change or to maintain the political status quo.

However, those who engage in terrorist violence seek change outside channels that are considered mainstream. They seek to challenge the system as it exists or, in the case of pro-state/state terrorism, act outside the law, to protect the system in a way the criminal justice system cannot. One way this is achieved is through undermining the security of a target group or those who represent the population as a whole. Undermining security is fundamentally a psychological issue as the perceived or actual threat of violence is absorbed psychologically by the target group or by those who represent the group and is transmitted to fellow group members, across time and context.

Indeed, terrorism as a psychological tool survives because it successfully targets its audience by undermining their sense of security, trust, and the predictability of their daily lives. Terrorist violence oftentimes directly targets symbols of the system it wishes to challenge: military installations, police officers, police stations, state infrastructure, and so forth. However, the option to send a message through a proxy to the state or the substate group also exists. In these instances, civilians associated with the state or the substate group, members of the opposing community, or in some instances random individuals are chosen, all acting as conduits for a particular communiqué. Through the selection of random civilians, or a particular subpopulation, the psychological message is clear: The message is the creation and maintenance of fear, upholding a state of arousal among that population, and the ever-present threat that *anyone could be next*.

For the terrorist actor, the ultimate aim of this looming threat of violence is to weaken and undermine their enemy (the state/substate group) by virtue of the political cost of failing to act against those individuals who threaten both the state and its people. Successfully provoking the state into action is of course seen as a successful outcome for the violent substate terrorist organization. However, retaliation by the state, while it may be a reasonably popular course of action initially, is difficult to sustain and near impossible to win within the bounds of a liberal democracy. Violence by the state therefore fulfills the rhetoric of the antistate violent group, that of war, oppression, abuse, and importantly that there are two players in a conflict. While this macrolevel analysis of what terrorism is highlights the issues that are generally captured in the academic definition of terrorism, what it does not include (understandably) is the means by which terrorism is acted out. Relying on definitions of what terrorism “looks like” is of course necessary to recognize the phenomenon when it occurs, but it doesn’t necessarily assist in developing knowledge about the phenomenon in its own right. A focus on the actor rather than the outcome can be substantially more revealing. In addition, it informs how we should think about terrorism as the outcome of a range of idiosyncratic and flexible behaviors rather than the aim of the behaviors themselves. It is in this space that psychology can serve to facilitate our understanding of the terrorist and, relatedly, terrorism as a larger phenomenon. The heuristic value of such an applied research approach based in psychological theory is that the uniqueness, complexity, and human plasticity features of each situation are captured (Lévy-Leboyer, 1988). Having outlined the complexity of defining terrorism, we will consider the definition below to be as closely representative of the way terrorism is understood as a psychological concept in this volume.

Terrorism can be broadly understood as an act of violence, or the threat of violence, that is intended to instill extreme fear in a population and undermine their sense of



security in order to bring about some form of social or political change (Schmid & Jongman, 1988b; Wilkinson, 1990).

## 1.5 Conclusion

Having set the parameters of the research conducted in this volume as well as exploring definitional issues in the use of the term “terrorism,” we will briefly outline the aims of the book, which are threefold. First, we aim to relieve some of the problems outlined at the beginning of this chapter that have limited the potential contribution of psychology to the study of terrorism. In doing so we will put forward a framework for approaching psychological research on terrorism that encourages an explicit orientation to the issues that have acted as road blocks to the potential for psychology as a discipline to meaningfully contribute to terrorism research. This framework will be explained in detail in the proceeding chapters; briefly, however, the framework encourages researchers, from the outset, to define the research parameters in clear concise terms, devoid of theoretical jargon and rooted in an understanding of real-world social problems. Furthermore, researchers are encouraged to be explicit about the vantage point through which the problem is being viewed (i.e., is it a problem for participants themselves? For broader society, for policy makers, and other stakeholders?) and what the intended outcome of the research might be.

Second, we aim to explore how research in psychology can speak to real-world problems, particularly those related to terrorism. The application of the framework would advance this aim by encouraging researchers to describe the research problem in such a way that it is rooted in observable, real-world social issues. While this may seem like an obvious starting point for any research in psychology, often the focus is on exploring a theoretical gap. This is not to say that there is a shortage of applied research in psychology; however, the applied focus of psychology in terrorism research has vested much time and energy in identifying causal factors, terrorist prototypes and characteristics, and the existence of terrorist psychopathology. This is arguably less to do with the reality of the problem than it is to do with the desire to “other” those involved in terrorist activities.

Third and relatedly, we aim to apply existing psychological theory to terrorist-related phenomena in order to avoid the “othering” of individuals involved in terrorist activity. To relate back to the proposed framework, by being explicit about who is constructing the problem and from what vantage point, it might be possible to be clear about the biases and vested interests of academics and policy makers in this realm. These biases, when left unchecked, often lead researchers down the path of searching for what is exceptional about those involved in terrorism and how they deviate from the “normal” population. In applying the proposed framework, researchers are also asked to consider whether the research problem is psychological in nature and, if so, what existing theories can help explain, if not alleviate, the problem. As such, researchers in psychology are encouraged to dig deep, to tap into the wealth of knowledge available in psychology to understand terrorist-related phenomena as embedded within normal psychological processes, albeit manifesting in what can be considered exceptional situations and circumstances.

## 1.6 Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 2: Following on from the work of Buunk and Van Vugt (2013) this book puts forward a framework for applying psychology to the study of terrorism and the terrorist. It does so by outlining how the steps involved in applying a research framework could potentially avoid the traditional pitfalls encountered in the application of psychology to the field.

Chapter 3: By way of introduction, this book will guide the reader through some of the fundamental issues in applying psychology to terrorism research. By considering both individual and group processes this chapter examines the key dominant psychological frameworks that have been applied to terrorism research.

Chapter 4: This chapter will consider some of the key limitations of both terrorism and social psychological research, specifically methodological issues that plague researchers in conflict contexts.

Chapter 5: This chapter presents empirical research that explores the identity management strategies of political ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland who are currently involved in violence prevention initiatives. This chapter demonstrates how the research framework advocated in Chapter 2 can be utilized in research planning and data collection/analysis.

Chapter 6: Moving on, we explore how political ex-prisoners make meaning out of their experiences of involvement in political violence, as well as their role in peace-building initiatives. Again, this case study makes use of the framework proposed in Chapter 2 based on Buunk and Van Vugt's work.

Chapter 7: This chapter explores the complexity of British Muslim youth identity and how this identity has been attended to in the years after 9/11 and 7/7. By applying *normal* psychological processes to the data analysis of this study, the authors examine, again with the use of the research framework advocated in Chapter 2, how notions of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism become conflated with unrelated phenomena.

Chapter 8: This volume concludes with a discussion of some of the key messages that have emerged from this volume, how it relates to the original aims set forward, as well as how we now understand the ways in which psychology can contribute to terrorism research.