**The Relevance of Psychoanalysis to
an Understanding of Terrorism**

for

**Psychoanalytic Controversies Section
of International Journal of Psychoanalysis**

By

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Psychoanalysis has much to offer an understanding of terrorism, in two primary domains: 1) the social context and group dynamics of terrorism, and 2) the understanding of the individual psychopathology of the terrorist. My argument is anchored in several givens: (Akhtar 1999, Twemlow & Sacco 2002):

1.   The terrorist label is always assigned to the other person; it is never a self-assigned role.

2.   The term is applicable to individuals. For example, the FBI has classified the school shooters as domestic or anarchic terrorists.[1]

3.   Terrorists usually consider themselves the victims of humiliation by the enemy with incompatible political, religious or personal ideologies.

4.   The definition of terrorism is influenced by the political and social mores of the time. Yesterday's terrorist may be tomorrow's hero, as in the case of members of the French Revolution like Robespierre, and other revolutionary leaders.

These givens are empirically observable, with the unique potential contribution of psychoanalysis being to understanding the dynamics of the processes as they play themselves out in the social context much like as an individual plays out his or her conflicts in interpersonal relationships. These contributions can be grouped into four main areas:

Terrorism as a Transference Re-Enactment of Past Trauma

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[1] Personal communication, SSA Mary Ellen O'Toole, Ph.D, Critical Incident Response Group, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, FBI, Quantico, Va, 1999.

Analysts often experience being terrorized, especially those who have a significant number of borderline patients in their practices, or work with violent and paranoid patients. Akhtar 1999, has pointed out that such patients demonstrate a form of intrapsychic terrorist organization with an over-representation of trauma in their backgrounds. He feels this is also part of the terrorist's personal experience, who may share, with the patients, a similar propensity for omnipotent denial, concrete thinking, psychotic transference enactments and an endless resentment about their impossible needs, which of course cannot be accommodated by the objects of their love or hate.

In good psychoanalytic therapy such complex transference enactments of infantile omnipotence are contained within the therapeutic relationship, where every opportunity to reinforce reality testing, synthetic ego functioning and the development of new subliminatory channels is encouraged by the analyst. Akhtar (2002) suggests a psychologically sophisticated form of forgiveness that could be useful in political negotiation. Forgiveness as a negotiation strategy could increase the potential for political reconciliation between opponents, resulting in the dissolution of grudges and the creation of compromises. He proposes that renouncing omnipotent claims and settling for the less than ideal reality may lead to lessened anxiety, greater mutual trust and peaceful resolution of conflict. Psychoanalysis also has a great deal to offer regarding an understanding of reparation, compromise formation and compulsively repeated patterns, all processes in evidence in political terrorism.

Understanding Shame & Humiliation in the Making of a Terrorist

"Injustice collecting" is a term that is frequently used both by the lay public and professionals to describe a feigned experience of shame and humiliation as a justification for some pathological action. The term was commonly used for the "school shooters" in the United States. These "domestic terrorists" were an unusual group of mainly adolescent boys from intact middle class homes, with no prior history of violence or even disciplinary problems, above average, often exceptional, academic achievement, without substance abuse problems or prior history of significant psychiatric treatment (Twemlow & Sacco, 2002), not dissimilar to the background of many terrorists (Post, 1990). These children usually had experienced severe sadomasochistic bullying by individuals and peer social cliques, which seemed to promote premature identity foreclosure in Erikson's sense, and the adoption of an avenging victim posture (Twemlow & Sacco, In Press). These children came from home environments that seemed dismissive of intimate relationships and many of the boys seemed to lose faith in the value of these relationships to solve problems, often experiencing a feeling of disconnection from the social values of their peer and community groups. The data available about these children's fantasies suggest a narcissistic rage of epic proportions, with a subsequent process not dissimilar to Wertham's (1941), catathymic crisis. What seemed to happen in these adolescents was a narrowing of social perspective accompanied by an intolerable mental pressure, coupled with despair that their experience of humiliation would never change, leaving a future consisting only of unendurable psychological pain without social acceptance. The act of murder, then, is against the peer group and serves as a form of vindication for these children .

Self-psychology views shame as an emotional reaction to the thwarting of self object needs which can also evoke feelings of castration (powerlessness), and inferiority (humiliated), feelings with damage to the omnipotent need for moral and self-perfection. The loss of the object's love is also a primary source of narcissistic injury experienced as shame and being unlovable (Chasseguet-Smirguel (1985), Wurmser 1981). The omnipotent idea of ultimate merger and reunion is rendered hopeless, and is acted out in a "nothing to lose" way by the terrorist, with the ultimate "back up," salve and validation taking the form of martyrdom for an earthbound cause or in the afterlife. Morrison (1989), has suggested that shame is generated from overwhelming grandiosity as a result of early repetitive self-object failure, particularly with regard to idealization, i.e., the self's passivity is experienced as shameful. Kilborne (2002), points out that the ambivalent rage of narcissism can be kept at bay by the mirroring of others, but paradoxically, dependence on mirrors is an unwelcome reminder of an underlying fear of not being able to exist independent of that mirror.

Psychoanalytic study of humiliation (Twemlow,2000), reveals a sadomasochistic ritual that can lead to primitive autistic defenses with dehumanization of the victim-object, exacerbated by a voyeuristic audience of bystanders that is present in the fantasy or the reality of the victimizer. The manic and triumphant terroristic bullying especially intensifies the humiliation of the victim if there is a bystanding audience, rather than a single person, by increasing the indignity of the humiliation. Coerciveness, even without words and actions that are clearly humiliating and disrespectful can lead to a chronic victimized response with debilitating autonomic sequelae.

The shame literature offers suggestions about how humiliation may cause severe narcissistic injury, releasing unmediated rage with chaotic consequences. On a deeper level envy may be fundamental.

Groups, Cults and Terrorism

The vast psychoanalytic literature on groups including; Bion's (1959) basic assumption groups, Miller's (1998) later creative elaboration of those assumptions as innate biogenetic urges and Elliot Jaques'(1996) fundamental discovery that organizations are the repository of leaders and members disavowed and projected part objects, often reflected in disturbances of organizational functioning, gives a solid foundation for the understanding of group dynamics of terrorism. Later research into large groups from the Tavistock clinic group relations approach; Main(1985) Turquet (1975) emphasised defining authority including self-authorization, role, task and boundary, in another more cognitive perspective on group functioning. The assumptions the leader makes about role and task and the assumptions or fantasies the group has about what the leader will do for them, particularly in actualizing their omnipotent fantasies, has an important effect on the way organizations and even countries may function. Investigations into projective identification and counter projective identification in large groups is particularly important for the understanding of the behavior of large unstructured groups such as nations. Volkan (1999a), who has studied countries and nations, offers a unique perspective utilizing the concept of large group identity. According to Volkan large group functioning is based on a complex synthesis of personal identity, and the gradual adoption of family, region, clan, profession, country and national identities, where a variety of issues can define that identity, like socio economic status (USA) and religion

(Muslim countries).   Large group identity emerges partly through "chosen" traumas and glories that are ritualized and even used politically to manipulate the populace. Collective pride and collective shame can become a prominent part of such traumas and glories. Group anniversary reactions are prominent among "victimized" groups (Volkan 1999b), especially groups that have experienced drastic losses, helplessness and humiliation at the hands of another large group that cannot be effectively mourned or reconciled. Volkan also points out that rallying around the leader is an important reaction of the large group to the celebration, mourning of traumas and glories that have been ritualized within the large group. Under this projective pressure, the leaders may come to adopt the group goals as their own with little difference, i.e. adopt a large group identity. Thus, the leader of a nation needs a great degree of psychological sophistication; otherwise these massive projective processes will titivate their grandiosity and omnipotence. Such rituals, can involve creation of enemies to strengthen group cohesion and to define oneself by defining the other as notself, "aided" by the narcissism of minor differences. Erik Erikson, noted that healthy rituals, e.g., respectful war as agreed upon by both sides, allows mutual containment of ambivalence and aggression with peace possible through the resolution of differences, instead of the splitting and dissension of terrorism. Lifton's (1999,1989), theory of terrorism emphasises the group apocalyptic fantasy and demand for a purified society, necessitating destruction of the impure to make way for the new world order. His eloquent arguments derive from studies of Nazism, the Aum Shinrikyo Japanese nerve gas cult ,the Jim Jones Guyana cult and the Heavens Gate cult in San Diego.

Groups with highly unfamiliar ideologies and behaviors, like Osama Bin Laden and his followers, are easy to disavow as not self, and thus not amenable to reason and negotiation. In contrast, we have consulted in a number of business and clinical settings where a leader with a variety of problems is chosen to actualize an unrealistic group fantasy. The fantasy usually is of the group's specialness, and if the leader does not acknowledge and understand the fantasy, he/she may become psychotic, a "bizarre object" (Bion 1967), or instead passively attempt to act out the group fantasy, often with unproductive results. The group may choose a leader who, although clever and charismatic, is often in a stage of transition: divorce, professional disillusionment or a variety of other factors that make them a natural choice for the group since they are also looking for someone to heal them and make them feel special. Such a leader becomes a "victim" of the group fantasy. As this process emerges we have seen that such a leader defensively sees even justifiable criticism as projection, and feels like a victim-martyr in response. In an extreme form, this feeling can be enacted within powerful nations and ideologies, where the group leader becomes so deeply affected by the group fantasies he can only function as an unthinking instrument of the group itself.

Terrorism in the Social Context

Relational psychoanalysis, self-psychology, the intersubjective schools and analytically informed philosophers like Foucault, highlight how social forces can objectify and dehumanize individuals and thus entrain them into actions that reduce their individual identity. A contextual understanding of terrorism suggests a developmental continuum, from committed social activist to fanatic (intensely held ideas which have not yet led to aggressive action) to martyr, where aggression is turned against the self, or

terrorist when turned against others (Twemlow & Sacco In Press, Haynal et al 1983). The key factor in that progression is whether the fanatical ideas are accommodated in the culture in a respectful, noncoercive way, even if rejected in substance by the majority of its members.

Fonagy, (1997), has suggested that securely attached families may form a model for healthy social attachment patterns in communities. For example, he has hypothesized that there may be a chronic failure of mentalization in violent environments. From this viewpoint, for the bystander, that is, all of us, the libidinal pleasure of sadism is split from the disavowed aggression which is projected into the victim or victimizer. This enables the bystander to experience himself as more coherent and complete without envious, contemptuous aggression, which now belongs to the victim or victimizer. Thus, we avoid experiencing the suffering in ourselves, and guiltily retain only the excitement .

Some rather obvious directions emerge for understanding terrorism on both a social and political level. For example, a war conducted by two parties who feel humiliated by the other would achieve nothing if shame, and contempt continued unabated. Introducing respect, for example, rather than contempt for the enemy into this equation may have valuable results; one Palestinian psychiatrist, (Sarraj 2002), indicated that much of the Palestinian reaction to the Israelis may be grounded in shame/humiliation.

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Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have outlined some of the ways psychoanalysis may be relevant to

understanding terrorism. Obviously, this survey is not comprehensive, but I wonder to myself why this topic is even considered controversial. It seems instead to be a natural application of psychoanalytic scholarship deeply embedded in the history of our forefathers, beginning with Freud, who saw such work as one desirable endproduct of psychoanalytic scholarship.

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