Module PS4094

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TERRORISM

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2nd semester

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Overview

This module will introduce students to psychological factors and processes involved in terrorist behaviour. It will allow students to apply their knowledge of social psychological theory and research gained in previous years to a highly contentious and widely debated social issue. We will investigate terrorism at several levels of analysis, covering individual, organizational, and wider societal aspects. We will discuss contentious issues such as whether terrorism (including suicide terrorism) is rational and terrorist behaviour can be explained in terms of “normal” psychology, which types of ideologies and accompanying psychological processes justify terrorism and aid individuals in overcoming the moral barriers to violence, and what role of religion plays in terrorism. We will cover recent thinking and research on the processes involved in the radicalization of individuals and intra-and intergroup processes in terrorist groups, as well as the effectiveness of terrorism as a strategy of social influence. The final sessions are devoted to the question of how psychological research and thinking can be applied to counter-terrorism policy.

Format

The teaching will follow the standard structure of senior honours modules in psychology. The module will consist of weekly 2 hour sessions that will be composed of lecture material and student-led seminar teaching based around presenting articles. Students will be given articles to read before the classes and they will take it in turns to present these articles to the class. These will be followed by discussion of the papers and also supplemented by lecture material.

While class discussions will focus on the role of social-psychological factors and processes involved in terrorism, the reading list will include research and theory papers from a number of disciplines, including political science, sociology, economics, history, and criminology. Typically there will be 4-5 target articles as well as some relevant background reading (e.g., for the session on terrorist groups I suggest a chapter on the social psychology of group processes) that everyone should read prior to the class. I will also provide a list of (non-compulsory) further reading for each of the topics covered.

Assessment

Exam (50%) + essay (50%)

Preliminary Schedule

**Week 1: Introduction.** This session will provide an introduction to the topic and outline of the course. We will discuss historical examples of terrorism and discuss the difficulty of defining terrorism. Research questions and methods (e.g., archival research, interviews, surveys, and experiments) will be introduced and the opportunities and limitations of psychological inquiry into the causes of terrorism will be examined.

**Reading**

TBA
Explanatory approaches

In weeks 2 and 3 we will discuss general explanatory approaches and cover theory and research that aims to explain terrorism at different levels of analysis.

**Week 2: Individual-level explanations.** This week will cover work on the psychological and sociological profiles of terrorists and examines the evidence for explanations that view the causes of terrorism in individuals’ personalities, personal circumstances, or psychopathology.

*Reading*

*TBA*

**Week 3: Group-level explanations.** Examines group- and structural-level explanations of terrorism and evaluates the applicability of psychological theories of intergroup conflict (e.g., relative deprivation theory, social identity theory) to terrorism.

*Reading*

*TBA*

Terrorism as a political strategy

Weeks 4 and 5 examine the strategic logic of terrorism and the ideologies that provide a moral justification of violence. Differences and commonalities with other forms of political behaviour are discussed.

**Week 4: The strategic logic of terrorism.**

*Reading*

*TBA*

**Week 5: The morality of terrorism.**

*Reading*

*TBA*

How do people become terrorists?

Weeks 6 and 7 deal with the question of how particular individuals become terrorists. We will cover psychological models aiming to explain the radicalization of individuals and discuss psychological processes involved in organizational aspects of terrorist groups.

**Week 6: The radicalization of individuals.**

*Reading*

*TBA*
Week 7: The psychology of terrorist groups.

Reading
TBA

The effects of terrorism on target groups and constituencies

Terrorist activity is often directed at (at least) two different audiences: an ‘outgroup’ or target audience which is coerced into making political concessions, as well as an ‘ingroup’ audience, on whose behalf terrorists claim to act and whose support they seek. In Weeks 8 and 9 we will examine the communicative function of terrorism, the role of the media, and the psychological effects of terrorism on outgroup and ingroup audiences.

Week 8: Responses to terrorism among target groups. This session will cover research and theory on the effects of terrorism in terms of relevant political attitudes, outgroup-directed attitudes and behaviour (prejudice and discrimination, hate crimes, support for war) and ingroup-directed behaviour (interpersonal closeness, group identification and patriotism, helping behaviour).

Reading
TBA

Week 9: The effects of terrorism among constituency groups. We will discuss when and why terrorists receive wide public sympathy.

Reading
TBA

Responding to terrorism

The final sessions will cover the issue of how terrorism can be addressed and examine the psychological consequences of counter-terrorism. We will review and integrate the findings discussed over the last weeks into a multi-level model of explanation and to discuss how insights from psychological research and thinking can be applied to current counter-terrorism policy.

Week 10: Counter-terrorism measures and their effectiveness.

Reading
TBA

Week 11: Review and concluding discussion.