Terrorism: Justification of Violence through Social Identity Motives and the Existential Dilemma

CHRISTINE GROS, MICHAEL KING, & DONALD M. TAYLOR
McGill University

The current study investigates the 'single narrative', which describes a perceived threat on Islam that is used by jihadi terrorists to justify terrorism. Social identity theory and terror management theory were used as frameworks to interpret the 'single narrative' in order to examine the influence of identity threats and the existential dilemma threat on the legitimization of terrorism. Jewish participants played the roles of jury members in a court trial of a Jewish terrorist. Participants were primed with the existential dilemma and read one of two versions of the defendant's justifications for his plot, describing an identity threat on the group's positivity or distinctiveness. This study aimed to identify which threat would elicit participants to legitimize the terrorist, as measured by participants' recommended sentence harshness. The control condition of the social identity manipulation and the existential-dilemma prime of the terror management manipulation elicited the highest justification of the terrorist.

Keywords: terrorism, social identity, terror management, justification, single narrative

La présente étude examine le « récit unique » qui décrit la menace perçue envers l'Islam utilisée par les terroristes jihadi pour justifier le terrorisme. Les théories de l'identité sociale et de la gestion de la terreur constituaient le cadre d'interprétation du « récit unique » afin d'étudier l'influence des menaces à l'identité et au dilemme existentiel dans la légitimation du terrorisme. Des participants juifs jouaient le rôle de membres d'un jury dans le procès d'un terroriste juif. Une amorce concernant le dilemme existentiel leur était présentée. Les participants devaient ensuite lire une des deux versions du défendant justifiant les raisons de son complot, soit décrivant une menace à l'identité pour la positivité du groupe, ou une menace pour le caractère distinctif du groupe. Cette étude visait à identifier quelle menace provoquerait la légitimation du terrorisme chez les participants, mesurée par la sévérité de la peine qu'ils recommandaient. La condition contrôle de manipulation de l'identité sociale et la condition de manipulation avec l'amorce du dilemme existentiel de la gestion de terreur provoquaient la plus importante justification du terrorisme.

Mot-clés : terrorisme, identité sociale, gestion de la terreur, justification, récit unique

Terrorism is unequivocally one of the most puzzling behavioral phenomena of the current era, and by extension, it is also one of the most poorly understood processes. Yet, terrorism affects countless individuals worldwide, making it an undeniably imperative issue. The perplexity of terrorism lies in its absolutely non-normative nature, as it leaves its victims and observers puzzled at what could have motivated such vicious violence against defenseless civilians.

Terrorists are often viewed and portrayed by Western media as simply ignorant, mentally ill, or evil individuals (World shock over U.S. attacks, 2001). While preventing terrorism will undoubtedly entail a complex multi-pronged approach, extending into political and economic realms, every solution must begin with a thorough and scientific understanding of the roots of the problem.

Initial explanations, whereby terrorism was attributed to ignorance, mental illness, and evil, have been disproved by empirical research (Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP], 2009). The Committee on the Psychological Roots of Terrorism for the Madrid Summit on Terrorism, Security and Democracy held in 2005, concluded that "explanations at the level of individual psychology are insufficient in trying to

understand why people become involved in terrorism; the concepts of abnormality and psychopathology are not useful in understanding terrorism" (Post, 2007, p. 4). It was suggested that social psychology, and in particular the concept of collective identity, provides a more constructive framework for understanding the roots of terrorism (Post, 2007).

To add to the bewildering nature of terrorism, the common assumption that terrorists arise from the margins of society is also poorly supported by evidence (RCMP, 2009). According to a RCMP report, the majority of terrorists are educated professionals from the privileged middle and upper-middle classes (RCMP, 2009). In the same document, it is reasoned that "mature and well-educated individuals are likely to be receptive to much more sophisticated radical messages than their younger counterparts" (RCMP, 2009, p. 5). More importantly, these privileged professionals are more likely to have both the intellectual and emotional capacity to translate radical messages into meaningful actions and to become leaders within terrorist cells (RCMP, 2009).

Furthermore, it is not necessarily the case that terrorists are edified in religiously fervent communities from a young age. According to Marc Sageman, a former CIA Operations Officer and an influential contributor to debates concerning the origins of terrorism, "the vast majority of children who later became global Islamic terrorists grew up secular, in secular environments" (Sageman, 2008, p. 52). Instead, Sageman (2008) suggests that radicalization is a collective process, since social bonds are formed before any ideological commitment to radicalism is made. Furthermore, under specific circumstances, individuals who would otherwise be very unlikely to harm others individually are, in fact, able to do so collectively (Sageman, 2008). It is these circumstances that must be identified through social psychological investigation.

Terrorism as a Social Psychological Phenomenon

Collective behavior has been extensively researched in social psychology during the past several decades. The repeating theme of this realm of psychology suggests that individuals are strongly affected by their social surroundings, and thus causal attributions of their behavior must take this into consideration. Despite the seemingly simplistic nature of this

assertion, its implications for the field have been invaluable. With this insight, the interpretation of intergroup conflicts, such as terrorism, has shifted its focus to the collective atmosphere, as opposed to blaming individuals' attributes, such as ignorance, insanity, or evil nature.

The extensive research of the past several decades has given rise to numerous theories of intergroup relations. These contributions provide important insight into fundamental social processes that set the theoretical background against which terrorism may be studied. The issue of terrorism is too intricate to be completely explained by a single theory. Nevertheless, two specific theories incorporate certain fundamental social processes in a way that is more directly applicable to the study of terrorism: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Terror Management Theory (TMT). Both of these theories frame animosity towards out-group members as stemming from a perception of a threat on one's own identity. Each theory defines the concept of identity in a distinct way, but in both cases, the collective aspect of identity is pivotal. By interpreting terrorism through the theoretical frameworks of SIT and TMT, the roots and precursors of terrorism may be clarified.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is based on four basic psychological processes: social categorization, social identity, social comparison, and psychological group distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The basic assumption underlying SIT is that of social categorization, which is defined as a natural process of segmentation that imposes order on one's surroundings, and provides a locus of identification for the self. Categorization simplifies the task of processing information by perceiving unity within single categories, and perceiving distinctiveness between them. This process is extended to the social realm through intergroup discrimination. The automatic process of social categorization is essential for social identity and it is defined as the part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from membership to a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. Group membership is viewed from a subjective perspective. Tajfel and Turner (1979) theorized that individuals engage in social comparison, through which one compares characteristics of one's

own group to those of others' groups in order to clarify their own social identity. In this sense, groups will inevitably be in a state of competition, and sometimes conflict, because intergroup comparison is essential for gaining an understanding of the relative position of one's group.

The most innovative contribution of the theory suggests that individuals strive to have an identity that is perceived as being both positive and distinct in comparison to other relevant groups. Overall, SIT assumes that individuals are inherently motivated to achieve a social identity based on the natural tendency of social categorization. This motivation in turn encourages individuals to make intergroup comparisons in order to evaluate their own group as positive and distinct.

Tajfel (1970) performed experiments where he divided school boys into two groups based on completely trivial criteria. Despite the fact that the boys' personal identities were kept anonymous, the participants expressed a positive bias towards their own group by allocating more rewards to fellow group members than non-group members (Tajfel, 1970). SIT emphasizes the link between one's self-concept and one's group, and reveals how group membership can be a fundamental contributor to one's personal identity. Interpreting terrorism through this framework would suggest that terrorists feel a threat to the positivity and distinctiveness of their collective identity, and this in turn harms their personal identity. In this sense, terrorism can be understood as a defensive effort against a threat to the positivity and distinctiveness of one's collective identity.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory takes an evolutionary stance in emphasizing humans' instinct for self-preservation in combination with unique cognitive abilities that allow humans to know that their death is ultimately inevitable (Becker, 1973, 1975). The paradox of having both an instinct to survive and an awareness of one's mortality leads to an existential dilemma. This dilemma produces the potential for paralyzing terror. In order to defend against this potential terror, humans develop anxiety buffers that consist of a cultural worldview and self-esteem. One's worldview originates from a set of standards and values that evolve within one's culture. For example, in Western cultures, a sense of independence and individuals' unique qualities are highly valued; by contrast, Eastern cultures prioritize a sense of collective harmony and interdependence (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). As an anxiety buffer, the cultural worldview provides a sense of permanence, order, and meaning to subjective reality. By extension, self-esteem is derived from the belief that one is living up to the standards prescribed by the cultural worldview.

TMT asserts that the existential dilemma poses such a fundamental threat that humans devote a large part of their social behaviors to defending their anxiety buffers. Any threat to these anxiety buffers would naturally produce a negative reaction in a defensive effort. This defensive reaction consists of an especially positive evaluation of those individuals who validate one's worldview, and an especially negative evaluation of those who challenge it (See & Petty, 2006). As such, this creates an in-group bias and discrimination against those who are not in-group members (McGregor et al., 1998). Since the existential dilemma is so fundamentally ingrained in the human social experience, and since the anxiety buffers are so fragile, defensive efforts may escalate to extreme levels of aggression, such as terrorism.

In order to experimentally test the effects of the existential dilemma, TMT theorists prime participants with the concept of death (mortality salience). These experiments show that a mortality salience prime leads participants to express extreme negative biases toward out-group members and positive biases toward in-group members. For example, Pyszczynski et al. (2006) demonstrated that, when primed with death, Iranian university students formed significantly more favorable impressions of confederates who supported martyrdom attacks, and indicated that they themselves would consider joining the cause. In this case, support for martyrdom attacks indicated support for the in-group and aggression towards the out-group. In a parallel study, Pyszczynski et al. (2006) demonstrated that after being primed with death, American university students supported extreme military interventions in the Middle East, including the use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, in both cases, a reminder of the existential dilemma through a mortality salience prime led participants to legitimize extreme violence (comparable to terrorism) against out-group members, who challenged the participants' worldview. Similarly to SIT's emphasis on the importance of group

membership, TMT accentuates the significance of one's group as the source of the worldview, which acts as the anxiety buffer against the existential dilemma. In this sense, terrorism can be understood as a defensive effort to protect the aspect of one's identity that consists of the worldview.

Theories of Terrorism: The Single Narrative

While it might appear intuitive to borrow concepts from SIT and TMT to explain terrorism, it is only by anchoring these concepts in field data that a valid understanding of terrorism will emerge. Despite the fact that very little empirical research exists on the phenomenon of terrorism, government security agencies collect ample information about terrorism-related events and perpetrators. According to many security agencies, such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a recurring theme can be found among the rhetoric of jihadi terrorists: the 'single narrative' (RCMP, 2009). This concept states that the West is fundamentally at war with Islam, and that Muslims worldwide are suffering as a result (RCMP, 2009). In other words, Islam is under threat. According to the RCMP report on radicalism (2009), "the romance of this unequal struggle may be especially appealing to young Muslims, who feel both justified and compelled to come to the aid of their brothers and sisters against the powerful forces arrayed against them" (p. 7).

Although the 'single narrative' is specific to jihadi terrorism, its underlying concept suggests that the motivation for terrorism in general stems from a perception of a threat on one's group. This concept can therefore be used to study terrorism as an entity independent of a specific group or ideology. In order to anchor the 'single narrative' into a theoretical context, the current research interprets it through SIT and TMT. If terrorism is justified in jihadi rhetoric as a reaction to a threat against Islam, it is crucial to understand how this threat is perceived. In the context of SIT, Islam would represent one's social identity. A threat to this social identity would endanger the positive group identity and its distinctiveness in comparison with other groups. In the context of TMT, Islam would represent the cultural worldview of terrorists, which is the fragile yet vital anxiety buffer against the existential dilemma. A threat on the cultural worldview would leave one defenseless in the face of the paralyzing terror produced by the existential dilemma. Thus, a threat to Islam as a social identity (SIT), or otherwise a cultural worldview (TMT), is theorized to trigger defense mechanisms that may escalate to terrorism.

The Present Study

The current investigation aims to isolate the specific element(s) of one's social identity that is threatened during the process of radicalization. In order to test the validity of setting SIT or TMT as the framework for the study of terrorism, the present study manipulated different threats presented to participants' identity and worldview. Subsequently, participants were given an opportunity to defend their identity and worldview by legitimizing an in-group member's terrorist acts, thus simulating the legitimization of terrorism. Importantly, the current study investigated the 'single-narrative' in the context of an identity that is distinct from Islam. This was done in order to demonstrate that the 'single-narrative' of terrorism functions independently of the Islamic identity, and instead it applies to any group with a well-delineated identity.

The challenge of studying the psychological dimension of terrorism in an experimentally controlled setting is avoiding the biases that are associated with this controversial topic. The pressure to behave in socially desirable ways would motivate participants to express opposition towards terrorism. This makes it difficult to study attitudes related to the legitimization of terrorism in a direct way. In order to reduce this bias, the current study used deception and it was presented to participants as an investigation on cross-cultural jury decision-making.

The participants were asked to play the roles of jury members in a court trial of a terrorist who shares the participants' social identity. As jury members, participants were asked to recommend a sentence for the defendant. The harshness of the recommended sentence was interpreted as the extent to which participants legitimized the terrorist's acts. Relatively low sentence harshness would indicate higher justification of the terrorist, while relatively high sentence harshness would signify lower justification. Participants were exposed to threats pertaining to different aspects of their identity, as defined by SIT and TMT. These threats mediated the differences in the recommended sentence harshness. The purpose of the study was to test which identity threat on the in-group – as a positive or distinctive entity (SIT manipulation),

or as a worldview (TMT manipulation) – would yield the highest legitimization of the terrorist.

In the context of the SIT manipulation, it was hypothesized that the threat to the positive or distinctive aspects of social identity would lead to the highest justification of the terrorist's act. Therefore, participants who experience a threat to the positivity or distinctiveness of their group would recommend sentences of relatively decreased harshness in order to protect their group. In relation to the single narrative, this would indicate that terrorists are motivated by a perceived threat on the distinctiveness or positivity of their group identity.

In the context of the TMT manipulation, it was hypothesized that participants would legitimize the terrorist to a greater extent in response to a threat on their worldview. Accordingly, participants who experience a mortality salience prime would recommend sentences of relatively decreased harshness in an effort to defend their group. In connection to the single narrative, this would indicate that terrorists perceive their worldview to be under threat, and are therefore motivated to defend it through terrorism.

In addition to investigating the group aspects that are perceived to be under threat, the study also examined participants' level of identification with the in-group as a possible moderator that could influence their legitimization of the terrorist. Across both SIT and TMT manipulations, it was hypothesized that participants who highly identify with their in-group would yield increased legitimization of the terrorist, as compared to participants with a low level of group identification. This would indicate that, in addition to perceiving particular aspects of the in-group to be under threat, terrorists are also motivated by a high level of identification with their group.

Method

Participants

The study included 50 participants who identified with the Jewish identity or Judaism (34 women and 16 men, mean age = 21.1 years, age range: 18-50 years), and they mainly consisted of McGill University undergraduate students. Participants were recruited through posters around the McGill University campus, as well as online advertisements. Jewish individuals were recruited primarily because the study required a group with a well-delineated identity, and it was also a convenient sample with group members easily accessible. The majority of the participants reported having visited Israel at least once, indicating that they had proximity to the site of the inter-group conflict in the Middle-East. Although the experimental paradigm focused on the Jewish identity, the investigated collective identity processes apply to all groups with a strong collective identity.

Procedure

For each participant, the study was conducted in two phases.

Pre-laboratory phase. Participants were asked to complete an online survey consisting of some demographic questions and the *Collective Identification questionnaire*. This Likert-scale questionnaire consisted of eight items, and was adapted from a study by Grieve and Hogg (1999). Participants indicated the strength of their identification with the Jewish identity by rating statements on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). For example, participants indicated how similar they are to other Jewish, how much they like other members of their group, and to what extent they feel a sense of belonging to their group. This measure was collected to test whether an individual's level of identification with his or her group may moderate the degree to which a participant legitimizes an in-group terrorist.

In-laboratory phase. Participants were reminded that the study was testing cross-cultural decision-making patterns of jury members. As jury members, they were told that they would be familiarized with the case by reading two documents about the trial. Before they received the trial documents, the participants were asked to complete two exercises. Participants were told that the purpose of these exercises was to clear their minds before the experiment began. To this end, half of the participants were asked to respond to the following statements: "Please, briefly describe the emotion that the thought of your own death arouses in you", and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die". These two statements were aimed to prime participants with mortality salience. The other half of the participants were primed with the concept of a headache, as a control measure. This paradigm is widely used by

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TMT experimenters (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006; Hirschberger, Pyszcsynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009; McGregor et al., 1998; Pyszcsynski et al., 2006). Once these exercises were completed, participants were told that the jury-decision-making study officially began.

In order to familiarize themselves with the court trial case, participants read a fictitious Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news article. The news article described a trial taking place in Israel for a foiled attack in Gaza City that was carried out by two Jewish men. The article explained that the Israeli government was not involved, in order to ensure that the foiled attack was considered a terrorist act.

To familiarize themselves with the defendant, participants read a second document. Participants were given either one of two versions of the defense statement, whereby the defendant explains his motivations for conducting the bombing (the manipulation), or a control document describing the role and importance of jury members. One version of the defense statement described a threat to the positive aspect of the Jewish identity, while the other version described a threat to the distinctiveness of the Jewish identity. For example, the threat on the positivity of the Jewish Identity included statements such as: "Our actions in Gaza were carried out because this conflict has made Jews feel increasingly worse about our identity. We were once a proud people, but this conflict has undermined respect for our Jewish identity worldwide". The threat on the distinctiveness of the Jewish identity included statements such as: "Our actions in Gaza were carried out because the unique identity of the Israelis and the Jewish people as a nation is severely endangered, and we risk being assimilated. The enemy would like to eliminate everything about us that makes us Jews". The two defense statements differed only in their specific arguments, while the template was identical. The two defense statements and the control document were identical in length at 486 words.

Participants were subsequently asked to recommend an appropriate sentence on an 11-point scale (1 = *not harsh at all*, 11 = *very harsh*). Upon completion, participants had the opportunity to comment on the study, and were asked whether they believed the CBC News article was authentic. This was done in order to distinguish participants whose responses may have been biased by their belief that the trial and the event described in the article were fictitious. In total, four of the participants doubted the authenticity of the article because they had never heard of this particular event. In order to account for the potential bias of these participants in their evaluations of a terrorist that was known to be fictional, they were withdrawn from the final statistical analysis. Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked, and compensated for their time with $10.

Results

An analysis of the descriptive statistics shows a high reliability value for the *Collective Identification questionnaire* ($\alpha = .87$), with a mean identification of 5.26, and a standard deviation of .94. The measure of the recommended sentence harshness had a mean of 8.12, and a standard deviation of 1.65.

In order to test the effects of participants' level of identification with their group on their recommended sentence harshness, hierarchical regression analyses were applied to the data. The advantage of this statistical analysis lies in its focus on a more detailed spectrum of the level of group identification, instead of dividing participants into the two groups of 'high' and 'low' group identification by a median split. This allowed for a more qualified analysis of group identification.

Group Identity Threats on Distinctiveness and Positivity

A hierarchal regression analysis was conducted to investigate whether the SIT threats to group positivity and distinctiveness could predict the harshness of the recommended sentence. Identification scores were centered, and the two SIT threats were dummy coded in a way that compared the positivity and distinctiveness identity threats to the control condition. The first step of the regression analysis tested whether the participants' recommended sentence harshness could be predicted by the type of social identity threat and the level of participants' identification with the group. The regression equation produced by this first step did not predict participants' ratings for the harshness of the sentence for the terrorist, $F(3, 46) = 1.37, p = .27$.

Table 1

Hierarchical Multiple Regressions Predicting Recommended Sentence Harshness from Group Identification, Group Identity Threats, and Death Prime

Variables	Step 1				Step 2			
	R^2	B	SE B	β	R^2	B	SE B	β
Effects of group identity threats (SIT)	.08				.29*			
Identification		-.11	.26	.,06		-1.25	.44	-.71**
Positivity threat		.62	.57	-.18		.24	.53	.07
Distinctiveness threat		1.06	.59	-.30		.83	.54	.23
Positivity threat * Identification						1.18	.57	.41*
Distinctiveness threat * Identification						2.12	.60	.66**
Effects of death prime (TMT)	.06				.18*			
Identification		-.20	.27	-.11		.56	.41	.32
Death prime		-.75	.53	.22		-.73	.51	-.21
Death prime * Identification						-1.22	.52	-.55*

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

In the second step of the regression analysis, two interaction terms were added to the predictors used in the first step. Both interaction terms were the product of the participants' level of identification and each type of social identity threat. Thus, the predictors in the second step included the level of identification, two dummy codes representing each social identity threat, one interaction term representing the interaction between level of identification and the threat on the positivity of the group, and a second interaction term representing the interaction between level of identification and the threat on the distinctiveness of the group. In this second step, the regression significantly predicted participants' recommended sentence harshness $F(5, 44) = 3.51$, $p < .01$. The significant predictors included the interaction term comprised of the level of identification and threat on positivity; the second interaction term comprising the level of identification and threat on distinctiveness (Table 1, Figure 1).

Analyses of simple slopes suggest that the level of identification influences the recommended harshness of the sentence within the condition of the identity threat to group distinctiveness and the control condition (no threat at all). Higher identification was associated with recommendations of increased sentence harshness for those who received the threats to group distinctiveness. Higher identification was also associated with significantly decreased sentence harshness for those who were not threatened at all (control condition). Figure 1 shows that those individuals who expressed a low identification with their group identity recommended very similar sentence harshness levels across the three conditions, whereas those who had higher identification levels expressed more varied reactions to the identity group threats.

Mortality Salience Threats on the Cultural Worldview

A second hierarchal regression analysis was conducted to measure the effects of the TMT manipulation on the recommended sentence harshness. Identification scores were centered, and the TMT manipulation conditions were dummy coded for a
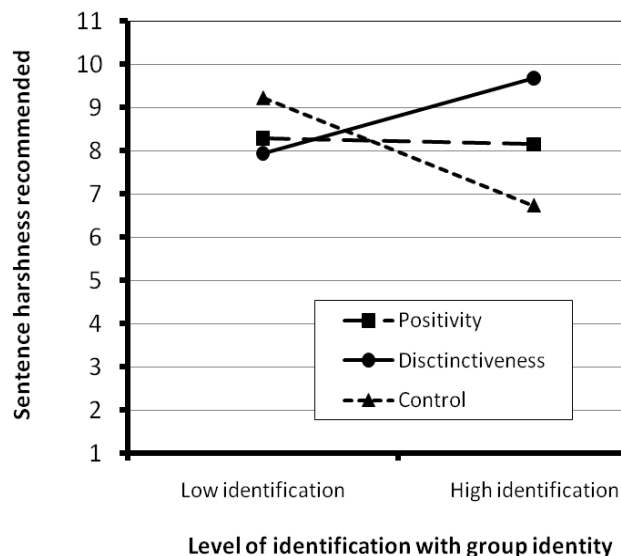

Figure 1. Ratings of recommended sentence harshness as a function of SIT threats on group identity and the level of group identification.

comparison between the mortality salience prime and the control condition. The first step of the regression analysis tested whether the mortality salience prime and the level of identification would predict the recommended sentence harshness. The resulting regression did not predict participants' recommended harshness of the sentence, $F(2, 40) = 1.29$, $p = .29$.

In the second step of the regression analysis, an interaction term was added to the variables used in the first step. The interaction term was the product of the participants' level of identification and the mortality salience prime. Therefore, the predictors in the second step were the level of identification, a dummy code representing the TMT conditions, and an interaction term between the level of identification and the mortality salience prime of the TMT manipulation. This second regression model marginally improved the ability to predict the recommended sentence harshness, $F(3, 39) = 2.76$, $p = .06$. This statistical amelioration was largely due to the additional interaction term between the level of identification and the mortality salience prime (Table 1, Figure 2).

The analysis of the simple slopes suggests a trend in which the level of identification predicts decreased harshness of the recommended sentence for those primed with death, but not of the recommended sentence harshness for those primed with a headache. Similar to the previous analysis of the effects of threats on group identity aspects of distinctiveness and
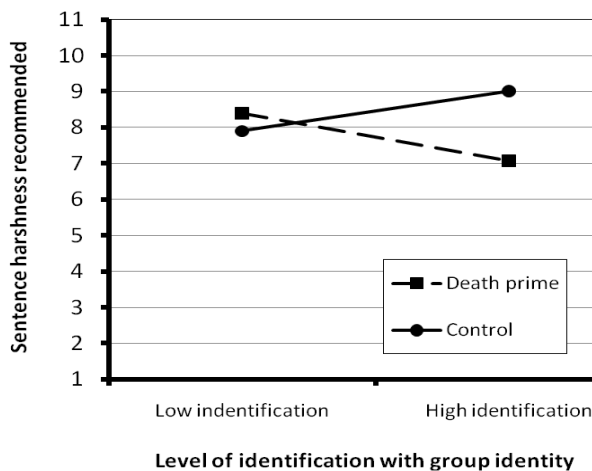

Figure 2. Recommended sentence harshness as a function of the TMT threat and the level of group identification.

positivity, participants who expressed low identification recommended sentences of similar harshness level across the two conditions. By comparison those individuals who highly identified with their group expressed a more varied reaction to the TMT manipulation in the recommended sentence harshness.

Discussion

In the context of the SIT manipulation, the present findings indicate that among participants with high group identification, threats to the distinctiveness of group identity lead to increased harshness of recommended sentences for in-group terrorists, while threats to the positivity of group identity do not lead to significant differences in the recommended sentence harshness. Additionally, the absence of a threat (control condition) leads to reduced recommended sentence harshness by participants with high group identification. This suggests that when people are not informed of the reasoning behind the terrorist's acts, they seem to react with increased legitimization of the terrorist.

In the context of the TMT manipulation, participants with high identification that were primed with mortality salience (marginally significantly) recommended sentences of decreased harshness, compared to those primed with headaches. This trend suggests that reminders of the existential dilemma lead people to behave more defensively towards their group members. This defensiveness can extend to judging in-group terrorists to be more justified.

While the two sets of manipulations tested fundamentally different interpretations of the threat theoretically motivating terrorism, there is a significant commonality across the results of both sets of manipulations. With the exception of the outcomes of the SIT threat on the group positivity, the manipulations significantly (or marginally significantly) influenced the recommended sentence harshness from those participants who were highly identified with their group. This result suggests that high group identification plays an important role in motivating individuals to react strongly (positively or negatively) to terrorism carried out by members of one's own group.

The Power of Group Identification

The results of participants with high identification were the focus of the analysis because high identification was the influential factor that led to significant (or marginally significant) reactions to the terrorist as measured through the recommended sentence harshness.

Implications of the SIT Manipulations

The SIT manipulations threatening the distinctive or positive aspects of the group identity did not yield results that confirmed our hypothesis. While the threat on the positivity of group identity did not lead to significantly reduced harshness of the recommended sentence, the threat on the group's distinctiveness led to recommended sentences of significantly increased harshness. Moreover, the control manipulation that required participants to read a document about the role and importance of jury members led to a significantly reduced harshness of the recommended sentence.

If a recommended sentence of a relatively low harshness level is to be interpreted as increased justification for terrorism, then these results suggest that simply identifying with the terrorist's group identity could lead to increased legitimization of the terrorist. Accordingly, it is possible that the explicit reasons given in the defense statement for the terrorist's act would inspire reduced sympathy by those who identify highly with the group identity (as with the threat on group distinctiveness). This may be the case because participants may not have agreed that the threat described by the terrorist actually exists, and thus they were interpreted as illegitimate reasons. Even if participants did believe that these threats exist, it may also be the case that they did not agree that these reasons constitute sufficient justification for the attempted terrorist act. Using illegitimate reasons to justify a bold terrorist act on behalf of the group is likely to inspire a strong negative reaction. Such a negative reaction is even more likely for highly identified individuals, who are invested in their group's identity. Thus, if the participants did not agree upon the existence and legitimacy of the threat described by the terrorist, they would have likely interpreted the terrorist as doing a grave disservice to their group's identity. This alternative explanation perhaps accounts for the increased harshness of the sentences recommended by

those participants who experienced the threat on the distinctiveness of their group identity.

In the SIT manipulation, the contrast between the results of the identity threats (on distinctiveness and positivity) and the effects of the control condition is revealing. In comparison to the identity threat conditions, the results suggest that there is certainly some mechanism that influenced participants in the control condition to recommend relatively less harsh sentences. Accordingly, this suggests that those who identify highly with their group do not require the reasons for a terrorist's act in order to legitimize their own group member's behavior. In fact, this occurred despite having been reminded of the jury's important duty to be just. Instead, in the absence of the terrorist's reasoning, highly identified individuals perhaps subconsciously invent legitimate reasons in order to justify the behavior of their own group members. If the terrorist attempts to legitimize his act by describing threats on the group identity, it is likely that this forces fellow group members to consider the terrorist's reasoning as an additional parameter in the judgment. In this case, if fellow group members did not find the specific threats identified by the terrorist as legitimate, this would lead to reduced justification of the terrorist. However, in the absence of the terrorist's appeal to threats on group identity, it is possible that fellow group members 'fill-in the blanks' in order to legitimize their in-group member.

This phenomenon has extensive implications for the power of group identification as an influential factor in decision making situations. In the case of terrorism, this phenomenon would help to explain how individuals who are educated professionals from the privileged middle and upper-middle classes could develop considerably skewed judgment because of their high group identification.

Implications of the TMT Manipulations

The results of the TMT manipulation supported the initial hypothesis: participants who expressed high identification with their group showed a trend of recommending less harsh sentences after having been exposed to a mortality salience prime, as compared to those primed with the concept of a headache (control condition). This suggests that for individuals highly identified with their group, the mortality salience prime marginally increases justification of a terrorist who is a

member of one's group. Consistent with TMT, these results also suggest that a threat to one's worldview, through a reminder of the existential dilemma, leads to increased legitimization of terrorism on behalf of the group identity in an effort to defend the worldview. Therefore, in connecting these results to the 'single narrative' of terrorism, the threat on 'Islam' as the worldview of Jihadi terrorists may contribute to the justification of terrorism.

The implications of the TMT manipulation results further emphasize the alternative explanation for the SIT manipulation results. In the SIT manipulation, highly identified participants responded with increased legitimization for terrorism only when they could rely solely on 'filling-in-the-blanks' as per the terrorist's reasons for engaging in terrorism. The experimental design had participants experience both manipulations, which allowed for the comparison of the effects of the two manipulations. Those highly identified participants who were primed with mortality salience recommended marginally lower sentence harshness *despite* the reasons (or lack of reasons) that the terrorist provided for his acts in the SIT manipulation. In other words, the effects of the mortality salience prime were powerful enough to override the participants' considerations of the reasons given for the terrorist plot. Therefore, even if the participants did not consider the threats on the group identity as legitimate, their ingrained need to defend their worldview overpowered this conscious disagreement with the terrorist. This implication further emphasizes the power of high group identification because it confirms that the terrorist's specific reasons are trivial in comparison to the fact of a shared identity with the terrorist. By extension, this reaffirms that individuals who highly identify with their group may be prone to radical ideologies despite their status or class.

Limitations

The limitations of the current study include a small sample size. Previous studies involved far larger samples, and as a result, were able to produce more pronounced reliability of their results. Since the sample included mainly McGill University students, increased diversity of the participants in terms of age, educational background and social status would also benefit the reliability of the results. Furthermore, increased diversity in the level of group identification would also help to confirm the current findings.

A major limitation lies in the specificity of the participants' identity group. One of the aims of the study was to disintegrate the association of terrorism with the Islamic identity, and to demonstrate that although the 'single narrative' originates from Islamic jihadi terrorism, it is not exclusive to this group. The study was essentially testing the underlying concept of group members' reactions to general threats on group identity, which lead to the legitimization of terrorism. Accordingly, no mention was made about unique aspects that shaped the participants' Jewish identity, such as Judaism or specific historical events (such as the Holocaust and the historical experiences of the Diaspora). Instead, the threats to group identity were kept to a general level that could be applied to different group identities. Nevertheless, despite the generality of the threat to group identity, it is important to acknowledge that participants' unique cultural context may encourage a specific approach that is distinct from other groups. For this reason, using populations of different identities would be a necessary step to ensure more valid results in follow-up studies. Furthermore, future studies should also examine the effects of the proximity of participants to the inter-group conflict. For example, participants who were native to Israel may have evaluated the in-group terrorist in a significantly different manner than those participants who never lived in close proximity to the site of conflict.

A further limitation may be found in the article that participants were instructed to read. Data was analyzed only from participants who reported not having suspicions about the authenticity of the article. This was done in order to avoid biases from participants who would potentially behave in an altered manner in response to a perceived insight into the purpose of the study. Moreover, these participants' identification with a character that was known to be fictional may be qualitatively different from the identification of those participants who believed the terrorist was real. This qualitatively different identification may lead to a biased evaluation of the terrorist. While it is a necessary precaution to eliminate these participants' data from the statistical analysis, it may in fact exclude the very participants who would express higher justification for terrorists that were members of their own group. The suspicious participants may have approached the document with a pre-existing bias towards their in-group (mainly that Jews would not attempt to commit such an act of terrorism). The denial

that in-group members would carry out such a terrorist act increases the probability that in a case where in-group members do in fact engage in terrorism, their actions would be legitimized simply because of their group membership. In order to eliminate this limitation, it is imperative that the news article be constructed to seem more authentic in follow-up studies.

A final significant limitation lies in the difficulty of translating the legitimization of terrorism to the motivation required to actually engage in terrorist activity. Although viewing a cause as legitimate is a necessary first step to adopting an ideology that would support terrorism, there is no guarantee that this would develop into motivation to engage in terrorism. There are obviously other contextual factors that contribute towards developing this motivation. One of these is the close relationships developed between terrorists and their ideological leaders (Sageman, 2008). The way participants were acquainted with the terrorist in the study (through reading defense statements) is a grave oversimplification of this pivotal relationship. Nevertheless, while the current study is hardly representative of the complex radicalization process, the ease with which the study's procedures led highly identified participants to take the first steps towards legitimization of terrorism is certainly revealing.

Implications and Future Research

It is crucial to generalize the implications of the current results to the appropriate extent. The current study investigated specific conditions that lead to increased legitimization of terrorism, and the results cannot be interpreted to be representative of the phenomenon of radicalization as a whole. Terrorism evolves through very intricately interwoven communities, whose members have very complex life experiences and perceptions of history and contemporary situations (Sageman, 2008). The elaborate circumstances that lead individuals towards radicalization cannot be specified through the limited and controlled conditions examined in this study. Nonetheless, the current investigation can shed light on the conditions that lead individuals towards increased justification of others' terrorist activities on behalf of their group identity, which is certainly an important initial step in the process of radicalization. Future research may explore how individuals in groups respond to such conditions, and whether justification of

terrorism increases with the effect of the diffusion of responsibility within a group. The effect of 'de-individuation' has been shown to lead individuals to make riskier decisions within group settings, since acting as a group member allows individuals to be released from full responsibility (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). This aspect is vital for future research because it reflects the process of radicalization more authentically as a collective process. Future investigations should also study different social identities in order to demonstrate that the effects are the result of group phenomena, and are not specific to any singular social identity. In fact, investigation with arbitrarily assigned fictitious groups may also demonstrate similar effects, and prove more powerfully that the initial steps of radicalization are independent of any particular characteristic associated with specific real-world groups.

The current experiment is innovative in combining two different theories in an effort to increase the representation of real-world conditions; mortality salience and group identity symbols are very common in the media and propaganda, especially when it comes to terrorism. Terrorism-related news frequently show chilling images of angry rioters carrying signs that represent, and are saturated with, identity symbols such as flags. Also, associated pictures and reports of deaths are common in such news. While the conditions in this experiment portray mortality salience and aspects of social identity (positivity and distinctiveness) in a very specific and limited way, the relevant underlying concepts were present. If such threats justify terrorist activity in the minds of individuals who are only particularly different in their level of identification with their group, then the roots of terrorism can be clarified considerably. This may have implications for the type of material that should be allowed to be presented in the media. Furthermore, perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is the reaffirmation that terrorism should be viewed as a normative collective psychological phenomenon that can occur in response to specific social circumstances and perceived threats. Such psychological research can contribute towards the refutation of uninformed accusations of terrorists as ignorant, mentally ill, and evil people. Instead, this reorientation of focus can build a scientific understanding of terrorism that would contribute to more effective solutions to this pressing issue.

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