Taking Terrorist Accounts of their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

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Abstract

The field of terrorism has long suffered from a data deficit, particularly when it comes to primary data derived from interviews with violent extremists. This deficit reflects more than the difficulties of securing such data. For a variety of more subtle and complex reasons, researchers have been reluctant to interview terrorists and suspicious of the information derived from such interviews. As part of a larger study, this article explores the nature and foundations of this situation by systematically examining the limited discussion of the problem in terrorism studies and delineating three underlying interpretive concerns that appear to have interfered with securing more such interviews and trusting the data acquired through them.

Keywords: terrorist accounts, interviewing terrorists, motivations of terrorists

Introduction

Terrorism studies has long been caught in the torque of two equally compelling and difficult challenges. On one hand, it is recognized that the field suffers from a lack of primary data—research incorporating "talking with terrorists."[1] On the other hand, there are deep suspicions about what terrorists say, casting doubt on the evidentiary value of such data.[2] Despite some recent progress, the deficit in data and the doubts about the data continue to impede the investigation of many important issues.[3] This is most notable when it comes to discerning the motivations of terrorists. Can we ever really know what someone else is thinking and feeling? We can listen to what they say, but people are inclined to say what is expected or what they think others want to hear, and accounts of past actions are subject to distortion. Without seeking to be deceitful, false information can be conveyed, and in some cases, terrorists have obvious reasons to be deceitful. So, what weight should we give to the accounts that terrorists provide of their motives? This essay seeks to explore several key facets of this methodological tension and consider why and how we should pragmatically prioritize what terrorists say.

This problem is neither particularly new nor unique to the study of terrorism. The tension exists throughout the social sciences, and it has been addressed in myriad ways. Some philosophers and sociologists debate the very concept of motivations, and whether they can be analyzed.[4] Some also investigate the interrelationship of reasons, causes, and actions.[5] Other sociologists, anthropologists, and religious studies scholars address the problem by investigating how to reconcile *emic* and *etic*, or insider and outsider, perspectives on actions.[6] Others dissolve the tension by adopting an episteme of extreme social constructionism, denying any plausible contrast of actual motivations and mere rationalizations in the first place.[7] While others, more prosaically, seek to ameliorate the tension by developing ever more sophisticated ways to enhance the validity and reliability of research interviews.[8] All of these approaches are pertinent, and an awareness of the intersecting, yet distinct, approaches is instructive. It is also daunting and discouraging, since the debates are complex, prolonged, and largely unresolved.

In practice, then, most social scientists simply tend to ignore the problem. Until, that is, they encounter a situation in which the relative veracity of the accounts they are relying on really matters or is challenged. In principle, however, all such data matters in terrorism studies. Hypothetically, the information from interviews with terrorists can help to save lives and preserve the social order. It may influence efforts to prevent people from engaging in the process of radicalization, to interdict those already plotting violent acts, and more effectively encourage violent extremists to disengage. In addition to the intrinsic merits of this research, a great deal of terrorism scholarship is implicated in defeating the phenomenon it is studying.

There is, however, another reason why the methodological tension is particularly acute in the field of terrorism studies. There has long been a reluctance on the part of many researchers to talk to terrorists. This reluctance is only partially explained by the difficulties and risks entailed in finding, accessing, and interacting with such participants.[9] It is also because the crimes involved and hence, by implication, the criminals, are so unpalatable.[10]. As Horgan comments, "apprehension surrounds the belief that interviewing terrorists … is ultimately tantamount to appeasement, and that any kind of understanding is the same as excusing or sympathizing."[11] Morally, if not methodologically, researchers fear that giving serious attention to the accounts of terrorists will lead to accusations that they are lending credence to the deviant views and repugnant actions of the terrorists, and thereby empowering them. This accusation is commonly made by members of the public, politicians, and even some policy officials.[12] Stampnitzky identifies this fear as a formative, and distorting, factor in the emergence of terrorism studies as a field.[13] Consequently, more than other social scientists, terrorism scholars feel compelled to justify why they are willing to talk to the criminals that are the focus of their research. The doubts and qualms associated with collecting such primary data may partially explain why there is so little of this data in hand.

The objective in this essay is to provide a fuller rationale for securing more interviews with terrorists and treating what they say about their motivations as a serious source of insight into how and why people become terrorists. The epistemic point of view is nominally realist, but not naively so, and the analysis is wholly pragmatic. Some of the deeper issues, alluded to above, are broached, but the discussion is more delimited and practical. To be clear, the focus is not on the biases that researchers may bring to bear on interviews and interview data. These can be controlled, to some degree, by implementing more sophisticated coding and analysis techniques.[14] Rather, the focus is on the reasons for placing some real evidentiary value in what terrorists say about their motivations in the first place.[15]

Horgan provides a succinct rationale for undertaking interviews with terrorist, despite concerns about their trustworthiness:

> To understand the development of the terrorist, we must ask questions about how decisions emerged, the meaning of those decisions, and their consequences for the person concerned … Interviews afford keen insight into how individuals involved in terrorism … perceive themselves, their environments and their involvement pathways. Although survey data seemingly allows us to do the same thing, only through in-depth interviews … are we able to understand the meaning associated with each individual's experience and how that meaning affects motivation to act (i.e., mobilization).[16]

The potential relevance of interview data from terrorists, however, extends beyond the research questions raised by Horgan. For example, in surveying the different approaches used to analyze terrorism, the strategic, organizational, psychological, ideological, structural, and critical approaches, Chenoweth and Moore repeatedly stress the role of "qualitative evidence—from memoirs, interviews, or recovered documents" in building support for many of the basic propositions advanced by each perspective. They choose to highlight the challenges posed by the use of such data in their criticisms of the psychological and ideological approaches, where there is a strong reliance on interview data.[17] The interpretive issues are equally pertinent, however, for the other theoretical approaches—whether such data is being used to determine the relative causal significance of strategic thinking, organizational conditions, psychological needs, ideological doctrines, or broader social, economic, political and environmental factors. Even in the latter case, where quantitative measures are dominant, Chenoweth and Moore note that researchers must take into account how terrorists and terrorist groups perceive and interpret situations in order to explain how the correlations detected may be relevant to the behavior in question.[18]

There are two parts to this paper. First, there is a review of the comments on interviewing terrorists made by terrorism scholars, displaying the limitations of the existing discussion. Second, three underlying reasons are delineated for why the field has struggled to come to grips with this methodological problem. These largely implicit background concerns condition much that is said on the subject, and help to explain why so few researchers have addressed the doubts raised about the validity and reliability of the accounts provided by

terrorists. The insights gained do not resolve the complex methodological issues surrounding the acquisition and use of terrorist accounts. Rather they help to lay the foundation for a fuller discussion. That discussion would entail a more exacting examination of the sociology literature on "accounts" and the problems posed by a radical interpretivist (i.e., social constructionist) approach to the issue, as well as the related issue of the relationship of attitudes and behavior. Some of the skepticism directed at terrorist accounts stems from a more generalized doubt of the influence of beliefs on behavior, as expressed by several prominent scholars in the field of terrorism studies. The grounds for this doubt are mistaken and exaggerated, but substantiation of this claim awaits development in an additional analysis, building on this foundation.

Discussions of the Problem in the Terrorism Literature

There is surprisingly little direct discussion of the veracity of interview data obtained from terrorists in the literature of terrorism studies. It is probably safe to say that every study employing such interviews makes some passing comment on this methodological concern. But these comments are hard to find, and as Khalil asserts, "many researchers seemingly accept interviewee responses at face value." In fact, he insists that a "critical caveat" cautioning against straightforwardly relying on interview data from terrorists "is … generally absent from articles that draw from such respondents."[19]

In recent years, for example, a great deal has been written about why thousands of young men and women traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for various jihadist groups, including the Islamic State. A handful of these studies have called upon interview data, from the fighters, and their families and friends, to support their analyses.[20] Amongst these studies, only Dawson and Amarasingam offer an extended defense of their reliance on such data (discussed below).[21]

Other general discussions of the use of qualitative data in terrorism studies tend to dwell on the technical and practical aspects of securing and conducting such interviews, and various attendant issues, such as the safety of researchers and improving the quality of the data.[22] Horgan, Nilsson, and Khalil do reflect on the trustworthiness of the data obtained from terrorists, but their comments are similar and limited in scope.[23] Before examining their contributions, however, the observations of a few other earlier terrorism researchers are summarized to set the context of the discussion in the field.

In 2000, White published an article arguing the merits of using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to secure better information about "why people engage in small-group political violence." The object, he stresses, is to "*understand* those who engage in the behavior" and not "to condemn, to condone, or find some objective 'truth.'"[24] All that we learn about why people engage in political violence is perspectival, he argues, and this complicates 'understanding.' It does not make it impossible, however, if we take care to place the information acquired in a well-developed contextual grasp of what is happening, and skillfully use a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches to offset the relative weaknesses of each method. Overall, he observes, there is a very real need for more and better qualitative research, since commentators are too often "removed from the violent field", and the "best research … is undertaken by researchers who, on some level, interact with the people being researched."[25] There are risks in doing so, he notes, since "there is the possibility that respondents will tailor what they say, for a number of reasons, including making themselves and/or their political movement look good."[26] In extreme instances there is even the risk of the researcher going native.[27] In both instances, he advises, the only logical corrective is more, and not less, immersion in the field, combined with greater methodological rigor.[28] We will only be able to differentiate between plausible and theoretically informed interpretive options, he insists, by securing more "in-depth information on *why* [individuals] are involved in violence."[29]

This is sound advice, and White illustrates his points well with examples from the study of the conflict in Northern Ireland. His points are in line with the approach still taken by most researchers who "talk to terrorists"—no matter how peripherally. Nilsson, for example, talks about the ways in which jihadist interviewees can have an effect on interviewers, and in turn how researchers can influence these interviewees.[30] Apart from the comment about respondents tailoring their answers, however, White does not address the issue of having

confidence in the evidentiary value of the information terrorists provide. In fact, his analysis more or less assumes the significance of collecting these kinds of accounts.

In this vein, Cordes, adds an important element to this rather conventional approach to the issue.[31] She notes the tendency of terrorists to "characterize their actions as something else," to deny they are terrorists. "This denial," she observes, "may consist not only of semantic denial but of recharacterising themselves as freedom fighters, revolutionaries, etc."[32] "To comprehend the terrorists' mindset", she stresses, "it is crucial to uncover the rationale, motivation and mechanisms for such denial. By listening to what the terrorists say, [we can assess] how they see themselves, what they think they are doing and what they think their actions will accomplish."[33] There is a secondary, and equally important, reason then for listening to terrorists that goes beyond securing information about how and why things happened. It is to gain access to how terrorists conceive of themselves, and to how they think. Insights in this regard are more or less inseparable, Cordes argues, from the propagandistic purposes of much that terrorists say. This is because the purpose of their communications, written and verbal, "are not only to explain their actions to others, but to persuade … themselves that what they have done was justified, was appropriate, and carried sufficient weight in the pursuit of their cause."[34] She calls this secondary aspect of terrorist pronouncements "auto-propaganda." Parallels exist with the witnessing function that sociologists of religion associate with the efforts made by sects and cults to recruit and convert others. The success rates of these efforts are normally dismal, yet the groups persist, it is argued, because the activity serves to reinforce the commitment of the members assigned the task.

Building on these insights, Horgan discusses issues of validity and reliability in "Interviewing Terrorists: A Case for Primary Research," and "Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research."[35] Citing White, he addresses the need to verify information obtained from interviews through comparative analyses with other sources, respondents, security experts, media personnel and stories. Following White's recommendation, he also encourages researchers to look for patterns in the data and accounts that conflict with, or even negate, the information provided by respondents. Doing so may lead to the discovery, as White further suggests, of information that was "not necessarily apparent" from the interviews.[36] In 2008, Horgan raises the problems of bias and "memory error" as well, but he has in mind the biases and faulty recall of the researchers, and not that of the respondents. He suggests that effective note-taking is a suitable corrective,[37] and in 2012, he encourages researchers to be more forthcoming about the kinds of questions they ask, and how they are guiding the interviews.[38] Finally, he touches on the value of case studies more generally.[39] In other words, most of his discussion assumes that the accounts provided by terrorists are incomplete and problematic in various ways, and his analysis is limited to suggesting some practical ways of getting on with the work and verifying the data better.

Horgan later provides a more penetrating analysis. In 2012, in a few paragraphs he directly addresses the question: How do we know if the terrorists are telling the truth?[40] He immediately questions whether identifying the "truth" in this context is something researchers can realistically do. Summarizing his reflections, he notes that what terrorists say may well change as they move through different stages of their involvement, and later accounts are more likely to be dressed in the "new ideological garb" acquired by recruits with their increased exposure to movements and ideologues. But this need not mean, he counterintuitively suggests, that the later accounts are "less truthful" than earlier ones. We must keep in mind that all accounts are incomplete and biased, and much of what terrorists say is a "post-hoc invention" inspired by ideology.

Finally, Horgan rather provocatively states:

> In some interviews, the issue of truth is really irrelevant. The significance of the interview may be that it gives psychological insight into the person being interviewed. Finding 'reality' may be less important than acknowledging the significance of its meaning for the interviewee … [41]

Horgan extends his thoughts on this issue in a discussion of trigger moments and catalysts for becoming involved in terrorism in the second edition of *The Psychology of Terrorism*.[42] Relying on unsubstantiated retrospective accounts of such trigger moments, he argues, may result in overstating the significance of certain events and experiences. This is because in hindsight, terrorists, like the rest of us, will tend to seek a clarity that was not

present at the moment, and they will more easily recall particular events, than aspects of a gradual process of socialization. What is more, most such accounts are subject to a "simple attribution bias," especially with regard to controversial behavior. Everyone tends, including terrorists, to attach a high degree of responsibility for problematic past actions to the influence of external forces—environmental factors and the actions of others—to avoid blame for past acts and to legitimate ongoing engagement in controversial behavior. Terrorists are inclined to justify their actions as having been provoked by the deeds of others, asserting that under the circumstances, they had no choice but to come to the defense of some victimized group or community with which they identify. It was their duty to take up arms, and external circumstances forced this duty upon them. The role of more amorphous personal factors or the benefits of joining, such as a lack of social status or sense of identity, or increased power and thrills, are rarely articulated as well, or at all. This state of affairs raises the key interpretive issue:

> It is immensely difficult to ascertain … whether these types of verbal explanations would have existed without the acquired effects and qualities of membership, and life as part of a terrorist movement more generally. In other words …, is this type of answer merely a by-product of exposure to in-group "training"?[43]

Horgan further notes that an awareness of the "auto-propagandistic" aspects of espousals of ideology, as proposed by Cordes, increases our suspicions of the veracity of these retrospective accounts.[44]

Horgan goes on, nonetheless, to cast some doubt on the overall argument when he states that only one person in a sample of terrorists from multiple groups he interviewed "suggested they had no alternative but to engage in terrorism. On the contrary, they described exploring the pros and cons of pursuing other avenues before settling on seeking out involvement with a specific violent group."[45] All the same, he concludes: "When couched in ideological terms … it can be exceptionally challenging to ascertain whether the justification preceded involvement or resulted from it."[46]

This is the key consideration: overall, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between motivations and justifications. As Horgan's brief excursus also indicates, however, it is not clear if this distinction actually makes sense or matters.

Nilsson makes a number of similar and new observations in his recent article on interviewing jihadists.[47] Questions of reliability arise, he suggests, for interview data acquired from imprisoned terrorists, but former jihadists "are still in a good position to self-evaluate the reasons for their becoming jihadists and their subsequent experiences."[48] He seems to imply this holds true for "active jihadists" as well, but notes that in this case the real issue is not the intervention of post-hoc justifications as much as an ongoing reflective process justifying future activity. "Gaining access to this reflective process," he states, "can be a rich source of data."[49] In such interviews, the jihadists will make contradictory statements, and this may cause us to distrust the data. "Sometimes," he states, "the interviewer is clearly aware that the interviewee is intentionally giving misleading or false answers."[50] Nevertheless, he argues, this is often because the interviewer has failed to establish sufficient grounds of trust and rapport with the interviewee. Sometimes, however, despite a significant investment of time, little useful data will emerge from even a long interview. In every case, as White and Horgan recommend, the data needs to be compared with other interviews and various forms of open-source material. "However, open-source material is often irrelevant to the topic of interest to the researcher as the point of conducting interviews is to gain access to data beyond open sources."[51]

As others have cautioned, Nilsson also argues that qualitative researchers need to guard against expecting too much coherence and order in the data interviewees provide. Our real lives are far more disjointed and full of contradictory actions, thoughts, and feelings, than even most narratives elicited in interviews indicate. Hence contradictions may be evidence of the "truthfulness" of the accounts offered as much as grounds for distrust. This adds another twist to the interpretive challenges faced by researchers.[52]

Finally, Nilsson suggests that one possible response to the question of whether we can trust what terrorists say is to distinguish between "informants" and "respondents." If the terrorist interviewees are deemed informants, providing information about events or processes, then "ideally" we should approach the obtained data critically and seek confirmation by other independent sources. "If the interviewees are treated as respondents, the aim of the interview is to gain access to their worldviews, thoughts, and feelings rather than to obtain data whose accuracy can be verified. Of course, in some cases, the interviewees are both, and so overall Nilsson falls back on using our "common sense and experience from previous interviews" to sort things out.[53]

In Khalil's guide to interviewing terrorists and violent extremists, he touches briefly on the issue of trusting the information provided. He stresses the importance of cautioning readers to be careful in interpreting the findings,[54] and adding nuance to the worries, he notes:

> Terrorists and violent extremists may provide false or misleading information, for instance, by offering opinions presented as 'facts,' to be viewed favorably by the interviewer, because they are ill-informed, to discredit others, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, to aggrandize their own role in events, through unwitting self-deception, or simply as their memories are flawed.[55]

Calling to mind the attribution bias noted by Horgan, he observes that it is common for interviewees to "overemphasize" the role of either "structural grievances" or coercion in explaining their actions in order to "reduce their own culpability."[56] His recommended response is to "triangulate" the information provided "as much as possible with other sources." He admits, though, that this can be problematic when dealing with "perceptual or motivational information."[57]

In an analysis of the motivations of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, Dawson and Amarasingam provide a more extensive defense of the use of information derived from social media dialogues with terrorists.[58] They use this data to argue that ideology and personal existential reasons are more important in explaining the behavior of the Western foreign fighters than the socio-economic factors highlighted in other studies of such fighters. When an anonymous reviewer of the article challenged the "evidentiary value" of the statements the fighters made, they formulated a more explicit rationale for using such data. The reviewer, they state, raised at least three reasons for doubt: these jihadi fighters normally only had access to their phones after completing some religious education, and this religious training conditioned them, on the one hand, to overlook socioeconomic reasons for their radicalization, and on the other hand, to emphasize their personal religious motivations for travelling to Syria. Consequently, the reviewer argues, it is not surprising that these fighters present their turn to terrorism as "an epiphany of God's will." In other words, echoing Horgan's comments, the anonymous reviewer is arguing that the data is more reflective of the ideological training the fighters underwent than their actual motivations for becoming foreign fighters.[59]

After noting how this kind of data is subject to some distortion and hence interpretive caution is necessary, Dawson and Amarasingam respond to the reviewer's critique with several interesting points. First, they note that the criticism presents a chicken-and-egg conundrum. "Did these individuals end up in jihadi religious education programs because of their prior religiosity, or are their accounts of their past religiosity merely a manifestation of their religious training in Syria? How could we determine which is more the case? Perhaps both possibilities are true?" With the limited data in hand, they argue it is implausible that most of the people who traveled to Syria and Iraq to wage jihad were not driven, at least partially, by their religious commitments. "The commitments may have been theologically flawed and incomplete, but they were probably sincere and obviously consequential. Once in Syria, in other words, they received training in the particulars of Islamic Law (Shari'a), as espoused by the group they joined, but not in the fundamentals of the Salafi-jihadist ideology."[60]

They argue that the reviewer is presumably, "neither proposing that we … should stop collecting primary data from foreign fighters, nor that all the information derived from individuals who have undergone some religious training is categorically non-evidentiary." Doing so would be "methodologically unjustified, and substantively counterproductive."[61] It certainly would pose problems for sociologists of religion, and a wide array of other fields of study, since comparable training is a constituent part of many roles in society, in the military and the

police, and for professors, nurses, computer hackers, athletes, actors, members of organized crime groups, and so on.

They suspect, however, that the reviewer is suggesting that the nature of religious training is somehow more suspect. The approach taken by the reviewer implies that the accounts of the jihadists "might somehow be more credible if they were secured before they became religious, since it is the religious indoctrination that is problematic." However, they ask, "Why would pre-religious, or perhaps post-religious, accounts of their behavior or reasoning be intrinsically less subject to distortion?"[62] As Horgan cautions, there is no good reason for assuming that either later or earlier accounts are intrinsically any more or less "truthful." In fact, in the sample of foreign fighters interviewed by Dawson and Amarasingam it is clear that many had some formal religious education in childhood, and they all claim to have undergone some conversion-like experience in adolescence that set them on the path to jihadism. Consequently, they point out, by the logic of the skeptical reviewer, "almost everything that most jihadists could tell us about their own experience would be significantly discounted, no matter when we interviewed them as they progressed along the path to becoming a foreign fighter."[63]

In fact, Dawson argues, the entire discussion of religious terrorism is permeated by a subtle yet significant conceptual bias against accepting religion as a *sui generis* source of motivation, born perhaps of the secular backgrounds and training of most terrorism scholars. This bias leads many to misunderstand and misrepresent the nature and impact of the religiosity of homegrown jihadists and foreign fighters. Elsewhere he documents the presence and consequences of this bias in some detail. He delineates the presence of problematic assumptions, interpretive inconsistencies, and gaps in knowledge in the arguments of some of the leading scholars of terrorism.[64] His critique is inevitably inferential but developed from a close reading of the texts.[65]

More fundamentally, however, he stresses the need to offset the suspicion of terrorist claims with the "equally strong methodological imperative" to prioritize what subjects say about their lives.[66] He cites the classic formulation of this point of view by Herbert Blumer:

> … if [a] scholar wishes to understand the action of people it is necessary for him to see their objects [i.e., physical, social, and conceptual] as they see them. Failure to see their objects as they see them, or a substitution of his meanings of the objects for their meanings, is the gravest kind of error that the social scientist can commit. It leads to the setting up of a fictitious world. Simply put, people act towards things on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them, not on the basis of the meaning that these things have for the outside scholar. Yet we are confronted left and right with studies of human group life and of the behavior of people in which the scholar has made no attempt to find out how the people see what they are acting toward.[67]

Indeed, Dawson argues,[68] the field of terrorism studies tends to succumb to what Bale calls the problem of "mirror imaging." Analysts will "project their own ways of thinking, their own values, their own frames of reference, and their own fantasies onto [terrorists], including those emanating from very different cultures with very different histories and values, instead of trying to view the world from the [terrorists] own perspectives and points of view."[69] This form of parochialism is most conspicuous in the analysis of individuals who profess an "extremist ideology" (i.e., one that deviates dramatically from the social and political norms of the analysts). In this context, Dawson further stipulates, it is irrelevant whether the beliefs and ideas espoused by jihadists, such as the imminent restoration of the Caliphate, are fantastic.[70] A methodological obligation remains to prioritize the claims of those being studied, because when people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.[71]

Six key findings and insights, then, emerge from the existing discussion of this issue in the literature of terrorism studies. First, the question of the reliability and validity of the primary data obtained from interviews with terrorists has received little sustained attention. The issue is mentioned in passing in a handful of more general discussions of the methodological challenges of interviewing terrorists and is largely absent from substantive empirical studies using data from such interviews. Second, two overarching and conflicting tendencies seem to

co-exist in the field at present: either to take much of what terrorists say at face value or be categorically skeptical of most of what they say. Third, amongst those who address the issue there is a consensus that researchers need to deal with the tensions surrounding the evidentiary value of this data by being more rigorous and careful in their methods of interviewing and reporting, and seeking to triangulate their findings with data from other sources. In other words, the dominant approach is a delimited methodological one, which only partially addresses the full set of relevant concerns. Fourth, all data acquired in interviews is perspectival, and in the case of terrorist accounts, much that is said is relative to where individuals are on the path of violent extremism. We need to take this situational aspect of the accounts into consideration when interpreting them. There is no sound reason, however, for assuming that interviews acquired at an earlier point in the process of radicalization, or the career of a terrorist, will necessarily be more reliable than later ones, or vice versa. Fifth, on the basis of existing social psychological studies, it is hypothesized that the terrorists' explanations of their motivations for becoming terrorists will tend to display an "attribution bias" which emphasizes the role of external forces and conditions in making their decisions, thereby limiting their personal culpability. This does seem to be the case in many instances. As several researchers have noted, however, it is not the case with other samples. Sixth, the key issue appears to be determining the role of ideological training in shaping the retrospective accounts provide by terrorists—both in writing (e.g., memoires) and verbally (e.g., interviews). If the fear of the taint of training is carried too far, or the conception of training is too broad (e.g., encompassing all religious activity), then there is the risk that the testimony of those under study will be excluded altogether from the field of study. Such an exclusion is ethically and methodologically problematic, and unless it can be justified with substantive evidence from the cases under consideration, it will perpetuate the counter-productive practice of mirroring.

Three Reasons Why Terrorism Studies Researchers Have Struggled with the Issue

There are at least three different, intertwined, and largely implicit concerns that seem to have stalled efforts to address the methodological issues raised by talking to terrorists. These concerns need to be teased apart and clarified before proceeding to discuss the methodological justification for seeking more interviews with terrorists and taking their motivational claims more seriously. The positions are logically inconsistent, yet they co-exist in the field overall and appear together—implicitly—in specific discussions of the issue.

First, as indicated above, the willingness to credence the claims of perpetrators of crimes exists on a continuum of degrees of deviation from the dominant values and norms of modern Western liberal-democratic societies. For logical, but also emotional and moral reasons, the more deviant the acts in question, the more everyone, including researchers, are inclined to be suspicious of the explanations provided by perpetrators. In part, this is because the abnormality of the acts leads us to believe that the actors must be abnormal as well.[72] Given the heinous nature of the crimes of terrorists, often it is assumed these individuals must, like other kinds of exceptionally violent offenders, be significantly different from the rest of us.

Most terrorism scholars know that this common interpretive proclivity runs counter to decades of relevant research. No one has documented a clear relationship between definable forms of psychopathology and acts of terrorism, and efforts to develop a distinct terrorist profile, modelled on those developed for serial killers, for example, have failed.[73] Leading scholars of terrorism have insisted on the normalcy of most terrorists.[74] Silke's conclusion continues to hold true: "the research supporting terrorist abnormality has been sparse and of questionable validity. In contrast, the research suggesting terrorist normality has been more plentiful, and in general, of much greater scientific validity."[75] This does not mean that some terrorists are not suffering from diagnosable or other less definitive forms of mental illness. Rather, as Victoroff concludes, the research literature shows that terrorists "are psychologically extremely heterogeneous. Whatever [their] stated goals and group of identity, every terrorist, like every person, is motivated by [their] own complex of psychosocial experiences and traits."[76] Recent empirical work is starting to delineate how this might be the case, disaggregating the data on the behaviors of terrorists, types of terrorists, different kinds terrorist acts, and forms of participation in terrorism, in order to delineate more specific correlations.[77] The details of this work, however, are not our concern in this context. Rather the point is simply that categorical suspicion of the testimony of terrorists on these grounds, explicitly or implicitly, is not warranted and this fact needs to be stressed in justifying giving

credence to what terrorists say.

Second, we also tend to assume, understandably, that the perpetrators of terrorism, like most criminals, feel guilty about their actions. Reversing the onus of the first assumption, in attempting to understand terrorists it is common for people to assume there are important parallels with their own experience. Even though most terrorists are thought to be monsters, we still tend to expect them to be cognizant they have broken the law, and what is more, grievously violated the norms and values of the societies in which they live. Consequently, it is assumed, they will seek to obfuscate why they acted in order to escape or minimize blame and punishment. There is an intrinsic motivation, in other words to be deceitful, in both premediated and more off-handed ways. In some cases, perhaps, it is assumed additionally that there may be a deeper psychological urge to rationalize the acts in order to relieve the burden of guilt experienced by the terrorists. We do seek, after all, to have such offenders confess to their crimes in court and express remorse. This is seen as an essential part of achieving true justice in these cases.

It remains an open question, however, whether these perpetrators do feel guilt for their actions. This is something that must be determined on a case-by-case basis, and probably never in a definitive way. On the one hand, there are reasonable grounds for being suspicious of the statements made by terrorists under investigation, on trial, or seeking release from incarceration. Such individuals are motivated, in multiple ways, to provide the kinds of explanations that either they think their captors want or that will disguise their real motivations. On the other hand, it is questionable whether grounds exist for being equally suspicious of the statements of terrorists who are either still active or long-since retired and perhaps free from further legal repercussions for their actions. Some grounds for distortion will exist, such as the desire to present a more acceptable public image or alternatively exaggerate the importance of their role. These individuals, however, are operating in a context that favours a freedom of expression unlike that experienced by those facing legal penalties, so there is a difference. Dawson and Amarasingam, for example, had the rare opportunity to interview active jihadist foreign fighters in the zone of conflict, and long before the demise of ISIS and other jihadist groups.[78] They think this adds to the veracity of the accounts they collected—though the accounts are still retrospective. The interviewees often expressed little concern for what others thought of their actions if they were not committed jihadists as well.

Given what we know about the re-socialization and self-transformation characteristic of many instances of radicalization, is it reasonable to assume that these individuals think about their crimes in ways analogous to how others would? Or is it more likely they will sincerely explain their actions in ways that are consonant with the new worldview, if not an alternate reality, undergirding their identity as terrorists? Most theorizing about the process of radicalization points to some kind of significant shift in identity. This shift is thought to be profound, and reminiscent of religious conversions.[79] If this is the case, are we warranted in doubting or dismissing the explanatory value of the statements they provide simply because they are embedded in an ideology or worldview we reject or find implausible, or even fantastic? The statements made can be an authentic expression of their motivations, no matter how alien to our sensibilities. This holds true both at the time they are made, and in some respects, with regard to actions taken earlier in their lives. Memory and distortion issues arise with all retrospective accounts of behavior, but if the acts the terrorists are accused of did not lie so far outside the spectrum of normal behavior, would we not extend to them the same credibility and interpretive license we do to other people in our lives and legal systems?

As Horgan cautions, we must keep in mind that all accounts are incomplete and biased, and much of what terrorists say is a "post-hoc invention" inspired by ideology. Learning the ideology, however, may involve finding the right words and concepts to express what were real but inchoate feelings and thoughts. In other words, the ideology has the potential to reveal "the truth," as the ideologues themselves believe, as well as cloak it. This is why, presumably, individuals are drawn to the ideology in the first place. It resonates with their experience and thoughts.

Third, concern about the veracity and value of the testimony of terrorists comes to the foremost forcefully in the case of religious terrorism. As Dawson argues, many terrorism scholars, who are often secular and have little or no training in the study of religion, struggle to be consistent and fair in their assessment of the role

of religion in motivating terrorism.[80] It is not that they have rushed to judgement and condemned religion as a source of terrorism, as other kinds of public commentators commonly do. On the contrary, most of the leading researchers in the field have been inclined to see religion as a secondary factor in instigating terrorist activity, relative to an array of social, economic, political, and psychological considerations. Religion is rarely taken seriously as a prime motivator, despite the ample contrary testimony of religious terrorists (primarily jihadists) themselves. Without reiterating why Dawson thinks this interpretive proclivity is misguided, poorly justified, and counterproductive,[81] an additional related argument is introduced. This particular argument is consonant with the first two criticisms raised above, and a special instance of the general fear, discussed in the introduction to this article, that in seeking to understand terrorists we are somehow engaging in appeasement.

Like the sociologists and psychologists studying new religious movements in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, scholars of religious terrorism have consistently turned to the identification of latent social and psychological factors to explain the behavior they are examining. In part, this is because the beliefs and practices are so unusual and threatening. In both cases, in seeking to bring the subject more within the orbit of other "normal" phenomena, that is, understandable phenomena, social scientists revert to reductive lines of reasoning. The emphasis placed on more primary social and psychological factors is used to discount the inherent religiosity of the groups and their members—both in the case of members of new religions and terrorists—because any recognition of the religiosity of followers is strongly associated with the legitimation of their goals and actions. Even in today's highly secularized societies, religion is residually accorded a special status and legitimacy. Religious freedoms are protected by the constitutions of most liberal-democratic societies, and religious institutions are generally deemed to be beneficial. If the motivations of the terrorists are acknowledged to be genuinely religious (however that is construed), then it is feared, implicitly, that some of the legitimacy accorded religion may bleed over to the terrorists and their causes, complicating the condemnation of these kinds of political action. Such, however need not be the case. If we are more careful in sorting out the normative and descriptive components of our arguments, we can offer more accurate explanations of why people become involved in jihadi terrorism, by recognizing their religious motivations (the ones the jihadists themselves fervently espouse) in conjunction with other social, psychological, and political ones, without legitimating the religious terrorists. We need to differentiate between recognizing their religiosity and the legitimacy of their beliefs. Accepting the former need not entail, in this case, accepting the latter.

Combining aspects of all three of these concerns, it is important to further recognize that when someone has replaced the norms and values that they are violating with an entirely new normative system and worldview, then the justifications they offer for their actions, present and past, can no longer be treated simply as self-serving excuses for deviant behavior, and we cannot be entirely critical and dismissive without calling into question one of the key processes by which social change happens. This is how Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, spread and transformed the world.[82] The personal and collective objections of analysts to the new norms do not provide sufficient grounds for overriding this social scientific insight, or supporting the categorical rejection of the accuracy or legitimacy of the motivational claims of the individuals and groups holding the new oppositional worldviews. Contemporary Western societies accept—and in fact actively promote—the possibility of persons undergoing these kinds of radical changes when it suits their purposes: for example, in the case of criminals and addicts, or even whole societies doing something similar regarding shifts in cultural norms such as the adoption of gender equality, legal formalism or democracy. In the past, the language of 'redemption' was used to characterize and encourage these kinds of changes, at both the societal and individual levels. In fact Western societies were centrally constructed around such notions for centuries, and we would do well to respectfully take this fact into consideration when addressing the professed beliefs and observed behaviors of others, whether we agree with their alternate worldviews or not. Either the kinds of radical shifts in beliefs and practices captured by notions like redemption are possible or they are not, and if they are, then social scientific observers cannot pick and choose which ones are legitimate and hence an authentic and perhaps primary source of motivations, based on whether they agree or disagree with the belief systems in question. Saying this neither entails advocacy for an unrealistic absolute moral relativism nor a mythological absolute value-neutrality in the social sciences. Rather, as Brannan et al., Jackson et al., Stampnitzky, and others have indicated,[83] it involves recognizing that the failure to construct adequate firewalls between normative

and empirical considerations in terrorism studies has damaged the integrity of the field from the beginning, and in this instance needlessly interfered with efforts to discern the motivations of terrorists.[84]

Conclusion

With these new and more systematic insights into the nature and complexity of the issues raised by using evidence from talking to terrorists, we are returned to the hermeneutic circle, and the initial suspicion of the motivational claims of terrorists is complemented by a further suspicion of the grounds for being skeptical of these claims. A hermeneutic of suspicion is operative at two levels: with regard to the data itself, and the explicit and implicit interpretative frameworks used in assessing this data. In seeking to be more rigorous in the treatment of the data terrorism scholars need to keep this bigger picture in mind.

In the end, however, it is fair to say that most terrorists do recognize that they have broken with the dominant norms and values of the societies in which they have lived. Therefore, the explanations they offer for their behavior, no matter how they are formulated, will conform to the classic sociological definition of "accounts." They are verbal explanations for socially undesirable or problematic behavior.[85] In seeking to bring additional resources to bear on the evidentiary value of data from interviews with terrorists then the logical next step would be to utilize insights from the considerable broader sociological literature on the problem of "accounts."

A satisfactory resolution of the problem of accounts in terrorism studies also depends, however, on addressing a related point, the relationship of attitudes to behavior or beliefs to actions. Citing the results of experimental social psychology, namely that attitudes or beliefs are weak predictors of behavior and actions, some terrorism scholars call into question the causal significance of ideology, and hence by implication the veracity of the motivational claims made by terrorists in ideologically informed accounts.[86] The situation, however, is more complex than terrorism researchers have acknowledged. Certain kinds of attitudes do not align well with certain kinds of behaviors, but meta-analyses of the relationship reveal that under discernable conditions "attitudes significantly and substantially predict future behavior."[87] Much depends on how the attitudes were formed, the specificity of the object of the attitude, and how readily and often the attitude is recalled and enacted. If the circumstances surrounding the radicalization of an individual match the conditions under which people typically act in accordance with their attitudes, then the accounts they offer of their behavior may be more reliable and potentially valuable than the critics think.

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Notes

[1] For example, David W. Brannan, Philip F. Esler, and N.T. Anders Strandberg (2001). "Talking to 'Terrorists': Towards an Independent Analytical Framework for the Study of Violent Substate Activism." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 24 (2001); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence.* Third edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); John Horgan, "Interviewing Terrorists: A Case for Primary Research," in H. Sinchun Chen, Edna Reid, Joshua Sinai, and Andrew Silke, eds., *Knowledge Management and Data Mining for Homeland Security* (New York: Springer, 2008) and John Horgan, "Interviewing the Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, 3 (2012); Andrew Silke, "Research on Terrorism: A Review of the Impact of 9/11 on the Global War on Terrorism," in Hsinchun Chen, Edna Reid, Joshua Sinai, Andrew Silke, and Boaz Ganor, eds., *Terrorism Informatics Knowledge Management and Data Mining for Homeland Security* (Boston: Springer, 2008).; Todd C. Helmus, "Why and How Some People Become Terrorists," in Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds., *Social Science for Counterterrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2009); and Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, Anja, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, 2010.

[2] For example, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and US* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); James Khalil, "Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture Between Attitudes and Behaviors at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37 (2014) and James Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, 4, (2019); Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Ira,." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, 1, (2015); Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Erica Chenoweth, Erica and Pauline Moore, *The Politics of Terror*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[3] In 2001 Silke reported that only ten percent of the research in terrorism studies utilized interviews, and in 2008 he documented that only one percent of research on terrorism has been based on systematic interviews with terrorists (Andrew Silke, op.cit., 101). Reviewing the research literature from 2007 to 2016, Schuurman discovered that almost sixteen percent of studies employed interviews. He does not break down his data further, however, to determine the percentage of studies based on interviews with terrorists—Bart Schuurman, "Research on Terrorism, 2007-2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship," *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Online version, Mar. 1, 2018, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023. It is fair to say that the number of studies involving interviews with terrorists remains small and uncertain, for example: Mark Jeurgensmeyer, op. cit.; Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Jerrold M. Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita M. Denny. "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15, 2003; John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009); Ariel Merari, Jonathan Fighel, Boaz Ganor, Ephraim Lavie, Yohanan Tzoreff, and Arie Livne, "Making Palestinian 'Martyrdom Operations'/'Suicide Attacks': Interviews with Would-Be Perpetrators and Organizers," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, 2010; Alessandro Orsini, "Interview with a Terrorist by Vocation: A Day among the Diehard Terrorists, Part II." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, 2013; Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, "Who are They and Why do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, 4 (2014); Kate Barrelle, "Pro-integration: Disengagement from and Life after Extremism," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 7, 2 (2015); Julie Chernov Hwang, "The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists: Understanding the Pathways," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29 (2017); Lorne L. Dawson, and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, 3 (2017); Susan Fahey and Pete Simi, "Pathways to Violent Extremism: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of the US Far-Right," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (initial online version, Dec. 5, 2018).

[4] For example, C. Wright Mills, "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," *American Sociological Review* 5, 6, (1940; R.S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation* (London: Routledge, 1960); (1940). Jonathan H. Turner, "Towards a Sociological Theory of Motivation," *American Sociological Review* 52, 1, (1987).

[5] For example, Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *Journal of Philosophy* 60, 1963; Martin Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Jerald Hage and Babara Foley Meeker, *Social Causality* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988); and Mark Risjord, "Reasons, Causes, and Action Explanation," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 35, 3, (2004).

[6] For example, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Margery Wolf, *A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Kim Knott, "Insider/Outsider Perspectives," in John Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[7] For example, John Heritage, "Ethnomethodology," in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan H. Turner, eds., *Social Theory Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Kieran Bonner, "Hermeneutics and Symbolic Interactionism: The Problem of Solipsism," *Human Studies* 17, 1994; Vivian Burr, *Social Constructionism*. Third edition (London: Routledge, 2015).

[8] For example, Charles C. Ragin, Joane Nagel, Patrica White, eds. *Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research* (Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation, 2004); John Levi Martin, *Thinking through Methods: A Social Science Primer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[9] For example, Adam Dolnik, "Conducting Field Research on Terrorism: A Brief Primer," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 5, 2, 2011; John Horgan, 2012, op. cit.; Marco Nilsson, "Interviewing Jihadists: On the Importance of Drinking Tea and Other Methodological Considerations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, 6, 2018; James Khalil, 2019, op. cit.

[10] David Brannan, et al., op. cit.; John Horgan, 2012, op. cit.

[11] John Horgan, 2012, op. cit., 202.

[12] Quite characteristically, after the arrest of two Canadians involved in a terrorist plot in 2013, the Conservative Prime Minister of Canada, Steven Harper, took an oppositional leader (the current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau) to task for calling for more investigation of the "root causes" of terrorism. He did so by saying: "I think, … this is not a time to commit sociology … I don't

think we want to convey any view to the Canadian public other than our utter condemnation of this kind of violence … and our utter determination through our laws and our activities to do everything we can to prevent it and counter it" (CBC, 2013, at https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/harper-on-terror-arrests-not-a-time-for-sociology-1.1413502).

[13] Lisa Stampnitzky, Lisa, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism."* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and "The Emergence of Terrorism Studies as a Field," in Richard Jackson, ed., *The Routledge Handbook on Critical Terrorism Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[14] Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Third edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015); Matthew B Miles, A. Michael Huberman, Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Fourth edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2019).

[15] In this limited context, I have not included additional insights from the literature on investigative interviewing (e.g., Gisli H. Gudjonsson, "Investigative Interviewing," in Tim Newburn, Tom Williamson, and Alan Wright, eds., *Handbook of Criminal Investigation* (New York: Willan Publishing, 2007); Tom Williamson, ed., *Investigative Interviewing: Rights, Research, Regulation*. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[16] John Horgan, 2012, op. cit., 198-199.

[17] Erica Chenoweth and Pauline Moore, 2018, op. cit., 119 and 158.

[18] Idem, 167.

[19] James Khalil, 2019, op. cit., 7 and 11.

[20] For example, Daan Weggemans et al., 2014; Edwin Bakker and Peter Grol, "Motives and Considerations of Potential Foreign Fighters from the Netherlands," International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) Policy Brief (July 2015); Marco Nilsson, 2018, op. cit.; Jacob Sheikh, "'I Just Said It. The State'—Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighters in Syria," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, 6, 2016; Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, op. cit.; El-Said, Hamed and Richard Barrett, *Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria*. United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (July 2017), at: http://www.un.org/en/counterterrorism/assets/img/Report_Final_20170727.pdf; Marion Van San, "Belgian and Dutch Young Men and Women Who Joined ISIS: Ethnographic Research among the Families Left Behind," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, 1, 2018; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, Bennett Clifford, "The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq," Program on Extremism, George Washington University (February 2018), at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/travelers.

[21] Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, op. cit., 202-205.

[22] John Horgan, 2008 and 2012, op. cit.; Adam Dolnik, 2011, op. cit.; Mark Juergensmeyer, "Entering the Mindset of Violent Religious Activists," *Religions* 6, 2015; Marco Nilsson, 2018, op. cit.; James Khalil, 2019, op. cit.

[23] John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2005); John Horgan, 2012, op. cit.; John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism*. Second edition (New York: Routledge, 2014); Marco Nilsson, 2018, op. cit.; James Khalil, 2019, op. cit.

[24] Robert W. White, "Issues in the Study of Political Violence: Understanding the Motives of Participants in Small Group Political Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12, 1, 2000, pp. 95-96.

[25] Robert White, 2000, op. cit., 100.

[26] Idem, 101.

[27] Idem, 103.

[28] Idem, 101-103.

[29] Idem, 104.

[30] Marco Nilsson, 2018, op. cit., 5-7.

[31] Bonnie Cordes, "Euroterrorists Talk about Themselves: A Look at the Literature," in Paul Wilkinson and Alasdair M. Stewart, eds., *Contemporary Research on Terrorism* (Aberdeen, Scotland: Aberdeen University Press, 1987).

[32] Idem, 318.

[33] Idem, pp. 318-319.

[34] Idem, p. 319.

[35] Horgan, 2008, op. cit. and Horgan, 2012, op. cit.

[36] Horgan, 2008, op. cit. 94-95.

[37] Idem, p. 95.

[38] Horgan, 2012, op. cit., p. 201.

[39] Horgan, 2008, op. cit., pp. 95-96.

[40] Horgan, 2012, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

[41] Idem, p. 201.

[42] Horgan, 2014, op. cit., pp. 88-91; building on the comments made in the first edition, 2005, pp. 80-90.

[43] Idem, p. 89.

[44] Idem, p. 90.

[45] Idem, pp. 90-91.

[46] Idem, p. 91.

[47] Nilsson, 2018, op. cit.

[48] Idem, p. 10.

[49] Idem, p. 10.

[50] Idem, p. 11.

[51] Idem, p. 11.

[52] Michele Lamount and Ann Swidler, "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing," *Qualitative Sociology* 37, 2, 2014, pp. 162-163.

[53] Nilsson, 2018, op. cit., p. 11.

[54] Khalil, 2019, op. cit., pp. 7-8, 11.

[55] Idem, p. 7.

[56] Idem, p. 7.

[57] Idem, p. 8.

[58] Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, op. cit., pp. 202-205.

[59] Idem, pp. 202-203.

[60] Idem, p. 203.

[61] Idem, p. 203.

[62] Idem, p. 204.

[63] Idem, p. 204.

[64] Lorne L. Dawson, "Trying to Make Sense of Homegrown Terrorist Radicalization: The Case of the Toronto 18," in Paul Bramadat and Lorne Dawson, eds., *Religious Radicalization and Securitization in Canada and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Lorne L. Dawson, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," in James R. Lewis, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Lorne L. Dawson, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism," *Numen* 65, 2-3, 2018; Lorne L. Dawson, "Debating the Role of Religion in the Motivation of Religious Terrorism," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31, 2, 2018.

[65] A reviewer of this article objected that "researchers whom believe religion is not the main motivating factor of terrorists should not be subjected to speculation about their backgrounds in order to dismiss the views they propound in their academic output," and I fully concur. Dawson's position rests on a multifaceted analysis of the specific arguments, statements, and language used by several influential terrorism scholars (e.g., Clark McCauley, Marc Sageman, Rik Coolsaet, Bart Schuurman, and John Horgan) when they discount the primary role of religion. The analyses are too precise and extensive to be summarized here. The critical reviewer goes on argue that there is a significant body of research that suggests religion does not play a major role, and they cite Schuurman and Horgan, "Rationales for Violence in Homegrown Jihadist Groups: A Case Study from the Netherlands,"

as a prime example. If such research "has been carried out in ways that led the authors to the wrong conclusions," the reviewer states, then "it is, of course, perfectly legitimate to point that out." In fact that is what Dawson has done multiple times, and most specifically with an extended critique of the Schuurman and Horgan article in his article "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism" (reference provided in [64]).

[66] Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, op. cit., pp. 203-204.

[67] Herbert Blumer, "The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism." In Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 50-51.

[68] Lorne L. Dawson, "Clarifying the Explanatory Context for Developing Theories of Radicalization: Five Basic Considerations." *Journal for Deradicalization* 18 (Spring, 2019), p. 66.

[69] Jeffrey M. Bale, "Denying the Link between Islamist Ideology and Jihadist Terrorism: 'Political Correctness' and the Undermining of Counterterrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, 5, 2013, p. 6; Jeffrey M. Bale, "Introduction: Ideologies, Extremist Ideologies, and Terrorist Violence," in Jeffry M. Bale, *The Darkest Sides of Politics*, I, (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 12-13.

[70] Lorne L. Dawson, 2018, op. cit., pp. 111-113.

[71] William I. Thomas, and Dorothy S. Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*. (New York: Knopf, 1928), pp. 571-572.

[72] Andrew Silke, "Cheshire-Cat Logic: The Recurring Theme of Terrorist Abnormality in Psychological Research," *Psychology, Crime and Law* 4, 1, 1998; Horgan, 2014, op. cit., pp. 47-61; Lisa Stampnitzky, 2016, op. cit.

[73] Silke, 1998, op. cit.; Jeff Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, 1, 2005; Horgan, 2005, op. cit. and 2014, op. cit.; Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, "The Psychology of Terrorism: 'Syndrome' Versus 'Tool' Perspectives," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, 2006.

[74] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, 1981, p. 390.

[75] Silke, 1998, op. cit., p. 62.

[76] Victoroff, 2005, op. cit., p. 35.

[77] Paul Gill, John Horgan and Paige Deckert, "Bombing Alone: Tracing the Motivations and Antecedent Behaviors of Lone-Actor Terrorists," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 59, 2, 2014; Emily Corner and Paul Gill, "A false dichotomy? Mental illness and Lone-actor terrorism," *Law and Human Behavior* 39, 1, 2015; Emily Corner, Paul Gill and Oliver Mason, "Mental Health Disorders and the Terrorist: A Research Note Probing Selection Effects and Disorder Prevalence," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, 6: 560-568.

[78] Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017, op. cit.

[79] Brannan et al., 2001, op. cit; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: the Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel and Alan S. Waterman, "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, 2009; Michael A. Hogg and J. Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, 3, 2013; Scott Atran, "The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict across Cultures," *Current Anthropology* 57 (Supplement 13), 2016; Marc Sageman, 2017, op. cit.; Lorne L. Dawson, "Sketch of a Social Ecology Model for Explaining Homegrown Terrorist Radicalisation," The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, Research Note 8 No. 1, 2017, at: https://icct.nl/publication/sketch-of-a-social-ecology-model-for-explaining-homegrown-terrorist-radicalisation/; Arie Kruglanski, David Webber, Katarzyna Jasko, Marina Chernikova and Erica Molinario, "The Making of Violent Extremists," *Review of General Psychology* 22, 1, 2018.

[80] Dawson, 2014, op. cit.; Dawson, 2017, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," op. cit.; Dawson, 2018, "Challenging the Curious Erasure of Religion from the Study of Religious Terrorism," op. cit.

[81] Dawson, 2017, "Discounting Religion in the Explanation of Homegrown Terrorism: A Critique," op. cit.; Dawson, 2018, op. cit.

[82] Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946 [1922-23]); Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*. Trans. Ephraim Fischoff. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [1920]).

[83] Brannan et al., 2001, op. cit.; Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning, eds. *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Stampnitzky, 2016, op. cit.

[84] In the case of religious terrorism, this failure applies equally to the practitioners of mainstream terrorism studies and critical terrorism studies (e.g., Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, "What's so "Religious" about 'Religious Terrorism'? *Critical Studies*

on Terrorism 4, 3, 2011 and Ioannis Tellidis, "Religion and Terrorism," in Richard Jackson, ed., *The Routledge Handbook on Critical Terrorism Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[85] Marvin B. Scott. and Stanford M. Lyman, "Accounts." *American Sociological Review* 33, 1, 1968; Terri L. Orbuch, "People's Accounts Count: The Sociology of Accounts," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23, 1997.

[86] McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011, op. cit.; Sageman, 2017, op. cit.

[87] Stephen J Kraus, "Attitudes and the Prediction of Behavior: A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 21, 1, 1995; Laura R. Glasman and Dolores Albarracin, "Forming Attitudes that Predict Future Behavior: A Meta-Analysis of the Attitude-Behavior Relation," *Psychological Bulletin* 132, 5, 2006.