

SPECIAL SECTION

Ideology and Motivation

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Abstract: This article examines ideology and motivation in terrorism through a psychological lens, responding to a debate about the analytic value of ideology. Drawing on Peters' concept of reason-guided, socially embedded action, and integrating rule-governed behaviour and Relational Frame Theory, it argues that terrorist behaviour is shaped by verbally mediated rules rather than simple causal mechanisms. This perspective aligns partially with social-movement framing theory, but highlights individual level processes. Conceptualising ideology as a dynamic process of rule governance offers a workable framework for understanding terrorist motivation and may help address the low base-rate problem in terrorism research.

Keywords: ideology, motivation, rule-governed behaviour, relational frame theory, terrorist behaviour

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In his article, Clark McCauley¹ raises the question ‘Can we give up talk about ideology in terrorism research?’ He argues that we can, largely on the grounds that the concept of ideology lacks an agreed definition, because it lacks definitional clarity, it resists empirical investigation, and uses of the term have become so broad, making the concept ‘unbounded and analytically unhelpful’. He then goes on to offer an alternative conceptualisation drawing on the social movement concept of framing theory.² In this short note, I do not intend to offer a critique of McCauley’s prospectus but rather examine a relevant parallel discussion of what we might mean by ideology from a psychological perspective, and how that might relate to the broader concept of individual motivation, and in so doing perhaps help our understanding of some of the vexed questions that surround understanding of terrorist motivation. One of the more difficult—if rather inconvenient—observations about terrorist actions is what Sageman³ refers to as terrorism’s low base rate – lots of people engage with what are legally seen as risk indicators of terrorist-related activities, yet very few people engage in violent terrorist behaviour. The confusion and definitional uncertainties around what we mean by terrorist behaviour and radicalisation, of course, complicate analysis, but it remains a rather troubling observation.

I want to use as a starting point for this discussion the ideas of R.S. Peters.⁴ Peters was an educational philosopher whose perspectives were grounded in the conceptual debates of that time concerning mechanistic models of human behaviour, especially Hull and Drive theory, and he acknowledged influence by Wittgenstein and the traditions of analytical philosophy. He critiques mechanistic and hedonistic theories of motivation, arguing that motivation is best understood as reason-guided, socially embedded action that can be understood through normative frameworks rather than reducible to causal or biological explanations. To the best of my knowledge, Peters never considered anything to do with terrorism in his work, but I think when terrorism is viewed through Peters’ lens, you might see terrorist behaviour as reflecting reason-guided action embedded in alternative normative frameworks, but which are essentially not reducible to drives, simple causes, or hedonism.

In essence, Peters argues that human actions (and I include terrorism) cannot be sufficiently explained in simple causal terms. Causal explanations may identify necessary conditions (like, for example, social context or poverty), but he argued that they fail to provide a sufficient account of ‘meaningful’ action, a comment of relevance in the area of concern to us, the terrorist. In what seems to me to be a critical observation, Peters argues that actions are rule-governed, drawn from a framework of social rules, cultural meaning and expectations. I think we can make sense of Peters’ use of ‘rule governance’ by drawing on B.F. Skinner’s concept of rule-governed behaviour.⁵ This refers to actions controlled by verbal rules rather than direct experience with reinforcement or punishment. Instead of learning through trial and error, individuals follow instructions, laws, or social norms that specify contingencies, allowing faster adaptation without directly experiencing consequences. Many if not most actions, including those of terrorists, aren’t learned directly through experience (few actors actually “test” outcomes or have histories that satisfactorily explain behavioural choices) but instead use what can be construed as verbal rules (to use Skinnerian terms) such as doctrine, manuals, sermons, and leader directives which specify contingencies in advance and which provide the structure to behaviour. This links with Peters’ notions of rules supplying agent-endorsed reasons (perhaps in this context “duty,” “martyrdom,” “justice”) within a normative system whereby action is intelligible via reasons/rules rather than drives/hedonism; we might also extend this to embrace mental health explanations, although there will clearly be additional complexities.

To explore a little further the technical context (which the uninterested reader can skip!)⁶, we can draw a direct conceptual link between Skinner’s sense of rule governance and Hayes’

book *Rule-Governed Behavior*,⁷ in which he explores how people's actions are influenced not just by direct experience but also by rules—things we are told or tell ourselves. Rule-governed behaviour occurs when verbal rules specify contingencies, influencing behaviour without direct experience. Hayes emphasised three types of rules: pliance (socially mediated reinforcement), tracking (correspondence with natural contingencies), and augmenting (rules altering the value of outcomes)—highlighting how language shapes human action beyond immediate reinforcement histories. Such rules can guide, shape, and sometimes restrict what we do, explaining why humans often act based on instructions and structure rather than trial and error. Hayes highlights both the benefits of rules (such as learning efficiently or keeping safe) and the downsides (rigidity and ignoring personal experience).

This was further developed in the book *Relational Frame Theory*,⁸ which explains a way of understanding how language and thinking work using rules as the basis for what is, in essence, a sense of motivation and direction to behaviour. The authors argue that people learn to connect things in flexible ways—not just through direct experience, but by relating ideas using patterns like “same as,” “opposite,” or “bigger than.” These learned connections, called relational frames, form the basis of language, reasoning, and problem-solving. This approach helps explain complex human thought and has had practical uses in teaching, therapy, and everyday life. It also laid the foundations for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and other modern clinical approaches.

These ideas have not particularly influenced terrorism researchers. Taylor⁹, Dixon et al.¹⁰ and Hayes et al.¹¹ have explored how rule governance and relational frame theory might help understand terrorist behaviour. A more contemporary paper is Masuda et al.'s¹² “Terrorism as an Act in Context: A Contextual Behavioral Science Account,” which examines terrorism through the lens of contextual behavioural science. The authors argue that terrorism should be understood not simply as irrational violence but as behaviour shaped by historical, cultural, and situational contexts. Using principles from Relational Frame Theory and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, they highlight how language and identity processes contribute to rigid world views that can support extremist acts. The paper emphasises functional analysis—understanding why behaviour occurs—over moral judgment, aiming to inform prevention, intervention, and policy approaches grounded in psychological science.

Is this analysis congruent with McAuley's emphasis on the social movement concept of framing theory? In some respects, it clearly is (not just by using the same term ‘frame’ but through the emphasis on meaning construction and the significance of language, for example), but there are important differences. Perhaps the greatest difference relates to the level of analysis. Relational Frame Theory is essentially an account of individual actions and processes, whereas Social Movement notions of framing relate to essentially macro-levels of analysis focusing on collective accounts of group meaning making. However, there are clearly considerable elements in common, and perhaps then this might suggest a fruitful avenue for further investigation would be exploring if there are underlying process variables that can be identified. In many ways, Peters anticipates this when he identifies ‘reason-guided, socially embedded action’ as a critical variable.

But what of ideology? Peters focuses on the individual endorsement of reasons (education, moral development), while framing theory focuses on the collective construction of reasons (mobilisation, social change). These seem to complement each other, but it seems to me that the relational frame theory account very neatly matches what the role of what we might characterise as ideology might be for the individual – a form of verbal rule governance that guides, limits and facilitates behaviour. Those rules might be derived from political sources, religious or

more informal socially focused sources (engagement with internet mediated social media, for example). Expressed in this way, and focused on the individual, it seems to me that a concept of ideology is both sustainable and empirically explorable – and conceptualising ideology in this way leads not to thinking of ideology as a ‘state’ affecting an individual, but rather as a process influencing an individual’s behaviour. Exploring the parameters of that process also seems to me to offer potentially useful ways of addressing Sageman’s low base rate problem.

The social context offered by Framing theory is not, however, the only macro-level way of conceptualising terrorist behaviour. From an evolutionary perspective, Moncrieff’s Coalitional Predation Template¹³ model offers a macro analysis, which offers a complementary perspective to Relational Frame Theory on responses to terrorism. The Coalitional Predation Template model provides an account drawing on evolutionary psychology, arguing that humans are equipped with a mental template tuned to detect predatory coalitional threats, which elicits fear, vigilance, and punitive preferences when certain cues, such as out-group membership, coordination, and indiscriminate violence, are present. Relational Frame Theory adds a learning and language-based layer, explaining how ideological labels and discourse (“terrorist,” “freedom fighter”) enter relational networks that transform the psychological function of events and groups. Through processes such as coordination and opposition framing, these verbal relations can activate or amplify Coalitional Predation Template responses even in the absence of direct threat cues. Together, Coalitional Predation Template and Relational Frame Theory explain both the patterned convergence of public fear in the wake of terrorist attacks and the definitional disputes over terrorism, offering ways of understanding how evolved threat detection systems and culturally learned frames interact to shape perception and societal responses.

Peters offers some other valuable insights into how we might think about motivation that may be relevant to this discussion. He notes, for example, that a given behaviour may have very different accounts of cause, depending on content and crucially the questions asked, and perspective taken by the interviewer. And uncomfortably, all may have some sense of accuracy and veracity! Anyone who has had the opportunity to interview active terrorists will be very aware of how the account given often is shaped to the needs of the interviewer, rather than some sense of objective truth (a commonplace observation in the context of clinical interviews). Furthermore, temporal as well as situational factors are relevant when trying to untangle individual accounts. An interview with a convicted (and self-confirmed) terrorist made the point to me that he only understood the meaning of what he had done after he had been in prison. What this suggests is that at different times, different forces underpin behaviour, and we can only adequately conceptualise this as a process - the end point we see (a bombing, an arrest, an autobiography) can be understood as perhaps a process of reason-giving, rather than a definitive motivational account. I would suggest ideology has a conceptual role in this, as one perhaps central element giving motivational direction in a complex process.

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Endnotes

- 1 Clark McCauley, "Can We Leave Ideology Behind? Diagnostic, Prognostic, and Motivational Action Frames in Tracking Radicalization and Deradicalization," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 19(4) (December 2025).
- 2 R.D. Benford and S. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26(1) (2000): 611-639.
- 3 Marc Sageman, "The Implication of Terrorism's Extremely Low Base Rate." In Max Taylor and John Horgan (Eds.) *Ethics and Terrorism*. London. Routledge, 2021. Chapter abstracts online at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003222873>
- 4 R.S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation*. Abingdon. Routledge, 1958.
- 5 B.F. Skinner, *Contingencies of Reinforcement*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969.
- 6 For readers who have interest in exploring further, Barnes-Holmes and Harte (2022) explore a relevant development and briefly describe some contemporary issues. They discuss the use of the Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure (IRAP) which was originally designed to measure natural verbal relations, but later repurposed to assess implicit cognition (e.g., prejudice, stereotypes). This analysis offers a further way of looking at the emergence of violent behaviour within a rule following context, but they argue this shift risks misinterpretation, as IRAP can be influenced by contextual variables like response speed, framing, and participant history, potentially amplifying bias. Studies show IRAP can, for example, reveal associations linking social categories to threat ("Black person-dangerous") and may predict persistent rule-following under coercive or fear-inducing contexts. They suggest misuse or overinterpretation could reinforce harmful stereotypes or justify punitive actions, highlighting the potential for unintended psychological harm or escalation of social conflict. See D. Barnes-Holmes and C. Harte, "The IRAP as a Measure of Implicit Cognition: A Case of Frankenstein's Monster." *Perspectives on Behavior Science* 45 (2022): 559-578
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- 12 Masuda, A., Donati, M. R, Schaefer, L. W., & Hill, M. L. (2016). Terrorism as an act-in-context: A contextual behavioral science account. In M. Taylor, J. Roach, & K. Pease (Eds.), *Evolutionary psychology and terrorism* (pp. 124-148). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
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About

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