Terrorists' personal constructs and their roles: A comparison of the three Islamic terrorists

David Canter[1]*, Sudhanshu Sarangi[2] and Donna Youngs[1]

[1]International Research Centre of Investigative Psychology, University of Huddersfield, UK

[2]Department of Psychology, University of Liverpool, UK

It is hypothesized that individuals who play different roles in terrorist organizations will have different psychological processes underlying their activities. An innovative examination of the personal construct systems of terrorists explored this. As part of a larger study, three individuals convicted of Islamic-related terrorist violence in India were interviewed using a semi-structured life narrative procedure enhanced by a Repertory Grid (Kelly, 1955/1991). One was a senior leader of a terrorist group, one a subordinate, the third a person who planted a bomb without full knowledge of the larger design he was part of. Principal component analyses of these grids informed by comments from the life narratives were used to elaborate each man's conceptual system and how it related to his commitment to violence. Important differences among the three individuals' in their construct systems were found. This demonstrated that the forms of Jihadi commitment is embedded in the individual's personal construct system. So, although these three case studies can only be taken as providing indicative results, they do point to aspects of construct systems that reveal the potential for disengagement, being most likely present in the lower echelons of terrorist organizations. Those who are unable to reconstrue themselves as having a non-terrorist future are unlikely to disengage. This is probably typical of those who lead these organizations. The results therefore contribute to the growing literature arguing for significant differences in terrorists' understanding of themselves and their roles and provide an original methodology for assessing a person's potential for deradicalization.

Although there is a developing understanding of the psychological processes underlying terrorist[1] violence (Horgan, 2005; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Loza, 2007; Merrari, 2007; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Ranstorp, 2006; Spekhard & Akhmedova, 2005; Taylor & Horgan, 2001, 2006) , studies of the psychology of individual terrorists, derived from direct contact with them, are still rare. In particular, there is a

*Correspondence should be addressed to David Canter, IRCIP, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD1 3DH, UK (e-mail: dvcanter@btinternet.com).

[1] Terrorism is understood for the present purposes in line with the definition Loza (2007) advances: 'the calculated use of unexpected, shocking and unlawful violence against non-combatants in order to intimidate or coerce a government or civilian population to accept demands on behalf of an underlying ideology or cause' (p. 142).

dearth of direct explorations of the conceptual frameworks of individuals who have been directly involved in terrorism. By drawing on Kelly's (1955/1991) Personal Construct Theory, a richer picture of the psychology of individual terrorists will become available.

Within Personal Construct Psychology, human actions are regarded as being shaped by ways of construing key aspects of experiences, but especially significant others in a person's life. Careful consideration of a person's construct system therefore allows the elaboration of what it is about that individual's psychology that underpins engagement in violence for political or ideological ends. Such considerations emphasize differences between people by focusing on their *personal* constructs rather than on the broad ideological claims that may characterize a particular sub-set of terrorists. There is a growing awareness from studies such as Nesser (2004) and Slootman and Tillie (2006) that there are important differences between individuals in the motivation for terrorism and the pathways to their radicalization. Therefore, there is value in exploring the construct systems of different terrorists to develop a further understanding of the psychological bases for these differences. Any differences found in the content and structure of individuals' thinking would challenge the assumption that the same psychological processes are relevant to all terrorists.

Differences found in terrorists' construct systems will complement the sociological perspectives that emphasize changes in the global structure of communities and the impact of these on the sense of identity of a diaspora (Kepel, 2004; Khosrokhavar, 2005; Roy, 2004). These global changes, as well as the processes of radicalization posited by theorists within the social movement school (e.g., Jankowicz, 2004) and social bond/network models (e.g., Sageman, 2004, 2007), or sociological and geo-political proposals of the causes of terrorism (Bloom, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005; Pape, 2005), all imply changes in the structure and content of the radicalized individual's construct system. Study of these construct systems therefore provides what Taylor and Horgan (2001) refer to as an 'understanding of the individual's place within these broader events'.

A focus on terrorists' construct systems moves beyond the much-disputed notion of the 'terrorist personality' or mental illness form of psychological explanation (see, e.g., Horgan, 2005; Merari, 2000; Reid, 2002; Sageman, 2004), to offer an approach that is consistent with the social psychological mechanisms of radicalization advanced by McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) and the view of terrorist radicalization as a process (Horgan, 2005). A concern with the concepts and constructs that organize the radicalized individual's thinking encompasses the more socio-cognitive psychological influences, such as attributional biases, attitudinal distortions, and rigid thinking proposed by Loza (2007) in his examination of rhetorical material, as well as the Skinnerian-based explanations in terms of 'rule-following' proposed by Taylor and Horgan (2001), and other psychological phenomena such as Rotter's locus of control (1954), Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness, and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy referenced by Huston, Long and Page (2009). All these theoretical stances imply that the individual conceptualizes what he or she is part of in distinct ways that support their terrorist activities. Yet, the content of these conceptualizations, the details of their construct systems, rather than the rhetorical arguments that support their cause, have not been explored.

To date, the official rhetoric espoused by terrorist leaders and related formal statements published by terrorist movements have been the major data source (e.g., Hafez, 2003; Ibrahim, 1988; Isam, 2006; for reviews see Loza, 2007; Sarangi & Canter, 2009) for understanding the detailed cognitive and emotional processes that lead people to carry out terrorist acts. It is suggested that examination of the structure of the construct systems of people who have been active participants in terrorism will reveal aspects of the

psychological processes that are not apparent from official statements. This personal construct perspective (Kelly, 1955/1991) has been successfully utilized in a great many contexts over the last half-century (Centre for Personal Construct Psychology, 2009).

Kelly (1955/1991) makes clear that people's actions are shaped by their construct systems, but that their experiences in turn modify those systems. These systems provide a framework for understanding what issues shape the person's actions. As, such they are rather distinct from 'motivations' or even 'reasons' for actions. They are the criteria and the relationships between those criteria that inform how a person conceptualizes others and the actions taken.

The Personal Construct focus on the content and structure of cognitive systems of individuals provides a way of comparing the distinct, personal psychological processes of different individuals who have played different roles in terrorist organizations. Taylor and Horgan (2006) propose 11 distinct terrorist roles, varying in terms of their distance to the terrorist event, from, for example, a Public Relations role, to a Logistics role to the Violent Actor role. They see these roles also as potential stages in a terrorist 'career'. Therefore, consideration of different roles can elucidate the psychological development of a terrorist thereby throwing light in the different potential for exit from this process at each stage in the development.

The role a person plays in any organization, at different stages in involvement in terrorism, would be expected to influence the constructs that are relevant to that person's engagement in the organization because his/her engagement with the organization will be based on different activities and carry different responsibilities. Their concept of themselves in relation to the organizational activities is also likely to be different for different organizational roles. This leads to the proposal that there will be important differences in the conceptual systems of different members of a terrorist organization. Such differences will provide insights into the nature of any given individual's involvement in violent terrorist activity. It will allow initial consideration of the likely relationship between the different psychological types of terrorist or terrorist 'motivation' proposed, for example, by Nesser's (2004) drifter, misfit, leader, and protégé or Slootman and Tillie's (2006)'s 'search for meaning', 'search for community' and 'reaction to perceived injustice' motives, and the types of terrorist role posited by Taylor and Horgan (2006). This in turn will provide indicators for the differential possibilities for disengagement from violence.

The present approach speaks directly then to Taylor and Horgan's (2006) call for research on what they refer to as the 'decisional contexts' of individuals. It seeks to move beyond the reliance on political propaganda material as data sources for insights into the psychological processes and constructs of terrorists (Bloom, 2009). Drawing on formal psychological data derived directly from the individuals themselves, it seeks to begin to address Silke's (2008) concern that, 'even the best available research on this subject is almost all based on secondary analysis of data, more specifically of archival records' (p. 101).

Personal construct psychology and the repertory grid

George Kelly's 'repertory grid' (Jankowicz, 2004; Kelly, 1955/1991) is an interview framework that has been widely used as a method for exploring individuals' personal construct systems in many very different contexts. Fransella, Bell, and Bannister (2004) list more than 240 published research papers that have used the repertory grid method in contexts as diverse as clinical settings, child abuse, market research, and looking at the way people construe animals. This has allowed detailed explorations of participants' key conceptualizations in the given domain, drawing out the issues or constructs they (rather

than the researcher) see as pertinent, in their own terms, yet allowing comparison across individuals in the structure of their construct systems and the central organizing concepts. It therefore offers the prospect of special insight into the processes that underlie terrorists' commitment to violence.

A common practice in the utilization of repertory grids is to provide elements that refer to the respondent himself. This allows direct exploration of his self-concept within the framework of his construct system as a whole. In the present case, one central consideration is how the terrorist sees his identity in relation to his involvement in terrorism. There are three stages in the process of his view of himself: Before he became involved in terrorism, when he was actively involved, and as he would like to be. Any relative differences among these three elements within his construct system are a useful indicator of his likely disengagement. They are less intrusive than asking directly about commitment to *Jihad,* and are also contextualized within the construct system, allowing a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that are producing any variations in the self-concept.

Method

Forty-nine individuals (13 Pakistani and 36 Indian citizens) convicted of high-profile terrorist crimes in India were asked to provide a narrative life-story account. The narrative life-story method, proposed by McAdams (2001), is based on the assumption that narrating a life story is a normal human activity and through the narrative accounts people reveal who they are, who they want to be and provide justification, meaning, and efficacy to their lives. In addition to the open-ended life narrative, once adequate rapport was established, the construct systems of each individual were explored using the repertory grid technique. Each participant was asked to name persons/entities who they considered had played a significant role in their lives. These significant persons/entities became elements for preparation of the grid. Three self-elements were added to the elements supplied by the participants. They are 'me as I was before involvement', 'me as I became during involvement', and 'me as I would like to be', after the specific technique within this approach articulated by Jankowicz (2004).

In the use of Repertory Grids, elements are either elicited from the participant or supplied. The advantage in eliciting elements from the participant is that the researcher does not influence the choice made by the participant. However, when a specific issue is to be explored, the researcher can supply elements. In general, participants offered about seven elements and the three self-concept elements were supplied. These allowed exploration of changes in the individual's conceptualization of himself in relation to his terrorist involvement.

All the elements were written on cards and three cards were pulled out at random for triadic generation of constructs. The triadic generation process (advocated by Kelly, 1955/1991) allows participants to indicate bi-polar constructs by describing the way in which two of the elements were similar to each other but different from the third. These similarities and differences indicate the two poles of a construct. Once the respondent has generated as many different constructs as he can, a grid is prepared, by placing the elements in columns and the constructs in rows. The participant is then asked to rate all the elements using all the constructs in a scale of 1–5, such that a score of 5 meant a high level of similarity with the positive pole of the construct, and a score of 1 meant a high level of similarity with the polar opposite. The participant was informed that he could give

intermediate scores of 2, 3, or 4 representing the degree to which a person could be characterized by the construct.

The interviews and repertory grid elicitations were carried out in the respondent's preferred language, usually Hindi, by the interviewer, recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were then translated into English for analysis by translation experts. These translations were cross-checked by the second author (SS). Where there was any ambiguity, the audio recording was consulted to ensure as accurate and faithful a translation as possible.

As regards ethical issues, all the interviews were conducted in prisons visited by the International Committee of the Red Cross and with individuals who had full access to the due process of law. Informed consent was taken and it was made clear to the individuals that they were free to decline answering any question or to leave the interviews at any point without there being any consequences. It was also made clear to them that their participation in the interview would have no bearing on any legal processes or how they were dealt with in prison; the study was purely for research purposes at a University in the UK. Complete confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all references to the names of the participants and any other specific reference that may reveal their identity. In the following accounts, any details that would help identify specific individuals have been removed, or made ambiguous, and in some cases, irrelevant details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

For the present comparisons, three individuals were selected who held three distinctly different roles within terrorist organizations. They were selected because their account of their roles accorded with the records available of their activities and because of their clear and confident engagement in the whole interview process. Three cases allow detailed exploration of each case in line with the valuable case study framework that has been recently adopted in this field (Vidino, 2006), allowing comparison across the roles.

One was a senior leader of a terrorist group who had been involved in terrorism for many years. The second was a subordinate who had never had any leadership roles, but had been active in a number of different attacks. The third was an individual who had transported and planted a bomb in a busy market causing multiple deaths, but did not fully understand the larger design and consequence and had no prior involvement with terrorist activity. This comparison allows exploration of the differences between people who take on different roles, related also to their length of involvement, within terrorist organizations. These differences will have many causes, including education, training, and experiences, but are also expected to relate to the individuals' view of themselves and how that relates to significant others with whom they have interacted. Of course, each of these individuals cannot be taken as representative of all those who take on any similar role in a terrorist group. For the present purposes, they are taken as illustrative examples of the sorts of variation that can be found across people in a terrorist organization.

Results

The multi-dimensional analyses of the repertory grids of the three of the individuals (Figures 1, 2 and 3) are given below. Each figure is a 'map' of the construct system of that individual. The grids were analysed using the commonly utilized Principal component analysis software (The standard software available for analysis of repertory grids is explained in Fransella *et al.*, 2004; Jankowicz, 2004). This generates visual representations of the personal construct system. For each person, his/her elements and
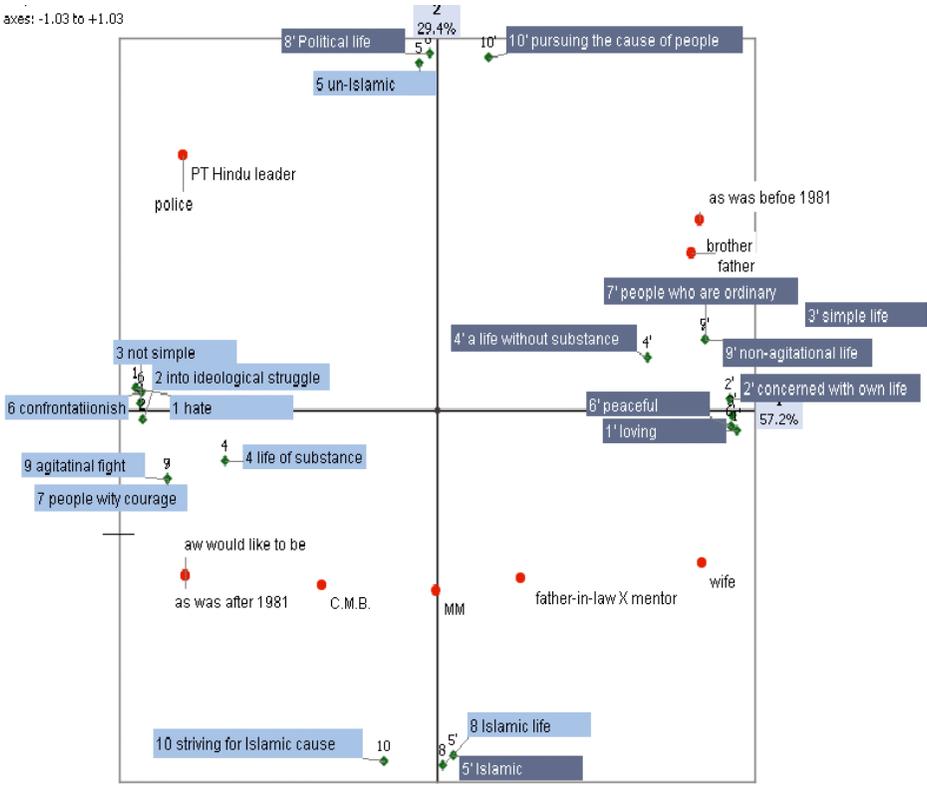
Figure 1. Principal component analysis of the repertory grid of an activist leader.
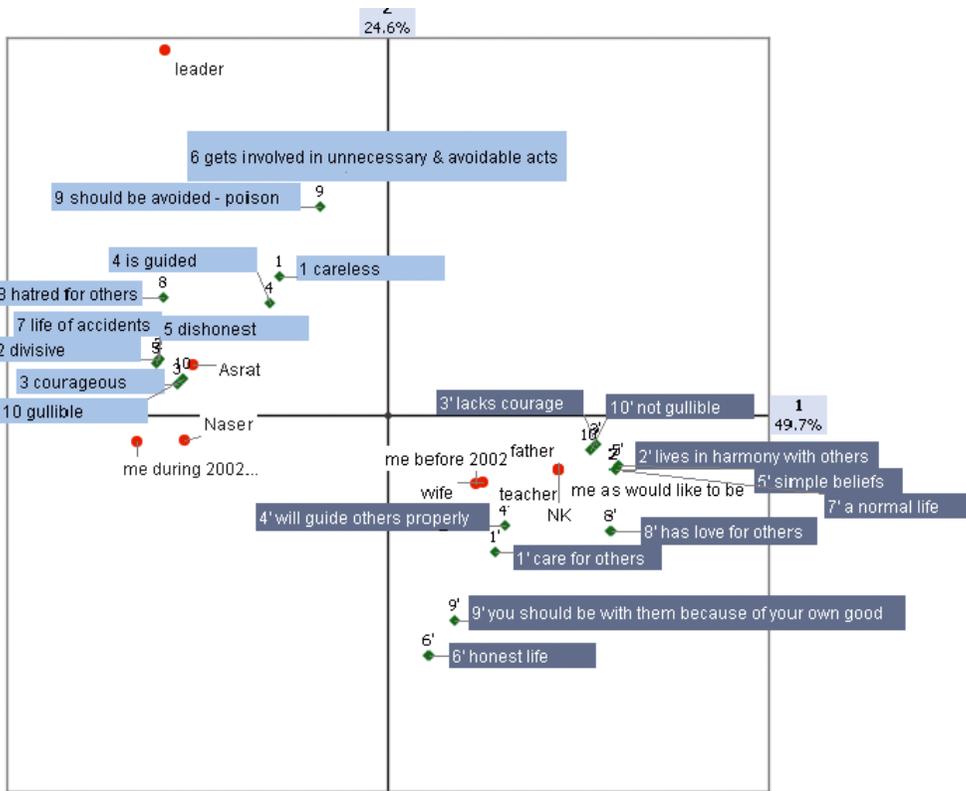
constructs are represented as points in the two dimensional space shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3, that is defined by the first and second principal component. The closer together any two points are, the more strongly related they are within that individual's construct system. So, the closer two elements are, for example, the more similar those people are conceptualized as being by the respondent. Each of the dichotomous constructs (e.g., non-political vs. politicized) will be located at opposite sides of the plot (being polar opposites of one another). The closer an element is to a construct pole, the higher the rating of that person on that particular construct.

Therefore, by considering where in the representations for different individuals the different elements lie, in relation (1) to one another and (2) to the different constructs, it is possible to gain insight into how those terrorists see those of significance to them, who, they believe, have played a crucial role in who they, are and in determining the course of action they have chosen to take. In addition, the constructs they have elicited provide insight into what issues are significant for the person. Further elaboration of the implications of the construct system is obtained by cross-reference to the life narrative interview.

The activist leader

This individual is a senior figure in a terrorist movement. He had masterminded and been actively involved in attacks in which many people had been killed, over many years.

Figure 2. Principal component analysis of the repertory grid of a terrorist subordinate.

Despite being in prison serving a life sentence, he still has authority within the terrorist movement.

    The persons (elements) that this individual identified as key in his life comprise:

- Father
- Brother
- Wife
- Father-in-law
- Mentor, who had guided his induction into terrorism
- C. (a colleague)
- M. (a colleague)
- A Hindu leader
- The police

The significance of his family is perhaps surprising, especially as they had never encouraged his terrorist activity. Yet, the identification of his main family members as significant people in his life suggests that this was not an alienated individual, for whom the terrorist organization was some sort of substitute family. However, there is a key

Figure 3. Principal component analysis of the repertory grid of an Islamic terrorist who planted a bomb.

person within this organization, his 'mentor', and two colleagues who are important to him, showing the significance of close personal ties within the organization even for someone so high in its ranks. The other noteworthy elements are people whom he regards as 'the enemy'. One element is a particular Hindu leader that sees as the epitome of 'the enemy'. It is interesting that a particular individual is identified here, showing how such people can become the iconic representation of a specific perspective. In contrast, he refers to the generic 'police' as an element without differentiating this organization or specifying any individuals.

The triadic elicitation process gave rise to 10 different constructs:

- whether they were loving (love vs. hate)
- their primary motivations/concerns (involved in an ideological struggle vs. concerned with their own life).
- the simplicity of their lifestyle (simple life vs. not simple).
- whether their life had substance (a life of substance vs. a life without substance)
- whether they were Islamic (Islamic vs. un-Islamic)
- whether they were confrontational (confrontationist vs. peaceful)
- whether they were courageous (people with courage vs. people who are ordinary)
- their political perspective (political vs. Islamic life)
- whether they were agitated (agitational fight vs. non-agitational life)
- their cause (pursuing the cause of the people vs. striving for an Islamic cause)

The grandiose qualities of most of these constructs are apparent. They address the nature of the 'life' of people. None deals with the particular personality characteristics in any conventional sense. Even the construct of 'love' has the polar opposite of 'hate', indicating that this is not about a loving, warm person compared with, say, someone who is distant and cold, but about an ideological perspective. This is also reflected in the construct of 'courage', which is seen as a way of being in the world, with the polar opposite of 'ordinary'. It is also about how one lives one's life. This concern with the bigger themes of life emerged clearly in interview, the interviewee stating, for example, 'Everything relating to life and the fact that the actual life started after death and for each act of his or her, he or she will be accountable before Almighty God' and giving many pronouncements on how to live, such as 'Only performing *namaz*[2] is not enough. You have to keep away from all vices and that is what Islam teaches. You must present Islam in its entirety and not merely *namaz*'.

All these constructs contribute to a system of thought for which ideology and commitment to a cause are the dominant theme. They indicate a person for whom their place in a larger scale historical context is crucial, giving their actions 'substance' because they strive for a 'cause'. This was clear in his narrative, within which he makes clear his awareness of the positioning of his concerns *vis-a-vis* the rest of the world, 'Islam does not talk about interests of Muslims or any other sections. It talks about interests of the entire world, of all humanity' as well as its historical context 'If you read the history of Islam then you will see many such things'.

To explore further the underlying structure of the construct system and how that relates to the elements, including the self-concepts, a principal component analysis was carried out. The elements and constructs are placed in the same two dimensional configuration, as shown in Figure 1, allowing further examination of this activist leader's construct system.

The dominant axis in Figure 1, by convention, the horizontal axis, accounts for 57% of the variance in the original repertory grid, making it the most significant dimension for this individual. This is shows his overarching concern with whether a life has 'substance', including having 'courage', being part of an ideological struggle and confrontational. This contrasts with a 'simple life' that is only concerned with the person's 'own life' being 'peaceful' and 'loving'.

The axis orthogonal to the dominant one, accounting for 29% of the variance is related to striving for the Islamic cause. Most interestingly, this is seen as the opposite to being political or pursuing the cause of the people. It is a strictly ideologically religious perspective. Its separateness from the dominant axis that deals with living a life of substance shows that for this individual, Islam is not as dominant in his thinking as doing something significant. This has implications for disengagement because it implies that arguments about Islam and its principles are likely to be overshadowed by his belief that he is doing something important.

The strong nature of this construct system is shown further when considering how the individuals (elements) are construed. His father, brother, and wife are to the simple life end of the dominant axis, although his wife is seen as being more Islamic and his father and brother less so. They are construed as being ordinary people who are living a life without substance. They are peaceful and loving, being concerned primarily with their own lives, which were viewed to be simple and non-agitational. This again indicates that his

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[2] *Namaz is the ritual Moslem prayer that is required five times a day.*

commitment to *Jihad* does not grow out of any belief that this is what his family expects or supports.

In contrast, he sees his associate C as closer to the confrontationist, courage pole. However, the people most extreme on this pole are the Hindu leader and the police. They are undifferentiated in his construct system. However, what distinguishes them from everyone else is their construal as un-Islamic. This indicates that he considers them to have some substance to their lives, but not in relation to the issues he endorses.

The significance of this construct system is shown very clearly when considering his self-concepts. He puts himself close to his father and brother, leading a simple un-Islamic life before his involvement in terrorism in 1981. However, after that, his construction of himself jumps across into the opposite corner. He is then courageous, living a life of substance. Most notably, this is exactly as he would like to be, that element being identical to how he sees himself after committing to terrorism. This also gives rise to the possibility that he sees the substance in his life as being given moment by his being against the police and Hindu leader.

Overall then, the construct system of this terrorist leader is dominated by considering himself to be living a courageous life of 'substance'. This is what he wants for himself, even though it puts him in a different conceptual space from his father, brother, and wife. The Islamic constructs are distinct from the idea of being part of an ideological struggle, but define those against whom he sees himself struggling, namely Hindu leaders and the police.

This distinction of his own mission against some Hindu 'out-group' is a graphic representation within an individual's construct system of the sorts of social psychological processes explored by McCauley and Moskalenko (2008). The dominant and distinct role of the constructs associated with living a life of substance also illustrates how the self-efficacy considered by Huston *et al.* (2009) is reflected in the construct system.

The terrorist subordinate

This individual received the death sentence for his involvement in a number of terrorist events in which he left bombs in crowded places killing many people. He had found his way into the terrorist organization from his association with organized crime. In the interview, he made clear that he now regarded his earlier activity as irresponsible, but that he had never planned or organized the bombing, explaining that 'I have nothing to do with these big people … I am sure that I did not do anything willingly, whatever happened was inadvertent. Everybody makes mistakes and to forgive is divine'. His lack of radicalization is clear from the further statement he makes in interview that 'The incident of that day transformed me from a good man in to a bad one'.

The persons (elements) that this individual identified included:

- his father and
- brother as well as
- his wife and
- grandfather,

once again demonstrating, as for the terrorist leader, the importance of family ties. During the interview, he discusses his grandfather in the following terms: 'My grandfather was always my ideal. He was highly respected by everyone in the village. People used to say one day I should be like him'. In addition, he recognizes as key people in his life,

- The individual who introduced him to the terrorist network and
- the person who masterminded the bombings in which he took part.

As with the terrorist leader, he also identifies an 'enemy' as significant, but in this case, it is the generic group that he refers to simply and without further explanation as

- 'Hindu fanatics'.

Although this subordinate has a similar mix of elements to the leader, his constructs are rather different. They deal mainly with responsibility, honesty, being respected, and a good human being, who thinks of others, living 'a normal life'. This theme is clear in the narrative interview, in which he makes references to 'my esteem at home' and that 'Right now, people do not interact with me, I get to hear nothing. People despise me. I stand condemned'.

These contrast with the opposite poles: Being 'political', 'self-centred', and 'taking advantage of others'. In the interview, he indicates that he is not political. 'There is no interest whatsoever in politics here. Wherever there is some politics, I run away from that place. I wanted to live a very plain and simple life'. Interestingly, the construct of being 'simple' is present for him as it was for the leader, and again, in relation to a non-political life. However, none of these constructs has any ideological aspect. They are about personal characteristics and interaction with others.

The principal component analysis in Figure 2 shows a very simple structure with the elements and constructs organized across the main diagonal. So, although the two dimensions can be identified, they combine strongly to produce a construct system that is virtually one-dimensional. The close relationship between the two dimensions makes sense because the horizontal dimension (accounting for 55% of the variance) is defined by honesty as opposed to betrayal. This incorporates, for example, 'simple' as opposed to 'taking advantage of other's simplicity'. The vertical dimension (accounting for 44% of the variance) is defined by 'responsible' versus 'irresponsible'. This includes being respected that contrasts with being hated and being 'a good human being' not 'a crook'. So, although the difference between being honest and responsible can be discerned, when it comes to considering actual people, these two dimensions correlate.

Figure 2 shows the location of those involved in *Jihad* in one corner, which they share with other fanatics, those from a Hindu context. In the opposite corner are his family members whom he regards very highly. They are all seen as very similar to each other in terms of their honesty and responsibility. The fact that this is also what he considers to be a normal way of living shows how he conceptualizes those involved in terrorism as outside of normal society, being essentially divisive.

The locations of his self-concepts are also very instructive. When he was involved in leaving bombs, he sits half way between the two poles. This shows that he does not totally disown his involvement. He accepts that he was irresponsible at that stage, ('At that age I was … not sincere like them. I didn't have the sense of responsibility at that time'), being high on the vertical axis, but his position to the right on the horizontal axis shows that he still thinks he was honest and non-political then. This contrasts with how he thinks of himself before he was involved in terrorism. That is identical to his constructs of his close family. Even more noteworthy is that his ideal self is in exactly the same position.

In summary, this subordinate's construct system deals with personal relationships and trustworthiness. It recognizes that the people he was dealing with within the terrorist organization were crooks, who are hated by others and take advantage of people who

have no political objectives, which includes himself. There are potential implications for disengagement from this. It implies that if a person's constructs relate directly to the characteristics of those with whom he is engaged, an approach that seeks to undermine the construal of them as honourable people could be of value. This opens up an intriguing possibility for handling social psychological processes (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008) relevant to disengagement, by encouraging individuals to consider their terrorist associates as part of an 'out-group' divorced from normal, simple society.

The terrorist bomb carrier

This individual claimed that he had no knowledge of what he was doing, but just followed instructions to leave his vehicle at a key location. The vehicle had a bomb in it that killed many people. He therefore illustrates rank and file involvement in terrorism that has no understanding or obvious commitment to any overall strategy, but is nonetheless willing to participate and follow the instructions given to him by associates.

The persons (elements) that this individual identified as key included

- his father and
- his wife as well as
- a teacher.

So, once again, family ties are relevant to this person, but in his case, a teacher was also significant.

- A close associate, N, is also significant.

However, unlike the previous two people considered, this individual lists a number of members of the terrorist organization. This included the leader of the organization,

- the mastermind of the particular bombing (A) and
- another terrorist associate (K).

He discusses his relationship with the latter in the following terms 'he extended unstinted support to me. I was a single man. As such, I could have trodden the path of dalliance, but he deterred me from it. He cared for me as though I was his brother'.

The selection of these elements shows that his involvement in that social group was significant for him and not just passing acquaintances who asked him for a favour. His identification with the terrorist group and commitment to its social rules are clear in interview when asked where he met the people who gave him some propaganda material 'It is not possible to disclose the exact place. As I had said, we have to maintain confidentiality'. His awareness of his position and lack of understanding relative to others is also clear: 'I believe in the Quran and what is written there. I understand some things. When I do not understand some portions of it, I take the help of someone more knowledgeable'.

The constructs all relate to the personal characteristics of people, even more than with the subordinate, how they relate to others is particularly important for this person. Living a life in harmony with others, caring for them and doing them good, as well as guiding them and being honest are all part of this construct system. This was again reflected in interview, when he proudly explains 'I told you in the beginning

that human nature is subject to this law: Action sets off reaction … When inmates of the prison fall out with one another, I settle their dispute and make peace between them. I love peace, but, I had to react to what was going on. That is law of nature'. But this individual also offers the constructs of lacking courage, but not being gullible. These contrast with people who should be avoided, who do not care for others and are divisive, but courageous. Figure 3 shows the principal component analysis of the person's repertory grid.

The horizontal axis that accounts of 50% of the variance dominates his construct system. It runs from ideas of a normal life across to one that is divisive and dishonest. The association of having 'simple beliefs' is again present here as part of the construal of normality, as it was in the previous two construct systems. Lack of courage is also seen as part of this normality, showing that however 'poisonous' he considers people to be, he still sees the courage in their actions. Another construct close to those dealing with simplicity and being in harmony with others is the construct of lack of gullibility. He sees the simple life as one that protects from destructive influences.

The vertical axis accounts for rather less of the variance, 25%. It deals essentially with whether the person should be avoided because that will not give you an honest life. Being with certain people will be good for you, but others are 'poison'. This shows that he construes the influence of others as significant for his own honesty.

As with the previous construct system, this person also shows a high relationship between the two axes, thus giving the structure across the diagonal. In effect, this divides the construct system into two distinct groupings. One is the group of father, wife, teacher, and friend. They are construed as having normal, honest lives with simple beliefs. They were seen as being caring and having love for others, living in harmony with those around them, and guiding others properly. Although they are construed as lacking courage, they are seen also as not being gullible or easily led. These were the type of people that the respondent felt that he should spend time around for his own good.

The second group, in the opposite corner of the plot, perceived as similar to one another and notably distinct from the other elements, consisted of those with whom the respondent had been involved in terrorist activity, including his terrorist leader. These people are seen as being the opposite of those comprising the first group. They are viewed as careless, dishonest, and divisive, gullible, and guided by others. They are perceived to have hatred for others, live a life of accidents, and to get themselves involved in unnecessary and avoidable acts. They are also viewed as being courageous. These are the people that the respondent felt he should avoid, as they are 'poison'. The terrorist leader is seen as being a more extreme example of those comprising this second group. This element is located in a section of the plot distinct from the others.

The self-concepts show the journey he has travelled. He starts close to his wife and father, but moves across to be in the region of the terrorists he took guidance from, but now his ideal self is far along the horizontal axis, in the area of a 'normal' life in harmony with others. This shows clearly his belief that he was misled by others and now does not want any part of their way of life. The power of the particular social group this individual is part of, as revealed through his construct system, throws further light on the social processes that Sageman (2004, 2007) emphasizes and that is central to Taylor and Horgan (2001) exploration of the significance of interpersonal interactions in radicalization.

Discussion

Of course, results from three individuals cannot be taken as indicative of the variations that may exist across all those involved in terrorist activity. The reliability of the nature and form of the personal construct systems presented here as they relate to the particular role of the individual within the terrorist network remains to be established. The main point of this study is to demonstrate that there are indeed important differences between the construct systems of different terrorists. These differences in the content and structure of the different individuals' thinking challenge the development of any psychological explanation that assumes the same psychological processes are relevant to all terrorists. It builds on recent empirical studies revealing different patterns of motivation for terrorism or pathways to radicalization (Nesser, 2004; Slootman & Tillie, 2006).

The differences in construct systems were illustrated here for terrorists involved in different functional roles within a network (Leader, Subordinate, Bomb-carrier). These results open up the possibility that the nature of involvement in terrorist activity does itself have significance for understanding individuals' cognitive structures. In the present study, this was linked to the amount and degree of involvement in terrorism over time, consistent with Taylor and Horgan's (2006) proposals on the migration between roles over time. The terrorist leader had been active for many years, the subordinate for a shorter length of time, and the 'bomb carrier' for only one incident. Therefore, it is possible to view these three examples as illustrating the different possibilities for deradicalization at different stages in the process Horgan (2005) describes of being a terrorist. In the present cast, the constructs system of the peripheral member of the group who, perhaps unwittingly, carries a bomb, reveals that he may be open to disengagement if he can be encouraged to identify with his family rather than with the terrorist group, reflecting the power of social identity theories. The construct system of the subordinate reveals the importance of being open to disillusion with those who lead the terrorist organization. The leader shows a construct system that is a much more difficult challenge, being most probably characterized by the search self-efficacy (Huston *et al.*, 2009).

However, it must be emphasized that not all individuals involved in one of the three roles explored here are likely to have identical construct systems. Furthermore, as Taylor and Horgan (2006) have elaborated, there are many other roles such as those that deal with finance, being a quarter-master or providing 'Indirect Aid and Abet' 'Logistics', or 'Technical' support. They would all be expected to reflect different personal construct systems.

The differences among the three individuals in their constructs, when related to the location of their ideal self-concept, provide an indication that it is the nature of the construct system that supports their engagement in or disengagement from terrorism. The committed senior figure's construct system was strongly organized around living a significant life with his ideal self firmly placed at that pole of the dominant construct axis. The leader and subordinate also see an abstract enemy as key in their lives, Hindus and the police. Whilst the subordinate now sees Hindu fanatics as unreliable and irresponsible, he, nonetheless, sees them as similar to his *Jihadi* associates. He has moved away from seeing any value in their character, unlike the terrorist leader whose ideal is still with that extreme of involvement in terrorism.

These results emphasize the importance of tailoring approaches to disengagement that reflect the dominant constructs of terrorists being targeted. For example, schemes that focus on ideological debate, such as, notably, those the Saudi Arabian Religious Subcommittee within their Counselling Program and the Yemeni Religious Dialogue

Committee emphasize (discussed by Horgan & Braddock, 2010), may be appropriate for people like the leader considered in this study because of his focus on a 'significant life'. Similarly, schemes that use respected former terrorists to deradicalize such as the use of the prominent now-de-radicalized figureheads Bin Abbas and Ali Imron within the Indonesian Disengagement Program (c.f. Horgan & Braddock, 2010), would be anticipated to be effective for people like the leader considered here, but could be counterproductive for the subordinate whose potential for disengagement lies in the very lack of respect he holds for his terrorist superiors, unless these deradicalized individuals drew heavily on their knowledge of the human weaknesses of terrorist activists.

The individual who claims he was just a bomb carrier unaware of the greater scheme of things shows in his construct system a clear separation from his earlier activities. He accepts no part of them other than his gullibility in being guided by others. This is a clear illustration of the external Locus of Control (Rotter, 1954). Huston *et al.* (2009) propose external locus of control as an aspect of the 'personal dynamic' that makes a person more vulnerable to Jihadi recruitment, which they combine with learned helplessness. This has much in common with the *Drifter* Nesser (2004) identifies. He is obviously keen to disengage from his association with terrorists if he can find a way of doing that. The appropriate focus here may be on disengagement directly rather than on deradicalization (see Horgan & Braddock, 2010 for distinguishing definitions). It indicates approaches that emphasize particularly the practical means of support, such as the training, education, and access to government benefits that are part of the Columbian initiative and were so successful in Northern Ireland (Horgan & Braddock, 2010). But the responses of this individual show that he still has some allegiance to his former associates and therefore any overly simplistic assumption of his desire to disengage needs to be treated with caution.

The detailed understanding then of the nature and structure of the Personal Construct systems of those involved in terrorist activity has much to offer disengagement and deradicalization efforts. General understandings about the types of construct systems that may be associated with particular roles within terrorist networks could allow and inform the tailoring of initiatives. Along these lines, Horgan and Braddock (2010) draw attention to the need for 'clarity around the selection process and screening procedures for admittance to the program' (p. 281). There may even be the possibility of developing initiatives, to complement existing dialogue-based programmes that seek to elicit and modify an individual's Personal Constructs.

In their review of radicalization programmes, Horgan and Braddock (2010) emphasize the need for a multivariate approach to assessing the impact of any programme. They propose that Multi Attribute Utility Technology (MAUT) could be a fruitful procedure for such evaluations. Intriguingly, MAUT is a generalization of the repertory grid procedure, typically providing a grid of attributes that describe the utility of different elements, often programmes. It is therefore entirely compatible with the exploration of the key events and individuals as construed by people who are part of a deradicalization programme. Furthermore, as illustrated here, such repertory grids have the potential of revealing crucial aspects of a terrorist's construct system in a non-threatening and unobtrusive way. The approach could contribute to the evaluation of deradicalization (as distinct from simple disengagement) that represents such a challenge in the assessment of these initiatives.

From a theoretical perspective, the current work opens the way for future research establishing links between the detailed Personal Construct systems of terrorists and the differences in motivational processes and 'pathways to radicalization' that have been proposed (Huston *et al.*, 2009; Nesser, 2004; Slootman & Tillie, 2006). It allows the

development of a range of hypotheses about the sorts of Personal Construct systems that will relate to the posited 'driving forces' (Dalgaard-Nielse, 2010, p. 807). One hypothesis, for example, might be that a Personal Construct system of the type seen here for the 'Subordinate', focused as it is on personal relationships and trustworthiness, will be characteristic of an individual radicalized by Slootman and Tillie's (2006) 'search for community', rather than by processes that related to what they describe as perceived injustices committed against Muslims in conflict areas. Some relationships between the functional role and the motivational processes and radicalization pathways are also suggested here. For example, the Subordinate, who makes his lack of interest in politics clear, seems highly unlikely to have been radicalized by reference to the geo-political issues of the sort proposed by Moghaddam (2005), Pape (2005), or Bloom (2005). Indeed, some of the similarities in the Personal Constructs across the three roles suggest that there may be no simple or straightforward relationship between the functional role and the particular motivational influences or radicalization pathway.

The identification of the very different ways of thinking revealed in the Personal Construct systems here also opens up intriguing questions about *how* these interact and develop with proposed processes of radicalization. Particularly intriguing is the possibility that group processes, such as those emphasized by McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), draw on and contribute to the cognitive characteristics of individuals. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) draw attention to pathways to terrorism that are embedded in group processes. Utilizing general principles from social psychology, they argue that an important pathway to terrorism is generated by the power of being part of a group that regards itself as extreme, isolated, and under threat. The question therefore arises, from the results presented here, of whether people with certain construct systems are more prone to these group influences, or if membership of the isolated group generated changes in constructs. Both processes are likely so that uncovering them would offer a way of answering the perplexing issue that has challenged many authors: 'the question of what makes some individuals more susceptible to militant (Islamism) than others – why radical groups manage to align with some individuals but not with others' (Dalgaard-Nielse, 2010, p. 806).

Although these are preliminary indications only, the details of the content and form of the construct systems are intriguing. All three notably have relatively simple construct systems with a dominant structure that places people clearly in one camp or the other. This is consistent with the work of Savage and Liht (2008) that has drawn attention to what they have termed 'the low integrative complexity' at the heart of extremist religious thinking. Here, however, the nature of their constructs indicates that their cognitive structures can be quite varied, not only focussed on religion, although still essentially bi-modal.

However, there were some interesting, and surprising, consistencies across these three individuals. For all of them, the cultural ties to family members, especially parents and wife, were an important part of their life, even though it is clear from their construct systems that these relatives did not share any of the characteristics the respondents associate with terrorism. They also all saw being involved in terrorism as the antithesis of the simple, normal life. For the terrorist leader, 'simple' was a disparaging construct, linked to lack of involvement in an ideological struggle that gives life substance. For the less involved individuals, the simple life is a positive aspect of how they would now like to live their lives. This suggests that some of the approaches used to encourage desistance with many different sorts of criminals by supporting the development of constructive life narratives, for example, Ward's Good Lives model (e.g., Ward & Brown, 2004), may also be applicable to terrorists.

The results also support the studies demonstrating that terrorists are influenced by many people throughout their lives, beginning from childhood as part of an unfolding process. However, they point to the weakness of any exploration that only considers the life of a terrorist on the date of involvement in a terrorist crime, rather than seeing terrorism as Horgan (2005) notably has argued, as an unfolding process.

Consideration of a terrorist's current situation does not give a complete picture of the psychological processes the individual goes through. In these three examples, the people with whom they were close before they became involved in terrorism were all seen as important, even though they did not support their activities. The question thus emerges of what it was in their upbringing that implicitly supported their violent actions whilst explicitly forbidding them. A terrorist is influenced not merely by terrorist ideologues but also by family and friends who play a significant role in their lives. The study shows the pitfalls of over-generalization in understanding radicalization and the manner in which, despite the emerging understanding of different psychological 'types' of terrorist (Nesser, 2004; Slootman & Tillie, 2006), many studies have failed to differentiate between individuals who commit terror crimes.

The potential use of the repertory grid as a tool in studying terrorism should not be undervalued. The indirect and non-intrusive nature of this intensive approach was accepted readily by nearly all those approached. The results presented here certainly make sense, relating as they do to what was known about the respondents. The findings thus lend support to the validity of the responses.

Interviewing people convicted of crimes is always problematic. They may use the opportunity as one for justification or despite careful indications, as in the present case, that the interview is only for research and will have no implications for the sentencing or conditions in prison, they may still believe that participating will help their case. In the present context, they might also use the interview for the exposition of their ideological perspective, seeing it as an opportunity to give a sermon to a wider audience. However, the repertory grid procedure, with its focus on key people in their lives and the elicitation of their own personal constructs, makes it much more difficult to use the interview for justification or propaganda. Even if they do try to do that, they reveal the constructs that are important to them and how they see themselves and important other people within that construct system.

Acknowledgements

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