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Terrorist Organizations And Criminal Street Gangs

An argument for an analogy

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Introduction

The events of September 11, 2001, were horrific not just in the number of lives lost but in, the loss of our sense of security as a nation. As one observer said, our failure was not an intelligence failure but a failure of imagination. It seemed at the time inconceivable that such an attack could be made on such powerful symbols.

Our efforts to understand what prompted the violence are hampered by a lack of knowledge about terrorists, their motivations, and their potential for action. This lack of knowledge, to a large degree, stems from a lack of data on terrorists. Such primary data that we have generally comes from interviews of terrorists conducted under conditions of significant power imbalance (they are prisoners). As a result, the results are highly suspect. Intelligence data, another important source, generally is highly indirect and requires conclusion by inference.

To address the absence of data as we move forward with efforts to model terrorist groups and activities, we have turned to the literature on criminal street gangs as an analog. Street gangs have been studied for years by the behavioral and social science communities. There is much empirical data available. Furthermore, the violence of the battles between gangs such as the *Crips* and the *Bloods* in Los Angeles, for example, combined with the lessons learned from much of the empirically based research, has led to successful trust-building campaigns and significant reductions in violent behavior.

This essay is an exploration of the validity of the analogy between street gangs and terrorists. We explore the theoretical approaches that have emerged from the data on gangs, and note similarities to work done in the field of terrorism which has been developing theories based on little empirical data. We conclude with a short position statement, stating our belief in the validity of the analogy and describing a theoretical approach for our work.

General Background

Both street gangs and terrorist groups are non-corporate groups. They are not organized as formal (legal) entities, so group leaders operate in different environments and with different kinds of authority than do those in charge of corporate legal actor. As a different type of actor, street gangs and terrorists also have different sets of actions available to them. Both terrorist groups and street gangs often are self-identified, that is, legitimacy and identity are not conferred upon them by some external body (they do not need to be 'recognized' by a larger community in order to act) but rather are self-proclaimed. Membership in both gangs and terrorist organizations is an active proposition. One does not become a member by virtue of (e.g.) birth, ethnicity, or residency, although there may be exclusionary criteria (that is, there may be criteria which determine [in]eligibility for membership). Rather, one becomes a member through some voluntary act, some act of choice. Both types of groups (gangs and terrorist organizations) engage in criminal and, often, violent behavior. They thus operate in an extra-legal environment and maintain an adversarial relationship with peace-keeping interests.

Four general theoretical explanatory frameworks have emerged from empirical studies of gangs. These theoretical frames also appear within the literature on terrorists and terrorist groups. They have been applied to the more anecdotal and sparse body of data on terrorists and terrorist

organizations in ways similar to their application to the more empirical data found underpinning the research on gangs. This discussion will review the approaches from the standpoint of the research on gangs, and then reference leading writings in the field of terrorist research that correspond to each set of groups.

We label our four approaches psychological, sociological, communicative, and power-based. The later two (communicative and power-based) are instrumental in nature, that is, they see gangs as a means to an end. The two former approaches (psychological and sociological) are causal and explanatory frames, seeking to understand why these types of groups emerge and the forces that keep them functioning as groups. It is important to realize that the more powerful treatments of gangs use elements from both the instrumental and causal camps, and from both approaches within each.

Psychological approach

The psychological approach focuses on the individual (the gang member). The research has looked for a particular personality constellation or composite of psychological factors that characterize the gang member such as self-esteem, family constellation, level of aggression, level of depression, and level of impulse control. The underlying hypothesis is that gang members are psychologically deviant, and exhibit psychopathological or sociopathological tendencies which cause them to join these extra-legal, violent groups.

There has been a great deal of work in this arena, comparing early initiates in gangs to their non-gang peer groups. The research generally concludes that potential gang members do not differ in significant ways from their peers in terms of psychological makeup. The percent of pathological individuals in gangs seems to be roughly similar to that in the general population. It is important to note, however, that psychological profiles will change with tenure in a gang. Long-term members show greater tendencies toward pathologies.

Motivations for joining gangs often involve the development and/or expression of primary self-identification. Gang members usually do not belong to 'mainstream society' but rather to socially marginal or economically disadvantaged groups. These marginal and/or disadvantaged groups are usually defined by race or ethnicity, and occasionally by religion. As social success or 'the good life' is generally defined in terms of the dominant society rather than marginal groups, access to rewards and the positive self-identification that comes with them is missing for the disadvantaged groups. Potential gang members have few legitimate sources for positive self-validation and self-definition. The gang, through its development of measures of success that are attainable for these individuals, provides these opportunities. The gang also provides members with a sense of both individual power and protection that is otherwise missing for them. It also provides members with a strong code of morals. This is particularly apparent in gangs defined by religion or strongly identified with religion that are characterized by religious iconography and rituals; however, the moral code is present in all gangs and is often verbally affirmed by members. Note that these complexes of behavior described above are particularly important for adolescents and young adults who are at a stage where identity formation occurs.

In this explanatory frame, a gang member trades loyalty to the group for social and moral security and the chance of success. His membership in the group is communicated by tangible marks such as clothes, tattoos, and jewelry, and by performance marks such as vocabulary or speaking style, participation in various rituals, and adherence to clearly defined and morally grounded codes of behavior. Rites of passage provide explicit markers of status.

The terrorist literature parallels the street gang findings. The few interviews that have been conducted with terrorists show that the terrorists also are low on the psychopathology scale. In the rare cases where interviews have been conducted, terrorists state that their membership in the terrorist group represented the first time in their lives that they have experienced a sense of belonging. Literature on fundamentalist religious movements (the basis of the Middle Eastern groups) supports this finding, suggesting that these types of fundamentalist movements gain adherents in situations of rapid social change in which moral structures become unclear or ambiguous, and the sense of community and the behavioral codes communities provide tends to disintegrate. Terrorist interviews also reveal a propensity for the same type of black-and-white thinking that characterizes the (usually adolescent) members of gangs.

Jerrold Post has been one of the strongest proponents of the psychological approaches to terrorism. He has worked over many years to develop a complex of traits to characterize the terrorist, and in particular, the terrorist leader. While there appears to be forensic value in this approach, there is a great deal of dispute over the claim that he has developed anything that can be broadly applied in the explanatory or causal arena.

Sociological approach

This moves us to the second theoretical frame, the sociological. This approach considers gangs as social phenomena, and focuses not on individual members but on groups. It investigates the environment from which members are recruited, looking for differences between that social milieu and those which do not spawn gangs. It also is interested in the organization and structure of the groups themselves. This research again is concerned with the marginalized or disadvantaged nature of the populations from which gangs emerge. It is primarily concerned with understanding that milieu and its effects on organization formation and operation.

Research on gangs has identified dysfunctional families, failed schools, and non-existent community structures as hallmarks of the milieu in which gangs are found. This research reinforces the importance of the marginal or disadvantaged nature of the populations from which gang members are drawn. In this case, the interest is in the influence of these social environments on the formation of groups rather than individual psyches. These social environments communicate messages of success in terms that are inaccessible to the populations in these environments. This integrates well with the psychological approach described above. If the macro-community marginalizes a group of individuals or causes them to feel powerless, they will seek structures within which they can exercise power and create such structures if they do not exist. If mainstream society offers no road to success, it will be sought (or created) through alternative communities such as gangs.

This approach also offers some explanations for the use of violence by these groups. Law enforcement or peace-keeping groups are often the most tangible representation of the forbidden

society with which gang members deal. They thus become a threat rather than a source of reassurance, stability, or structure, hence the criminal or extra-legal nature of gangs. Furthermore, gang members often come from environments where they have witnessed a high level of violence (families and/or communities) and seen the success of violence as a coping strategy. Research has also shown that access to weapons or the means of violence will increase the propensity for violence.

This explanatory frame translates well to the Middle Eastern terrorist groups. The macro-environment, defined in this case by the ‘failed states’ of the Middle East, is unable to provide many social services, including law and order, or physical or social infrastructures such as communications or banking. However, opportunity is defined in Western terms (which require these services and infrastructures) and is achieved through participation in a global community. Individuals feel set up for failure. Islam (particularly fundamentalist Islam) and associated groups provide an alternative vocabulary for success and an alternative mechanism for achieving it. Recall that religious fundamentalism tends to arise among dislocated populations, offering community and structure in an otherwise chaotic and animistic world. The integration of church and state offered by Islam allows Islamic fundamentalism to attract members with the additional promise of a world more amenable to social/political self-actualization than that offered by the current political regime. Note that the mechanisms for social actualization offered by these types of groups are explicitly counter to those offered by the ‘failed state,’ and hence are extra-legal and therefore deemed criminal.

Instrumental approaches

Instrumental approaches also focus on the group rather than the individual as the primary actor. Both communicative explanations and power-oriented instrumentalism seek to explain why groups use violence to achieve certain ends. Both approaches argue that individuals join groups such as gangs because they feel that they are unheard as single voices, or lack the power as individuals to achieve certain ends. To some extent, this does take us back to the individual actor and does engage the psychological approach—but the primary explanatory power of these approaches is focused on the power of the group vis-à-vis individuals, rather than on the type of individual that seeks to fill some specified need or resource requirement. The instrumental approaches also draw heavily on the sociological approach, for they begin from the premise that the group has no legal or legitimate means to achieve its end and so must resort to extra-legal activities.

Communicative approach

Communicative explanations see violence as ‘theater.’ This approach is also called ‘performance violence,’ where the goal is as much to have the act witnessed as it is to harm the victim. These types of violent acts on the part of gangs often are scripted, and are carefully planned. The audience may be other members of the perpetrator’s gang, members of a rival gang, or non-gang members of society. Explanatory deconstructions of these types focus on discovering the ‘message’ behind the performance. Note, again, that while the act may be performed by an individual, it is always performed within the context of the group. It uses group-defined symbology, may be scripted, and is always acknowledged. Mark Juergensmeyer and others have adopted similar approaches with

reference to terrorism, noting that the goal is not to harm the greatest number of individuals but to have the violence witnessed by the greatest number. The media has become a key actor in these scenarios

Power-oriented instrumentalism

Power-oriented instrumentalism grows out of the world of *realpolitik*, or realist politics. In this environment, the world is seen as a collection of actors (which historically have been nation-states) engaged in struggles for power. In a realm of failed communities (whether they be states or the city of Los Angeles), there emerges a whole class of people who feel that they have no voice or power in the competition for resources, however large or small the terms of that competition are written. In those instances, non-corporate actors emerge...gangs, or terrorist organizations, which act on behalf of these non-represented people. They use various tools, including violence, to attempt to redress real or perceived grievances. Performance violence has an obvious role here. Martha Crenshaw has made strong contributions to this approach.

Power-oriented instrumentalism takes us quickly back to the sociological approach. We need to understand the environments that spawn large groups of disenfranchised peoples and how these people get together to seek access to resources and so become players in the games of power.

Conclusions

Given the above similarities between the environments within which they arise, the structure of organizations, and the motivations of individuals to join them, we argue that gangs are a legitimate analog for terrorist and terrorist-like groups. The formation of both of these groups is stimulated by the belief in a lack of opportunity for self-realization, a search for structure and moral order in what appears to be a chaotic world, and the associated felt devaluation of self-identity. The groups become a means to define that self, and to provide the resources and share the responsibility for acts that will create a world within which these individuals can see hope and opportunity. In order for that world to be created, the creators (the groups) must speak to someone, must have an audience for their cause. Hence, violence as theater. Furthermore, because the individual is disenfranchised and powerless in the world of the dominant culture, and because participation in the group allows for the diffusion of responsibility for extra-legal acts, it is groups, not individuals, that wield power and have legitimacy.

We believe that the most robust approach is one which combines elements from both types of approaches (explanatory/causal and instrumental) and all dimensions of these. We thus subscribe neither to 'great man' theories nor to 'great times' theories. Rather we are working with the concept of socially embedded actors who use organizations as vehicles to achieve social and psychologically driven ends. This is the approach that will be instantiated in the 'Seldon' computational model.