INTRODUCTION
When there is a great tragedy or act of violence, one of the first questions asked is, “Why?” How can a person or a group plan and commit an act that involves killing hundreds, or even thousands of innocent people? Most logical people would say, “There must be something very wrong with them.” Surprisingly, this is not the case. Most terrorists are neither mentally ill, nor do they demonstrate any overt psychopathology. They do, however, demonstrate some similar personality traits and fall victim to multiple aspects of group dynamics.

Since September 11, 2001, this country has been fixated on preventing future egregious acts of terrorism. Through the knowledge of the psychological forces and social mechanisms behind terrorism, it is possible to apply this knowledge to the practice of mitigation in emergency management.

PSYCHOSOCIAL DYNAMICS OF TERRORISM
There is no one terrorist mind-set or thought process, although, according to Post, they do tend to demonstrate similar personality traits and psychological mechanisms. Some common personality traits seen in terrorists are tendencies toward adventure/action seeking, aggressive behavior, and stimulus hunger. They tend to be dissatisfied with life for numerous reasons. Damage in early childhood is frequently a factor, linked to the defense mechanisms of splitting and externalization. These two traits are commonly found in individuals with narcissistic and borderline personality disturbances. Splitting occurs when the self is split into the “me” and the “not me.” According to Post, “this personality constellation idealizes his grandiose self and splits out and projects onto others all the hated and devalued weakness and inadequacies within.” The motivation becomes, “it’s not my fault; they are the cause of my/our problems, and they need to be stopped or destroyed.”

Most terrorists operate in some sort of group. Numerous studies have found that individuals within a group do not always act as they would when on their own. This is exemplified in an extreme way in terrorist organizations. First, there is the appeal of a sense of belonging. For some, a terrorist group may be the first time they have felt as if they truly belonged or as if what they do matters to others—even if it means hurting others to achieve this acceptance. In order to not be rejected by the group, they must not go against the group decisions or goals.

In addition, the group has an effect on the individual’s thought processes. As stated by Post, “When individuals function in a group setting, their individual judgment and behavior are strongly influenced by the powerful forces of group dynamics.” The moral code of the group becomes the moral code of the individual because group situations inherently foster regression to more archaic psychological states where individuation, judgment, rational thinking, and ethical feelings mimic that of the group.

The survival of the group depends on a few factors. The group must act, or do something, in order to keep its members interested and involved and to achieve a sense of accomplishment. At the same time, to succeed in achieving its espoused cause would threaten the goal of survival. In other words, “[a group] must be successful enough in its terrorist acts” to recruit new members and keep the current ones enticed but not too successful as to succeed in accomplishing their goal 100 percent.
As originally stated, most individuals who join terrorist organizations were previously average, psychologically healthy, law-abiding citizens. How, then, does a person change and stray from accepted moral standards? Albert Bandura explores the idea of moral disengagement in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind.* In his chapter, he examines the psychological processes by which moral reactions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct. Every day, people make decisions based on internal controls that can be manipulated under certain circumstances. Three main mechanisms of moral disengagement can lead an ordinary person to commit acts of terrorism. These are: moral justification, displacement (diffusion of responsibility), and dehumanization.

Since most people do not take the lives of others on a daily basis, it is something they need to justify doing. For example, if someone threatens you, you have the right to defend yourself; this is morally justified. Terrorists use the same kind of moral justification. Their culture, well-being, or other important aspect of their life is perceived as threatened. The terrorists seek to change or remove that threat. Therefore, they cognitively reconstruct their morals to justify their acts. According to this logic, they are “fighting the ruthless oppressors” rather than innocent bystanders.

Another aspect of moral disengagement, according to Bandura, is displacement, or diffusion of responsibility. Basically, it works under the premise, “when everyone is responsible, no one is really responsible.” The members of the group see their actions as a request from authority instead of an act of free will. It has been shown that people behave in injurious ways they would normally repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the consequences of their conduct. Take, for example, a study by Milgram in which people caused egregious acts of pain on the basis that they were instructed to by an authority figure. “Average” people were willing to induce fatal doses of electrical shocks to subjects on the rationale that it was a requirement of the experiment. This can be seen as “evidence that good people can be talked into performing cruel deeds.”

The third aspect of moral disengagement is dehumanization. When a person sees the human side of their targets or can identify with them, it is difficult to cause them harm or view them as an enemy. Dehumanization removes these qualities so that the terrorist views them as an adversary, target, or obstacle to the fulfillment of their objectives rather then equals. According to Bandura, “once dehumanized, the potential victims are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns, but as subhuman objects.” A historical example of this is seen in Nazi prison commandants who committed unprecedented horrific acts. The prisoners were seen as evil adversaries, not mothers, fathers, and children.

With our increased knowledge of the social and psychological mechanisms that drive terrorism, a logical step would be to apply that knowledge in the realm of emergency management. The application of this knowledge is mainly in the mitigation arena in hopes of preventing future terrorist acts, but it is also to aid in preparedness and response. These applications can be in numerous forms such as policy change, education, and technology.

With regard to mitigation, one possible use for this knowledge is to divert potential future members, especially youths, from joining terrorist organizations. As suggested by Post, with no new recruits coming in, it would be hard to sustain an organization in the long run. There are several facets to this approach. The first is to make the group seem unappealing. A good example of this is the reaction of the public and politicians to September 11th. The acts were deemed cowardly, heinous, and other scornful and derogatory terms. To a youth, this may bring to light the immorality of the terrorist group. Another is humanization of the victims. The world was flooded with images of families gathered at Ground Zero holding pictures of their loved ones and asking, “Have you seen my mommy?” This put a real human face on the victims.

A third is understanding the mechanisms by which youths become attracted to and involved in terrorist networks. Terrorist organizations are adept at identifying potential members. Parents, teachers, and others need to be able to identify high-risk traits as well. For example, these youths tend to feel alienated...
from established groups and are easily influenced by others.\textsuperscript{5} Positive authority figures need to reach out to these youths to shield them from the dangerous ones.

**OTHER MITIGATION TECHNIQUES**

With regard to terrorism, effective policy is the backbone to mitigation. According to Post, “policies should be tailored to the specific group, which must be understood in its historical, cultural, and political context.”\textsuperscript{11} While this is good in theory, it may not be realistic in practice. A policy that allows law enforcement and other agencies to gather more useful data and to use informants and undercover agents to gather intelligence more effectively may be more feasible. The creation and implementation of the Patriot Act of 2001 (more formally known as the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) is a step in this direction. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation now has the authority to monitor the actions of extremists more closely.\textsuperscript{6}

Technology can be a key player in intelligence gathering. A good example of up-and-coming technology is high-definition thermal imaging, which can detect attempted deceit by recording and observing infrared thermal patterns in a person’s face. This works in a similar manner as the polygraph, operating under the assumption that psychological feelings are linked to specific physiological responses. The advantage with thermal imaging is that it can easily be used as a screening mechanism compared with the polygraph where a person must be hooked up and questioned at length. While the implementation of this technology may be far away, it has some great possibilities as a screening tool if used properly and systematically.\textsuperscript{7}

The media plays an integral role in the life of most people. They can be a great resource but can also be detrimental. Some view the media as helping to underscore the terrorists’ cause by showing the event, sometimes in real time.\textsuperscript{3} However, the media can also be used to the advantage of the general public. For example, it has a role in educating and informing people after catastrophic events. The role of the media can also be expanded during response periods to help the government uphold the perception that it has control of a situation. One of the main purposes of terrorism is to show that a government is weak and unable to protect its citizens. The media can help portray an image of security and safety so as not to induce fear and panic in the public—responses that are hoped for by terrorist groups.

While the press has a right to report what they want to and are not completely restricted by the government, they need to cooperate and work toward the common goal of eliminating the threat of terrorism and have care not to propagate the damage and panic caused by the incident on which they are reporting.

Another aspect of psychology that can aid in mitigating terrorism, with regard to news sources, is educating
the public to differentiate between a real threat and the popular media stereotype of a “terrorist.” Every day, both in the media and on the Department of Homeland Security homepage, the public is asked to be on high alert for terrorist attacks. What, as citizens, should they be looking for? Whom should they notify? What and where is the specific risk? Inducing anxiety without providing details or guidelines for self-protection can lead to irrational and inappropriate responses.

**THE ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Law enforcement as a whole is not very educated on the “why’s” of terrorism. This issue needs to become a focus of law enforcement planning, preparedness, and training. An understanding of group dynamics is necessary (this has been improving over time in response to gang-related activity) if law enforcement is to gather intelligence more effectively and eventually dismantle high-risk groups. Law enforcement can demonstrate the inaccuracy of the idea, “if everyone is responsible, then no one is responsible.” If an entire group is reprimanded for the actions of some, this may turn off other members of that group as well as similar groups. This was done to a certain extent after September 11th, where the entire al-Qaida network was targeted across the globe. If law enforcement agencies understand how terrorists and terrorist groups think, they will be better equipped to monitor them, plan on how to target them, and also to plan their response.

**CONCLUSION**

It is always easier to analyze events in hindsight rather than to anticipate them, regardless of psychological and technological advances. However, research, when properly applied, can play a significant preventive role. Unfortunately, the psychology behind terrorism is barely addressed when compared with the plethora of research published on other aspects of emergency management. With more study and better understanding, psychology can be applied more extensively and more effectively.

The question of why an individual does something has been studied for years. Some would say it is the very basis of psychology. Terrorism is no exception to this. It has been studied, and will continue to be studied, by psychologists for a long time to come. What is interesting from their findings is that, on the surface, a terrorist is no different than you or me. They have jobs, families, and, to the untrained eye, do not stand out in society. They are not psychologically ill, as one would want to assume. There is no carbon copy terrorist mind. However, they do share recurring similarities in personality, group function, and psychological dissociative mechanisms. Knowledge of these similarities and the application of this knowledge in emergency management can add even more to society’s arsenal in the fight against terrorism.

Kimberly Stambler, BA (Psychology), EMT, Emergency Medical Response Group (EMeRG) Coordinator, The George Washington University, Washington, DC.

**REFERENCES**