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TERRORISM WITHIN THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism within the community context investigates and discusses the processes of terrorist recruitment within communities and societies. It focuses on the different types of terrorists, their motivations and the social and psychological factors which are correlated with the transformation of an individual from a community member to a community threat. This analysis invokes the perspectives of Durkheim, Sykes and Matza, Snow and others as the role of terrorist is identified, acquired and acted upon. Particular attention is directed to strategies and tactics of role acquisition and social support.
Terrorists and terrorism have been a diverse though consistently violent historical footnote since the earliest days of civilization. A history of terrorism (Poland, 1968: 23-25) takes us from the early Jewish Zealots and the Ismaili Assassins, through the “Reign of Terror” (French Revolution) and the political and economic struggles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since World War Two we have had terrorism as a component of many wars of national liberation, and today domestic and international terrorism involves a plethora of alphabet groups such as ETA, PLO, IRA and others and now culminating in the quasi-political/religious struggles between fundamentalists of various persuasions, such as Hamas, Al Qaida and a host of other transnational and domestic terrorist groups.

Terrorism within the community context is a complex phenomenon and has been investigated from a variety of perspectives. As a complex phenomenon there have been numerous attempts to identify types of terrorism based upon the kinds of goals pursued, the types of acts manifested, the motivations for these acts, the types of people engaged in terrorist behaviors and their social profiles. Likewise, organizational analyses have dissected group goals, structures, recruitment, socialization, training and threat-level to a community or society. However, the primary focus of this inquiry will be the sociological and social-psychological processes associated with the transformation of an individual from that of community member to community threat and the development of a number of sociological types of terrorism. It will bring together the literature on collective behavior to explain the emergence of a number of types of terrorists.

Terrorism is a social construct (Schmid:1992: 8) that is defined differently by a variety of constituencies. The State Department, the FBI, the Defense Department and a host of other agencies and authors have defined terrorism in a variety of ways White:2009, 3-20). However, for the purposes of this inquiry, Alex Schmid’s (1992:17) definition which is cited by the United Nations states:

Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action employed by (semi) clandestine individual, group or state actors for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought.

http://unodc.org/undoc/terrorism_definitions.html
This relatively complex definition, however, does not fully cover the spectrum of conflict in which popular culture has often applied the term.

Jonathon White (2009:17) presented an interesting typology of terrorism which involves continuums of the level of activity from low to higher levels of violence, the relative size of the threat from individual to large-scale group or organization and finally whether the actions engaged range from criminal to political in their goals. These continuums allow us to identify different types of threats and to identify different types of terrorists. This is an initial step in ascertaining motivation and the processes associated with the transformation of individuals from community member to community threat.

Common Characteristics:

In all instances of terrorism, a structural environment characterized by a significant imbalance of power between different ideological groups must exist. Black (2004:17) noted that terrorism develops when a group with inferior power mobilizes against a superior power group in a non-normative, violent manner. In addition, these groups have a strong ideological component: a set of beliefs, values and norms that justify the existence of the group and can be used to manipulate and influence the behavior of its members (Rapoport, 1988).

Common to most terrorist movements is an ideology. That is, a set of interrelated beliefs, values and norms. Ideologies are usually highly abstract and complex. An ideology is more than a group of rationalizations and myths that justify the existence of the group; it can be used to manipulate and influence the behavior of individuals within the group.

In every society, idea, knowledge, lore, superstitions, myths and legends are shared by its members. These are cultural beliefs. Associated with each belief are values- the “right” or “wrong” judgments that guide individual actions. This value code is reinforced through a system of rewards and punishments dispensed to members within the group. In this way, approved patterns of behavior, or “norms,” are established and internalized.

Human beings dislike ambiguity and uncertainty in their social, psychological and physical environments. Through generalized beliefs individuals seek to give meaning and organization to unexplained events. Common agreement on certain beliefs also enables individuals to operate collectively toward a desired goal. Leaders interpret ambiguous situations in terms of the group’s beliefs or ideology, translating abstract beliefs into specific, concrete situations in which actions can be taken (Smelser, 1963: 82-84).

Because beliefs and values are only distantly related to concrete action in daily life, an interpretive process is essential to derive specific rules of behavior. Commonly agreed upon historical truths are used to justify the norms, values and beliefs of the revolutionary-terrorist group. Significant events which occurred in
the past are given symbolic meanings and reinterpretation for the current purpose. In doing this, a group may select certain concepts and adapt or distort them to justify specific forms of behavior. Where existing concepts conflict with current activities, a group may deny that a particular concept is relevant in a particular case. Selective redefinition is crucial in moving the normative system of a group from one that is based on generally acceptable social norms to one which is now based on revolutionary norms that will justify the non-normative and extremist practices of a terrorist group.

Within any organization, there are reification sources whose role is to apply new interpretations which now justify significant changes in the social environment. The Ministry of Truth in Orwell’s *1984*, The Mullah’s of Iran, the former Communist Party theoreticians in Moscow, the Nazi propagandists, the white supremacists in the Aryan Nation, and Osama Bin Laden are examples of key individuals who modify the interpretations of their groups ideologies to “fit” current events are interesting examples of these redefinition specialists.

This process of redefinition is a critical component in the development of an ideology of moral justification (White, 2009: 34) which underlies the weakening of the bonds of community and facilitates the process of transformation from community member to community threat. Hirschi (1969: 6-34) documents this process in his discussion of control theory by identifying the factors of attachment, commitment, involvement and belief and their roles in this process.

In established groups, many beliefs are based upon authority; that is, since they are voiced by the leaders of the movement, they are accepted as true. When a leader controls the dissemination of information to the members of an organization, he censors and approves various types of information. As a result, the group receives a restricted range of information, and group members tend to develop a common set of values and beliefs. Thus, in some cases, members need not be persuaded by argument, induced by reward, compelled by pressure, guided by past beliefs, or influenced by the opinions of other people; the restricted range of information to which they have access is sufficient to determine their beliefs (Turner and Killian, 1987: 347).

Within organizations, certain rules specify desirable behavior and the consequences of not conforming, and this is extremely critical within underground or terrorist groups because of security concerns. The rules are enforced by organized rewards and punishments that are relevant to the objectives of the group. The inner controls of conscience and normative standards are also reinforced or enforced by surveillance of members (Hirschi, 1969: 16-34).

Terrorist groups are “normative coercive” organizations. They are normative in that they appeal to people by offering to satisfy certain goals and to provide rewards, prestige and esteem. However, coercive power is also applied
through the threat of deprivation of certain satisfactions or the application of physical sanctions such as pain or death to insure that complete compliance is accepted.

Terrorist Types:

Historically, people passively have endured and suffered hardships and tyranny for many generations, and then outbreaks of revolution, rebellion and terrorism have erupted in one segment of society while others continue to tolerate their oppression. Discerning the causes and correlates of violent, non-normative movements have been of concern and interest to sociological inquiry since the advent of the discipline.

Terrorists can be differentiated in terms of their goals and objectives, and thus we can initiate our analysis of their motivational characteristics. The U.S. Army (2007: 2-15), for example, describes terrorist groups as separatist, ethnocentric, nationalistic, and revolutionary. Each of these categories reflects different motivational characteristics which influence the processes of recruitment and membership.

Eric Hoffer (1951: 23) suggested that “the game of history is usually played by the best and the worst over the heads of the majority in the middle.” Historically, researchers and writers have suggested that it is frequently from the ranks of the undesirable that the memberships of revolutionary and terrorist movements are recruited (Hagopian, 1974).

The reason that the less successful elements of a society can exert a marked influence on the revolutionary or terrorist process is that they are largely without reverence toward the present. They see their lives and present as spoiled beyond remedy and they are ready to waste and wreck both; hence their recklessness and their will to chaos and anarchy. As Marx noted, “…they have nothing to lose but their chains” (Tucker, 1978: 292). Likewise, they may also crave to dissolve their spoiled, meaningless existence in some soul-stirring, spectacular communal undertaking or crusade. To replace anomie with commitment, they are often early recruits of revolutions, mass migrations, religious, racial or terrorist movements. Thus the discarded and rejected are often the raw material of a movement’s future. The stone the builder rejects becomes the cornerstone of a new order.

However, the terrorists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may still seek to replace anomie with commitment, but they are increasingly from a broader, more privileged background. Researchers have noted that today’s terrorists are not initially psychopaths (Stahelski:1)). In fact, they seem to be from a variety of different family backgrounds and with different personality characteristics. Walter Laqueur (1999: 243) suggests that it is not possible to develop a composite picture of a terrorist because as terrorism
changes, over time, it attracts different constituencies and practitioners. For example, the terrorists associated with the ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna) movement in the Basque region in Spain appear quite different in membership and motivation than do the Chechen Black Widows or the 9/11 terrorists of Al Qaeda.

Durkheim, in his early study of suicide, noted that there was a relationship between this form deviant behavior and a society’s or group’s normative order (Timascheff, 1966). His identification of anomic, egoistic and altruistic suicide (p.111) suggests that the collective forces of social life may provide some insight into the process of becoming a terrorist within the community context. Specifically, an environment of anomie or normlessness provides a fertile context for the recruitment of individuals to a cause, cult or even a terrorist group. Hoffer (1951) notes this in his *True Believer*. Likewise, Turner and Killian (1987: 325-346) and others in the field of collective behavior provide significant documentation of the strategies and tactics of many groups who actively seek members from individuals in highly anomic situations and circumstances. Anomic terrorists are joiners, seeking identity and membership in a cause. Group membership such as in a terrorist movements, serves to satisfy several types of individual needs. It satisfies the need to belong, and offers recognition and prestige. The member’s status is enhanced and self-esteem is raised. A strong terrorist organization gives opportunities to gain economic, political, religious and/or status goals which could not otherwise be obtained.

Most terrorists appear to come from some environment of anomie. It may vary from absolute to relative deprivation. It must, however, be sufficient to overcome the control of the normative order to allow them to consider the very risk-filled process of being transformed from a community member to a community threat.

Obviously, from the context of anomie or a breakdown in social norms in a society or community undergoing rapid social change, one potential type of terrorist is the nationalist, revolutionary or insurgent terrorist. The *anomic insurgent terrorist* is an individual who becomes an involved member of an underground group and terrorism becomes a tactical tool of confrontation. This type of terrorist is usually a guerrilla fighter who undergoes a relatively intensive transformation process that replaces his sense of alienation or estrangement from the community with one of membership and commitment to the underground group of a transitional movement.

A second type of terrorist is somewhat consistent with the individual who experiences a breakdown of social ties. In an environment of weak group integration, the individual’s sense of self may be enhanced to the extent that he considers himself above the constraints of the community (Timascheff: 111). In this instance, the self-centered person may become the *egoistic lone-wolf*
Lone-wolf terrorists may be from a variety of backgrounds, but they tend to be cognizant of extremist literature, books and web-sites (Artiga:2010:1). They tend to be anti-social. Ted Kaczynski (Uni-Bomber), Timothy McVeigh (Oklahoma City Bomber), and both the Christmas Day and Ft. Hood terrorists were socially isolated individuals who identified with an agenda, but not an organization. They felt either individually “called” or uniquely capable of not only confronting the community, but also of succeeding because of their belief in their self-superiority.

A third type of terrorist is consistent with Durkheim’s identification of a normative environment within which an individual identifies in an overly committed manner (Timascheff: 111). In this context, a value orientation is so strongly held that it overcomes most traditional normative restraints against violence against others and oneself. The altruistic suicide terrorist is an individual who engages in non-normative violent acts against a community and its members because of his/her strong commitment to an ideology or belief system which antithetical to that of the society or community. Examples of altruistic terrorism include the suicide terrorists of Al Qaeda and Hamas.

An interesting sub-set of the altruistic suicide terrorist would be the fatalistic suicide terrorist. Durkheim alluded to a fourth type of suicide in his writings. Similarly, Holmes and Holmes (2005: 31) point out that a combination of acute internalization of a belief system and a condition of desperation and/or hopelessness can contribute to self-destruction and the creation of a fatalistic suicide terrorist. In a last act of defiance, as in the case of the Chechen female suicide bombers or “Black Widows,” White (2009: 341) notes that women who had been ravaged by Russian troops and who had lost their husbands and children were used as suicide bombers in both in Chechnya and in Moscow. They had lost all status and social ties and with no hope for the future, revenge was their last option of opposition.

Drawing heavily on Durkheim’s role of the normative order, the anomic insurgent terrorist, the egoistic lone-wolf terrorist, the altruistic/fatalistic suicide terrorist represent a sociological perspective of terrorist types. The examples cited reflect a social or cultural environment conducive to the transformation of a community member into a community threat.

The Process of Terrorism:

Students of terrorism have identified the transformation process from community member to community threat as similar to that of the processes associated with cult membership and behavior (Stahelski: 2). Obviously, terrorist recruitment is risky business. Overcoming the normative constraints against violence is a difficult and challenging task. David Snow (1979:23-44) notes that cults, movements, and in this instance terrorists groups, often build idiosyncrasy
credit as a tactic to render itself more attractive and acceptable. The Taliban, Hamas and even the Black Panthers have done “good works” as a movement-related resource which facilitates acceptance of their more controversial tactics. The “techniques of neutralization” introduced by Sykes and Matza (1957: 664-670) seems to address this process. The techniques of denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of a victim, condemnation of the condemner, and appeals to higher loyalties have been used to weaken the power of the general norms of society and provide a means for making the unacceptable, acceptable. Thus, the process of moral justification of terrorism is established (White:2009:34).

However, it is in the balance between recruitment and organizational security that the transformation process becomes a dangerous environment. First, the types of people recruited into an underground or terrorist organization depend largely on the group’s stage of development. The context of control by the larger society shapes the strategies, opportunities and risks of recruitment (Turner and Killian, 1987: 11-14).

Initially, terrorist groups seek to identify and attract talented individuals with grievances against the status-quo, the community or the state and to surreptitiously test each individual’s loyalty to the movement. Then, through a process of gradual commitment potential recruits are channeled through a process of gradual commitment into the terrorist group. Effective “pitches” are tailored to each recruit based upon the cultural, social and historical context of the movement (Gerwehr and Daly, 2006: 74).

Joining a terrorist organization is quite different from joining an ordinary political group. One ex-communist says that it is not like joining a political party, but like joining a church. The literature in collective behavior on cults, sects, and other non-normative groups provide many insights in the more extreme contexts of terrorist organizations. Another former terrorist says:

A faith is not acquired by reasoning. One does not fall in love with a woman, or enter the womb of a church, as the result of logical persuasion. Reason may defend an act of faith – but only after the act has been committed, and the man committed to the act. Persuasion may play a part in a man’s conversion; but only the part of bringing to it a conscious climax of the process in which there has been maturing in regions where no persuasion can penetrate. (Koestler, 1949:15)

The act of commitment in terrorist or other clandestine organizations is uniformly an oath-taking process. The individual performs some symbolic, overt act which demonstrates his willingness to accept the rules of the organization and abide by its sanctions if he does not conform. Once committed, the individual reorganizes his frame of reference and the way he views the world to conform to his new commitments.
During this transformation process, organizational security is critical for the protection of the terrorist group. Therefore, the potential terrorist recruit is initially only allowed limited access to the workings and identity of the members of the group. It is only after a series of tests and acts of increasing commitment that a terrorist gains access to group membership. This is critical for the insurgent terrorist, but not as crucial for the lone-wolf type of terrorist who, through the processes of “differential identification,” accepts an ideology or a cause without actual association or involvement (Glaser, 1956).

The essence of the process of transformation from community member to community threat involves a series of social-psychological conditioning phases which initially “eliminates an individual’s old social and personal identities and then reconditions joiners to hate and sometimes kill noncombatants upon demand” (Stahelski, 2004: 2). These phases include: Phase I - Depluralization during which a stripping away all other of the individual’s group identities; Phase II – Self-deindividuation which involves removing each member’s personal identity; Phase III – Other-deindividuation where the personal identities of the enemies are removed or neutralized; Phase IV – Dehumanization through which enemies are identified as sub-human, non-human; and Phase 5 – Demonization through which the enemy is identified as evil. These stages of psychological conditioning are constantly reinforced through both formal and informal group pressures and the reification of the movement through the rhetoric of charismatic or highly revered leaders.

Although an individual may be persuaded, coerced, tricked or forced to join a terrorist movement, his goals and desires may change as he stays with the organization. Recruitment is only the initial phase of involvement. Indoctrination brings about the socialization of the individual, and his experiences in participation with members of the movement change his attitude and eventually his goals.

During the indoctrination period, the aim is to have the individual internalize the values of the organization. Total control is achieved through insulation and absorption. Through ideology the individual is insulated and given a separate moral and intellectual world within which to think and operate; all events are interpreted within the context of ideology. The conspiratorial atmosphere, with an emphasis on illegal work, starts a process of disintegration of normal moral principles and a reduction of inhibitions which hampers an individual’s actions and ability to be manipulated. All of his time is absorbed by organizational activities – meetings, demonstrations, distribution of literature and recruitment. This constant activity gives the individual’s life an apparent meaning and removes him from outside interests and contacts (Stahelski, 2004: 4).

Indoctrination and education reinforce an individual’s loyalty to the underground terrorist organization and immersion in the movement. The
individual is disciplined and schooled to think in terms of how his actions can help or hinder the organization, not how they fit his former personal goals or norms.

When an individual joins an organization, the number of decisions and alternatives available to him decreases; he devotes most of his time to organizational activities and therefore limits his outside interests. As an individual reduces the number of personal relationships, he tends to internalize the rules of the organization and to search less for alternative forms of behavior. Small, closely knit cohesive groups, like most terrorist cells, are highly predictable in behavior. This rigidity increases the extent to which the group goals are perceived to be shared by all members of the group. It is through this development of “esprit de corps” that terrorist groups protect themselves from outside pressures.

The internalization process is complete when group members maintain their conduct without such enforcing agents as surveillance or the direct threat of punishment and when they perform their duties for their own sake. Rousseau (1762) noted the importance of internalized control when he stated that “The strongest, unless he transforms force into right and obedience into duty is never strong enough to have his way all the time”. This awareness of the role of internalization was more formally expressed in sociology by Hirschi (1969) in his articulation of control theory.

As the individual builds up institutional habits and internalizes a code of conduct, he is less likely to leave or inform on his fellow terrorists. The smaller the group, the greater the individual’s involvement and commitment to the group (LaPierre, 1954: 212). Likewise, the more extensive one’s participation in group activities, the more likely the individual is to develop loyalty and moral involvement and finally a commitment to the general goals of the terrorist group. The greater the prestige and status of a terrorist group within a given social context, the more demanding it can be in its recruitment and indoctrination processes. In some cases, potential recruits may be willing to participate in extreme acts to gain membership. In other instances, the group may need to introduce members more slowly into the context of terrorism and allow them to develop a valued identity prior to requiring extreme, non-normative acts of aggression and violence.

The leader’s authority and reputation is often sufficient to maintain social control. Persuasion may be used to present a particular judgment in such a way that the individual members see the value of accepting it in place of their own judgment. Because of the clandestine nature of the terrorist group, conformity to the directions and judgments of one’s superiors is expected. Because of security reasons, little deviation from the group’s norms or the leader’s directions is expected or tolerated. In this environment, a loss of group status is frequently accompanied by a loss of life.
The Process of Retention:

Once terrorists have been recruited and indoctrinated, sustaining loyalty becomes a significant priority. In the case of the altruistic/fatalistic suicide terrorist, sustaining commitment over a long period is usually not required as they are usually expended relatively quickly. The egoistic lone-wolf terrorist, on the other hand, usually operates independently from any group or organization. Sometimes, as was often the case with ETA terrorists in the Basque separatist movement, they dropped in and out of the movement over a period of time and many ceased their operations as they aged or social conditions changed (White, 2009: 332). However, the anomic insurgent terrorist, being in the movement for the long-haul, must adapt and be sustained as an on-going member of the movement.

Frequent assignments and a high degree of activity also have a useful side effect of providing the individual with a sense of invulnerability (U.S. Army, 2007: 2-15). He becomes so engrossed in his work that he loses any fear of harm coming to him. While he may be aware that others have been caught or killed, he is so busy with his daily routine that he unconsciously considers himself invulnerable. This feeling is further enhanced by progressively increasing the danger of failure or compromise in the early stages of his training and indoctrination. For example, throwing a few stones in a riot or anonymously distributing literature or painting a few slogans in the night can set the stage for more direct and even dangerous confrontations later on.

Psychological methods and morale-maintaining techniques have been used to induce loyalty and to sustain the role of terrorists. Since defections often occur after serious losses, many terrorist groups establish elaborate strategies to preserve morale and membership. For example, great care is given to make sure that bodies of those killed in action are safeguarded and ceremonies of recognition and honor are conducted, whenever possible (Scaff, 1955:121). This type of experience supports group solidarity and is used to motivate others to avenge the loss of their comrades, to establish a standard of sacrifice or to provide recognition and honor for those who fall in the cause. Hamas, Hezbollah and other jihadist groups also provide pensions and support to the families of suicide bombers or others who have been killed within the context of their movements. This increases retention and participation by providing an additional source of group support and recognition for active terrorists.

Terrorist group membership is also sustained through the use of more formal controls. New recruits are usually not initially given tasks of great responsibility and are kept under close surveillance. They are usually not allowed to leave the group without supervision. Most terrorist groups require that new recruits take an oath promising to remain with the movement on penalty of death.
Terror or enforcing squads are used to retaliate against defectors. Atrocity stories about how defectors are treated by the enemy are frequently part of a new member’s orientation and indoctrination into a movement.

Fishman (2006: 34-35) notes that the lifestyle of a terrorist may provide emotional, physical and sometimes social rewards that had not previously been available to an individual. Emotional rewards such as feelings of notoriety, power and belonging may be attractive to some. In some situations, a sense of satisfaction in rebellion or defying a hated power group may be rewarding; in other circumstances, participation may be perceived as an increase in social status or even power. Especially in the case of the anomic insurgent terrorist, the intense sense of belonging generated by membership in an illegal group may be emotionally satisfying.

Thus, the motives for remaining within terrorist movements may be quite different from those of joining. Indoctrination and propaganda expose the individual to new ideas, of which he may have been unaware before initial membership. New friends, as well as immersion into organizational responsibilities, are strong supports for continued organizational membership.

Terrorists are also influenced by the emergent norms of the group. Turner and Killian (1987: 7-10) stressed the role of norm development as an intrinsic stage in the process of collective behavior. In terrorist groups, norms of violence and commitment are developed in the peer group environment of a subversive organization. Though ideology may play a part in the initial attraction to the group, it is peer group pressure which emerges as the true tie that binds the member to the organization. Membership is further perpetuated through morale-sustaining techniques and practices of the group. Various psychological techniques, such as special ceremonies, group discussions and recognition by revered leaders, either directly or indirectly reinforce the norm of committed membership. Finally, simple inertia and habit of involvement may be another impediment against any inclination to leave a terrorist group.

As previously noted by Hirschi (1969: 16-24), the power of the internal controls of conscience are also reinforced through the group’s surveillance and threats of retaliation against those who either reduce their active commitment or consider defection. Thus, an individual conforms to group norms for many reasons. He may conform out of habit, he may anticipate group administered rewards, such as promotion or group approval, or he may be directed through the use of group disapproval or sanctions. Psychological sanctions depend for their effectiveness on the value the individual places on his status within the group. While a great loss of status seldom results from a single act, serious or persistent deviations may lead to loss of status, one’s reputation as a trusted member, or even one’s life within the terrorist movement (Crozier, 1960: 170).
Summary and Conclusions:

“Terrorism Within the Community Context” investigates and discusses the processes of terrorist recruitment within communities and societies and the development of the anomic insurgent terrorist, the egoistic lone-wolf terrorist, and the altruistic/fatalistic suicide terrorist Building upon the rich literature in the fields of collective behavior and social movements, this presentation focused on the different types of terrorists, their motivations and the social and psychological factors which are correlated with the transformation of an individual from a community member to a community threat. This analysis invoked the perspectives of Durkheim, Sykes and Matza, Snow, Hirschi and others as the role of terrorist is identified, acquired and acted upon. Particular attention was directed to strategies and tactics of role acquisition and social support.

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