A Review of Lone Wolf Terrorism: the Need for a Different Approach

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Abstract
This literature review examines the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism. There seem to be some important factors that contribute to an individual's deciding to become a lone wolf terrorist instead of joining a larger terrorist group or network. Although there seems to be consensus about terrorists being psychologically stable, it is likely that some lone wolf terrorists could be diagnosed with various forms of psychopathology. Also, lone wolf terrorism is often preceded by a personal event linked to the upcoming terrorist act – something that has made the political personal. Strong reciprocity and group identification are other factors that could contribute to a person becoming a lone wolf terrorist. But to what extent these factors differ in lone wolf and group terrorism is unclear. Another important variable is a more general pattern of acting alone, as well as being socially isolated. Research on lone wolves in a variety of other contexts reveals that these individuals are less likely to trust others to do their job properly. This could also be the case in lone wolf terrorism.

Keywords: lone wolf terrorism, psychopathology, strong reciprocity, group identification, marketing research.

Introduction

Terrorism, albeit existing for centuries, started to receive special attention after the attacks on September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of those attacks, large-scale operations were undertaken in order to deal with the issue of terrorism. Although numerous policies have been implemented, and information has been gathered about some terrorist groups, the issue of lone wolf terrorism seems to be particularly hard to deal with, and has received far less attention. When looking at the US government's definition of terrorism as being "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents", it can easily be concluded that lone wolf political violence is not actually a terrorist act because there are no groups or agents (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). Nevertheless, the lone wolves who carry out political violence seem to have some of the same motivations as the more common terrorists who are attached to groups. In addition, it cannot be denied that the phenomenon is perceived as a huge threat. Various authorities have recognized that lone wolf terrorists are particularly hard to identify before they strike (Spaaij, 2010). Recent cases of lone wolf violence – like the one in Norway, where Anders Breivik caused the death of 77 people – serve as good examples of this undetectability. When evaluating cases of lone wolf terrorism, it seems that it is important first and foremost to identify the perpetrators, especially because of the increasing number of lethal victims claimed by the phenomenon. This paper reviews several studies on the subject, and tries to determine how lone wolf terrorists may differ from the more well known, and perhaps more controllable, terrorist movements. In addressing this subject, the present paper sets out to provide insight as to the motivation individuals might have for committing acts of terrorism, and tries to identify some of the risk factors involved.

In examining lone wolf terrorism, it is important to start with a clear-cut

definition. A good starting point could be the definition Spaaij (2010) used in his research on lone wolves. Lone wolf terrorism is defined as: “ […] terrorist attacks carried out by persons who (a) operate individually, (b) do not belong to an organized terrorist group or network, and (c) whose *modi operandi* are conceived and directed by the individual without any direct outside command or hierarchy” (Spaaij, 2010). This definition helps distinguish lone wolf terrorism from group terrorism. There seems to be a difference of opinion as to what constitutes terrorist attacks. Common elements included in several accepted definitions include the following: (1) calculated violence, (2) that instills fear, (3) motivated by goals that are generally political, religious or ideological (e.g. Miller, 2006; Spaaij, 2010; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). These guidelines help distinguish terrorist attacks from other forms of violence.

Although several theories have been offered which seek to explain the process of becoming a terrorist, very few are specific. For example, in his theory on the evolution of the terrorist mind, Borum (2003) proposes four stages that occur in the process leading to terrorism. While explaining these stages in detail, the question remains why only a very small percentage of the people who experience these stages eventually become terrorists. Like so many other theorists on the subject, Borum leaves us without a clearly defined answer. Instead he says that some people “choose” the path of terrorism. But what is it that distinguishes these individuals from the more numerous group of individuals who do not choose such a path? According to other research on terrorism (Van den Bos, Loseman & Doosje, 2009), perceived injustice is an important factor contributing to becoming a terrorist. Although they argue that there is no single reason why an individual becomes a terrorist, they describe a number of other factors that could be seen as predisposing factors leading to becoming a terrorist, or to sympathizing with terrorists. These include strong reactions to uncertainty and the idea that other groups threaten their group.

There is one possible advantage in researching lone wolf individuals as opposed to terrorist groups and organizations: the availability of a number of published case studies on lone wolf terrorists. Although there seems to be no consensus as to whether to think about lone wolf terrorism as a form of terrorism in which the person concerned is just “more strongly motivated” or to think of it as being a completely different process, case studies on lone wolf terrorism hold out the promise of eventually answering questions like these. And it could be argued that it is possible that, through studying these specific cases, a more detailed answer on the motivations on becoming a lone wolf terrorist can be formulated. This article highlights some of the findings from a number of case studies on the subject, and sets out to identify a number of factors that could lead an individual to become a lone wolf terrorist.

Psychopathology

Although general research on group terrorism tells us that psychopathology is not a major causal factor in an individual becoming a terrorist (e.g. Van den Bos et al., 2009), some evidence exists regarding the presence of various forms of psychopathology in lone wolf terrorists. Indeed, Hewitt (2003) argues that the degree of psychological disturbance, seemingly low or lacking altogether in most group terrorists, is considerably higher among lone wolves. The research findings of Spaaij (2010) report that, in four out of the five individual case studies of lone wolves, some form of psychopathology can be observed. Three of the cases could even be diagnosed with

serious forms of personality disorders. And four of the individuals studied appear to have experienced severe depression during at least one stage of their lives. Moskalenko and McCauley (2011), on the other hand, argued that the individuals in their case studies were psychologically stable. This conclusion seems questionable though, considering how they proceed to describe some of these persons “hearing the voice of God” and viewing themselves as God’s personal warrior. Such self-reports don’t necessarily warrant a psychiatric diagnosis, and it could thus very well be that psychopathology is indeed not present among these individuals. Although aware of the serious dangers in judging people based on psychopathology, for now, evidence suggests that psychological factors should be taken into account when investigating lone wolf terrorism.

Personal

It is inherent in the definition of terrorism that the attacks are not personal. At least, its victims are not typically targeted for who they are, and in most cases not even for what they do. Most of them are civilians. However, the events that lead certain individuals to become lone wolf terrorists do seem to be of a personal nature. A common denominator in lone wolf research appears to be the fact that individuals experience something that leads to a political cause becoming personally important to them (e.g. Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). Although it can also be argued that group terrorism is also personally motivated, the link in that case is more indirect. Van den Bos et al. (2009) argue that, in group terrorism, perceived injustice vis-à-vis an entire group is an important factor contributing to an individual becoming a terrorist. In many of the observed cases in lone wolf terrorism however, it appears that individuals felt a moral obligation to act after something happened to make the political personal for *themselves,* rather than for an entire group.

A vivid example of political events being personalized is the case of Clayton Waagner. With a history of various acts of theft and burglary, Waagner was sentenced to four to ten years in prison in 1992. After Waagner was released in 1999, his daughter Emily went into premature labor. His granddaughter Cierra was stillborn at 24 weeks. In his own book, Waagner (2003) writes that his commitment to fight abortion started when he held his granddaughter’s inanimate body. Captured in December 2001 after sending out close to 600 letters to abortion clinics containing anthrax threats, leading to many of these clinics ceasing operations, Waagner is now serving a 30-year jail sentence in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). More cases like this one are known, though it is hard to tell if all of the lone wolf terrorists have had similar personal experiences. This kind of information is sometimes hard to derive from case studies, and there is always the possibility that information is being withheld. In order to make a statement about the importance of this variable – “the political made personal” – it is important that more cases be gathered. Recently, more research on female terrorism (i.e., in the context of group terrorism) has been conducted. Findings suggest that personal causes could be strong motivators in female terrorism as well, which means that gender could be a factor (O'Rourke, 2009).

Strong reciprocity and group identification

Two other important factors that are also contributors to group terrorism are possible causes of lone wolf terrorism: *strong reciprocity* and *group identification*. However, the way in which these terms need to be understood in lone wolf terrorism is not clear. What is clear is that lone wolf terrorists violate the rules of

rational choice theory, which dictate that individuals who make sacrifices for a general good (i.e., something that benefits more people than themselves) are seen as irrational. Specifically, the behavior of lone wolves violates the "free rider problem" in rational choice theory, which holds that it is better to let others sacrifice and then share in their fruits of effort, instead of making your own personal sacrifice (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2010).

In groups, this problem is perhaps logically overcome by punishment for free-riding. Social rewards for participation and social punishments for free-riding can be seen as leading to a group dynamic that rationalizes personal sacrifice. But in lone wolves, who do not belong to groups or organizations, these reasons seem absent. According to Moskalenko and McCauley (2011), this is where a strong feeling of reciprocity comes in. They argue that the feelings of sympathy and empathy these individuals experience mean that they care less for free-riding and believe strongly that they have a personal role in cooperating in order to reach a common goal. Although many people have a tendency to voluntarily cooperate and punish non-cooperators (Fehr, Fischbacher & Gächter, 2002), the extreme personal costs associated with being willing to commit violence is seen as a barrier for many individuals (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011). Therefore it can be argued that lone wolf terrorists have a strong feeling of reciprocity – a feeling that they perhaps experience more profoundly than other individuals. But this feeling alone is not sufficient to explain all cases of lone wolf terrorism.

Besides strong reciprocity, group identification plays an important role in lone wolf terrorism, and in terrorism in general. Group identification is common in human affairs. When we identify positively with a group, this means that we feel good when other members of our group do well, are safe, and prospering, but we feel bad when others in our group are in danger, failing, and diminished (Moskalenko, McCauley & Rozin, 2006). Negative identification operates in just the opposite manner and involves, for example, feeling good when the other is in trouble. Concern for the welfare of others in our group can go beyond value to ourselves. We invest in others that we care about, and when others are threatened, there is a strong possibility that conflict will follow. In fact, McCauley (2006) argues that the foundation of intergroup conflict is the human capacity for group identification.

So when we identify positively with a group, and we feel that this group is being victimized, this produces negative identification with the other group, which may lead to conflict. This finding is not different from the research Van den Bos and colleagues (2009) did on terrorism in general. In fact, group identification seems to play an important role in lone wolf as well as group terrorism. This finding suggests that lone wolves, perhaps even more strongly than other individuals identify with a larger group. The group cause is what motivates them to take action. However, rather than plotting plans with others, they instead take matters in their own hands. Moskalenko and McCauley (2011) argue that this could result from a heightened sense of sympathy and empathy towards other group members that – according to the lone wolves – are being victimized. However, other explanations exist. For example, although lone wolves do identify with others, the case studies suggest that they prefer being alone in general.

Loners

Research on lone wolves points out that they typically withdraw from mainstream society (Spaaij, 2010). All five cases investigated by Spaaij describe loners with

few friends that generally prefer being, and acting, alone. They all suffered from varying degrees of social ineptitude. This pattern also emerges when examining the cases in Moskalenko and McCauley's research (2011), and could be, as Spaaij (2010) points out, an important reason why lone wolves become and remain lone wolves.

A different angle

Research from a completely different angle holds promise in explaining some behavior exhibited by lone wolves. Marketing research that investigates the role of lone wolves in student teams offers an interesting take on these individuals. While some of the motivational reasons seem to differ greatly from the lone wolf terrorists described earlier, other findings from this marketing research seem to dovetail with those of the studies previously discussed here. A number of factors are described that might lead a person to not fully contribute to team processes. These include a lack of common goals and personality differences with other team members (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy & Ramsey, 2002). According to marketing research, lone wolves are highly committed, very task-oriented individuals. They seem to lack patience to work with others and spend little time and energy on interpersonal interactions. Lone wolves do not trust that others *can* and *will* do the work required (Feldman Barr, Dixon & Gassenheimer, 2005). These findings could contribute in creating a picture of lone wolf terrorists. While the lack of a common goal is not usually the case in lone wolf terrorism, many of the characteristics of lone wolves described in the marketing research could very well apply to lone wolf terrorists. If nothing else, these findings suggest a possible starting point for future research.

Conclusion

This article tried to identify points of interest in examining lone wolf terrorism. Case studies showed that a couple of factors possibly contribute to the process of becoming a lone wolf terrorist. Psychopathology might play a role in lone wolf terrorism. How it influences lone wolves is unclear, and further research on the subject is indicated. Two other contributing factors might be strong reciprocity and group identification. It is argued that lone wolves might be more sympathetic and empathetic than others. This might explain the motivation to act in response to feelings of reciprocity and group identification, where others would not. These factors could explain why somebody would commit acts of terrorism, but are probably not sufficient to explain why a person acts alone. In all the observed cases, the people described appear to be loners in general. They tend to isolate themselves from society, and act without others in everyday situations as well. Marketing research holds promise in identifying lone wolf behavior and maybe even explaining it. Although it is not certain that findings in marketing research apply to lone wolf terrorism, they might be a starting point in further research.

Limitations

One important factor that has to be taken into account when examining lone wolf terrorism is that the vast majority of research is based on case studies. These case studies have advantages as well as disadvantages. They provide reasonable insight into the behavioral patterns of the individuals concerned, but there is always the risk that important factors have been left out. Also, it can be hard to compare different cases, and it can be especially hard to generalize findings to other individuals or situations. Another possible limitation that has to be taken into account is the fact that little research has been done on the subject. Few authors could be found that specifically addressed the problem of lone wolf terrorism, and that used case studies to examine the phenomenon.

Therefore the current literature review seems to be somewhat limited to a few authors and findings. This is another reason why different disciplines – like marketing research – might be valuable in examining the phenomenon of lone wolves.

Interdisciplinary

The current review is based on different scientific disciplines. Interdisciplinary viewpoints in examining lone wolf terrorism could contribute to creating a complex yet comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Although different disciplines are used in examining lone wolf terrorism, the way in which the research is conducted is mostly qualitative. Different disciplines use different research methods that should be explored more deeply if possible. Research that is mostly based on case studies has advantages as well as disadvantages. The ideal situation would be to conduct experimental research, employ quantitative measures, and employ case studies. The greatest barrier to embarking upon such studies is finding the participants needed for these types of research. This barrier seems to be the primary reason for using mostly case studies. However, efforts should be made to overcome this obstacle. The question is *how*? A possible answer lies in different disciplines examining lone wolves in different contexts. Persons at risk of imminently engaging in lone-wolf terrorism are less likely to cooperate in research studies than other individuals sharing lone-wolf personality traits who are not contemplating violent action. Thus, exploring lone wolf behavior in different contexts might be a more fruitful course of action for researchers, and might yield findings that can be applied to the specific subgroup of lone-wolf terrorists (or would-be terrorists).

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