

Alternative Peer Groups May Offer Way to Deter Some Suicide Bombers

Science Journal/October 8, 2004

By Sharon Begley

The woman had never helped herself to so much as a paper clip from the office, but when she visited Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona it was as if she had had a character transplant.

A sign explained that, over the years, so many people had picked up chunks of the petrified wood scattered across the terrain that anything smaller than the gigantic logs on the desert floor could soon be gone, and it admonished visitors to therefore refrain from this illegal act.

The woman's reaction? She told her boyfriend they had better pick up some pieces this very visit or there wouldn't be any left.

This reaction stunned her boyfriend, but it shouldn't have. In study after study, social psychologists have shown that it is the group with which a person identifies, not individual personality, that often determines behavior, says Robert Cialdini of Arizona State University, who describes this incident in one of his studies. The upright woman inferred, correctly, that pocketing bits of petrified wood was normal behavior for visitors to the forest, and wanted to conform to the group norm.

Superficially, this is just peer pressure writ large. But as scientists are learning, the groups with which people identify are fungible (the woman never thought of herself as a member of the "Petrified Forest visitors" group). To understand why people do as they do, you need to look at the group with which they identify at the time.

That realization is shaping scientists' understanding of suicide bombers, whose numbers have soared. Who are they? Not the cowardly psychopaths or sociopaths you might expect. "There is little to no evidence that they are mentally unbalanced," says Todd Stewart, a retired Air Force general who now directs the Program for International and Homeland Security at Ohio State University. From the Sept. 11 attackers to Palestinian suicide bombers to al Qaeda terrorists, they are educated, fairly well off and "not necessarily from fanatically religious families," he says.

This alarmingly normal profile is why the National Science Foundation gave anthropologist Scott Atran, a research director at the National Center for Scientific Research, Paris, emergency funding to study groups that sponsor suicide attacks. He just spent three weeks in Gaza and the West Bank, where he spoke to counterterrorism strategists,

fugitive Hamas leaders, would-be suicide bombers and families of "martyrs."

"None of the supporters of suicide terrorism I interviewed, especially at al-Najah University, were poor, uneducated, socially estranged or psychologically deranged," says Prof. Atran. "They are idealistic and compassionate, and think they can change the world. That makes the whole thing more frightening than if they were just crazies off the street." In a study of al Qaeda recruits, forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman of the University of Pennsylvania finds a similar pattern: Many attended college and are economically better off than most Palestinians or European Muslims, and they are often "the elite of their countries," he says.

But suicide terrorists are not rational in the way science understands the term. They do not weigh risks and benefits or winning and losing strategies. For the suicide bomber, says Prof. Atran, "'sacred values' and fervor trump rational interest." For instance, when he asked young Hamas supporters whether a martyr is "more deserving" if he kills 10 of the enemy or 100, all responded that it would not matter if the martyr killed no one but himself. He also asked, if your father were dying and your mother asked you to delay your suicide operation, would you? All answered that "duty to God" cannot be delayed for even a minute.

Yet When Prof. Atran got aspiring martyrs alone, "there was a lot more nuance, flexibility and doubt," he says. "They're not so sure anymore, whereas in the group they're convinced of what they're saying."

That's why insights into suicide attackers will have to come from understanding group dynamics, not individual psychology, says Gen. Stewart. "Group norms are more important than individual traits" in creating a suicide bomber, he says. Terrorist leaders make recruits view the group -- terrorist cell or larger society -- as a pseudofamily for whom they will give their life. That manipulation can trump individual personality to produce horrific behavior in ordinary people.

Psychology experiments show how disturbingly easy it is to manipulate people into committing atrocities. The key is to inculcate a sense of belonging and hence obligation to a group. In the controversial "Stanford Prison Experiment" in 1971, for instance, 24 normal college-age men were assigned to be guards or prisoners. The "guards" quickly became sadistic, engaging in what Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo called "pornographic and degrading abuse of the prisoners," presaging the behavior of American troops at Abu Ghraib prison.

We won't prevent suicide attacks by trying to profile terrorists; they're not different enough from everyone else. The best hope, says Gen. Stewart, may be to understand how terrorist groups "socialize" recruits and exploit their desire for status and belonging -- and then to offer these young people an alternative. The group a person identifies with, as the woman at Petrified Forest showed, is not set in stone.

To see more documents/articles regarding this group/organization/subject [click here.](#)

[Disclaimer](#)



Home Database Cult News Search Getting Help Forum Mind Control Legal
Contact Us About Us What's New Headlines Links Books Help RRI FAQ