THEORETICAL PATHWAYS TO TERRORISM, CRIME, AND MASS SHOOTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Theories are systematic and evidenced-based approaches to processes and phenomena. They help us categorize, understand, and predict outcomes. This article argues that multi-theoretical approaches to problem-solving and research trump single-theory research. The article chronicles the multi-theoretical approach to terrorism, crime, and mass shootings in an undergraduate homeland security course. The course applies five theories: social movement theory, social identity theory, radicalization, general strain theory, and lone-actor grievance-fueled violence to terrorism, crime, and mass shootings.

Keywords: *crime, equifinality, lone-actor grievance-fueled violence, mass shootings, multifinality, multi-theoretical approaches*, *social identity theory, social movement theory, strain theory, radicalization, terrorism*

INTRODUCTION

Theories are systematic and evidenced-based approaches to processes and phenomena. They help us make value judgments, identify causal relationships, describe and characterize things, and predict outcomes (Comiskey, 2018; Kuhn, 1996; Popper, 1963). This article captures the methodology and core theories of Monmouth University's (MU) *Theory for Homeland Security* (HLS 287) course. The course presumes that multi-frame and multi-theory approaches to homeland security problems trump single-frame and single-theory approaches to those problems. The article provides a roadmap of HLS 287 and its affiliated courses. First, the article describes HLS 287, its learning outcomes, and its role in MU's Bachelor of Homeland Security curriculum. Next, the paper provides a snapshot of MU. What follows is a multi-frame analysis of five theories that help explain why people join terrorist and criminal groups and engage in terrorism, crime, and mass shootings. The article concludes with ways to teach theory in college-level homeland security programs.

THEORY FOR HOMELAND SECURITY (HLS 287)

HLS 287 is a required course in MU's Bachelor of Homeland Security curriculum and is a writing-intensive course (WT). MU requires all students to complete two WT courses in their major. The course focuses on multi-frame and multi-theoretical approaches to problems, starting with McEntire's (2003) multi-framing analysis of vulnerability, Allison and Zelikow's (1999) multi-frame analysis of the White House's decision-making process during the Cuban missile

crisis, and Greenhill and Kohm's (2013) multi-frame analysis of the Rashomon effect. Topical issues include misinformation, critical thinking, terrorism, mass shootings, workplace violence, climate security, inter-organizational collaboration, technology, and cyberspace operations. HLS 287 and Criminal Justice Statistics (CJ 211) are prerequisites for Research Methods (HLS 315), which is a prerequisite for Senior Seminar (HLS 490). The bachelor's degree resides in the Department of Criminal Justice. The Department refers to the courses HLS 287, CJ 211, HLS 315, and HLS 490 as the *research sequence* that aggregates problem identification, theoretical and statistical approaches and analysis of problems, and evidence-based resolution/amelioration of those problems. Upon completion of HLS 287, students will be able to:

1. Describe the term theory and associated terms to persons unfamiliar with the subject matter.
2. Describe and analyze the causation and underpinnings of homeland security problems.
3. Analyze and apply theories associated with terrorism and crime to real-world problems/circumstances.
4. Analyze and apply theories associated with natural, adversarial/manmade, and accidental/technological disasters to real-world problems/circumstances.
5. Analyze and apply theories associated with organizational behavior to real-world problems/circumstances.
6. Demonstrate the ability to provide evidence and reasons to support rigorous analysis and positions.
7. Produce an integrative theoretical review of a homeland security-related theory/theories.

MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY

MU is a private institution in West Long Branch, New Jersey, in the Northeast of the U.S. It is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education Association. The University hosts over 5,000 undergraduates and 1,700 graduate students and is ranked #17 in Regional Universities North by the *US News and World Report's* Best Colleges in 2023 (Monmouth University, 2022). MU's Department of Criminal Justice hosts over 300 undergraduate and 50 graduate students in its homeland security and criminal justice programs.

MULTI-FRAME ANALYSIS OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Homeland security is a national approach to all *threats* and *all-hazards*, especially the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk to the nation (Department of Homeland Security, [DHS], 2015, 2023a). A threat "indicates potential harm to life, information, operations, the environment, and property" (DHS, 2017, p. 661). All-hazards is a grouping classification encompassing all conditions, environmental or manmade, that have the potential to cause injury, illness, or death; damage to or loss of equipment, infrastructure services, or property" (DHS, 2017, p. 23).

Bellavita (2008) argued that homeland security might be framed as terrorism, all-hazards, terrorism and catastrophe, jurisdictional hazards, meta hazards, national security, and security

uber alles. Using terrorism as a proxy for homeland security, Kiltz and Ramsay (2011) viewed terrorism through multiple lenses, framing terrorism as criminal justice, international relations, organizational design problems, and an overlap of the three lenses. Using numerous lenses in analyzing complex phenomena such as terrorism is essential because, when used alone, one perspective can miss critical elements and capture only a tiny part of the phenomena we observe. Their reasoning follows the logic of Schmid's (2004) five conceptual lenses of terrorism: terrorism as a crime, politics, warfare, communication, and religious fundamentalism. More recently, Dahl and Ramsay (2023) found that homeland security is a meta, "pracademic" discipline with close links to international relations, public health, cyber security, and security studies. Considering the above, the author tasked undergraduate students in the HLS 287 course to identify scholarly sources for five theories that help explain terrorism, crime, and mass shootings. The theories are most effective in helping to explain the phenomena when juxtaposed and integrated.

COURSE METHODOLOGY

The course begins with an examination of key terms, including context, equifinality, meaning, multifinality, multi-frame analysis, interpretation, security, and terrorism. Next, students review the core tenets of homeland security, interagency and intergovernmental cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. What follows are examinations of theories, including interagency collaboration, the theory of preventive action, organizational theory, and central tendency theory.

Next, students read course texts on five key theories: social movement theory, social identity theory (SIT), radicalization, general strain theory (GST), and lone-actor grievance-fueled violence (LAGFV). Each theory and related topics are discussed in class in preparation for a five-part writing assignment that includes

- Multiple iterations of an annotated bibliography that provides five scholarly sources of each of the theories for a total of 15 sources.
- Multiple iterations of a final paper that defines terrorism, crime, and mass shootings and applies the five theories to terrorism, crime, and mass shootings.
- An oral presentation that defines terrorism and applies the five theories to terrorism, crime, and mass shootings.

The assignment requires students to identify scholarly sources that align with the assignment; provide brief descriptions of how the sources provide cogent explanations of each theory; integrate the explanations into a final paper that explains each approach and how they might be applied to terrorism, crime, and mass shootings; and comply with APA7 guidelines and the rules of grammar. The course concludes with an examination of reflective practice and an exploration of future homeland security challenges.

THEORIES THAT HELP EXPLAIN TERRORISM, CRIME, AND MASS SHOOTINGS

This section highlights the tenets of social movement theory, SIT, radicalization, GST, and LAGFV and their implications for homeland security policy and practice. They help explain why and how people join terrorist and criminal organizations and engage in mass shootings and other nefarious activities.

Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory helps explain the geneses and rationales for social movements, especially mass social and dissent movements. Groups of marginalized people and their supporters seek to change the status quo. They join forces and petition their governments, corporations, and others for change. The groups protest, boycott, strike, and engage in other activities to change the status quo. They may grow into mass civil movements involving thousands of people. They may split into nonviolent, violent, and criminal factions. Some terrorist organizations may be traced to mass civil movements (most do not). The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2023) concluded that sub-national and non-state actors, from multinational corporations to transnational social movements, can increasingly create influence, compete for information, and secure or deny political and security outcomes.

Social movement theory and associated theories, such as mass society theory, self-efficacy, and relative deprivation theory, have been used to help explain the emergence, methods, and experiences of animal rights, anti-government, anti-gun violence, anti-war, civil rights, environmental, faith-based, feminist, and other groups as well as groups that oppose these groups (Almeida, 2019: Beck, 2008; Belgioioso, 2018; Porta & Diani, 2018; Schlegel, 2020).

Social Identity Theory

SIT holds that people characterize themselves as being in competitive groups. The in-group ("us") comprises people who share an identity such as a social, political, or religious identity. The out-group ("them") consists of people who do not match or are excluded from the in-group (Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Some in the group adhere to the principle that the group, movement, or organization is justified using "any means necessary" (See Fanon, 2018; Malcolm X, 1992). Hoffer's *True Believer* (1951) aligns with SIT and social movement theory. He argues that people join social, political, and religious mass movements out of dissatisfaction with the status quo and their lives. They believe that the movement will bring positive change to society and themselves. SIT and related theories, such as significance quest theory and terrorism management theory, have been used to explain terrorism, violent extremism, and substate conflict (Brannan & Strindberg, 2023; Brannan et al., 2014; Wright, 2015); belief in conspiracy theories (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015); the propensity of youths to be attracted to peer groups, including extremist groups (Brown, 2020); the nexus of persistent status denial and geopolitical competition (Ward, 2017); gun ownership and media coverage of mass shootings (Seate et al., 2012); and sports fandom (Hirshon, 2020).

Radicalization

Radicalization theories define how individuals and groups accept and act on extreme ideas and beliefs. At the beginning of the process, people and groups are exposed to and progressively accept radical ideologies without question, culminating in the planning and execution of violence and illegal activity to further the cause. The process is not definitive. How different individuals and groups enter and progress in the process varies (FBI, 2006; Klausen et al., 2015, 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019; Moghaddam, 2005; National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, & DHS, 2021; Neumann, 2011; Odag et al., 2019; Raitanen & Oksansen, 2019; Scruton, 2002; Silber & Bhatt, 2007; Smith, 2018).

Crossett and Spitaletta (2010) identified 16 theories that explain the underlying causes of radicalization, ranging from societal and economic pressures to identity and antisocial disorders to dysfunctional cognitive processes. Beelmann (2020) proposed a three-step model of radicalization that integrated 10+ theories. He found four interrelated but distinct social developmental processes are central conditions for radicalization and extremism: identity problems, prejudice, political or religious ideologies, and antisocial attitudes and behavior. Turchin (2023) found that radicalization works like a disease. As it spreads, the condition changes people's behavior and makes them act violently. Naïve or malleable individuals can become "radicalized" by exposure to radicals, including interactions via social media. This follows Lafferty et al.'s (2008) ecological and epidemiological analysis of terrorism. Terrorism, like infectious diseases, emerges and evolves due to complex interactive processes. For example, Levinsson et al. (2022) found that COVID-19 psychological distress, support for COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and other variables contribute to support for violent extremism, and Barnett (2023) concluded that climate change would create northward-bound climate refugees who will be rendered both a burden to the state and prey to exploitation by criminal networks ripe for radicalization. Understanding these processes helps us understand the phenomena and anticipate how they might evolve.

General Strain Theory

GST helps explain deviant behavior. The theory holds that some people engage in deviant behavior due to stressors, including failure to gain social acceptance in school, career, financial, romantic, or other desired outcomes. These failures result in anger, frustration, and unresolved grievances. People lacking coping mechanisms and capable guardians to help them overcome these feelings may engage in criminal and deviant behavior (Agnew, 1985, 1992; see also Durkheim, 1893/2019; Merton, 1968). Strain theory and associated theories, such as cumulative strain theory, differential association theory, problem behavior theory, rational actor theory, and routine activities theory, were used to help explain terrorism (Agnew, 2010; Rajakumar, 2013), gangs (Klemp-North, 2007), cults and religions (Mavor & Yesseldyk, 2020; Seul, 1999), workplace violence (Hinduja, 2007); (van Heugten & Schmitz, 2015), mass shootings (Levin & Madfis, 2009; Silver et al., 2019), and white collar crime (Langton & Piquero, 2007).

Lone-Actor Grievance-Fueled Violence

LAGFV is an umbrella term for offenders who commit *targeted violence* toward others. Targeted violence refers to situations in which an identifiable perpetrator threatens violence to a particular individual or group. The term is often used to study mass shooter threats (FBI, 2019; Fein et al., 1995). LAGFV scholars argue that there is a risk of a simple polarity in thinking about public and mass violence. The approach misses a critical opportunity to understand pathways to violence and the significance of co-occurring factors that give rise to violence. LAGFV focuses on the grievances, real or imagined, that underlie the motives of mass murders, lone-actor terrorists, workplace shooters, school shooters, terrorists, and other types of demonstrative violence. The construct guides the conceptualization of a diverse group of offenders who commit targeted violence toward others (Brooks & Barry-Walsh, 2022; Clemmow et al., 2022; Sizoo et al., 2022).

Terrorism Remains a Top Threat to the Homeland

The DHS (2023b) *Homeland Threat Assessment 2024* found that terrorism remains a top threat to the homeland. Social movement, SIT, radicalization, and LAFGV offer overlapping explanations for pathways to terrorism, crime, and violence. Taken together, they provide practical means to identify and intervene in the processes contributing to the phenomenon, such as threat assessments, counter and deradicalization programs, crisis intervention initiatives, access and referral to mental health services, interagency collaborations (e.g., law enforcement, mental health providers, and educators), and disorder control tactics (policing of demonstrations) that avoid alienating nonviolent participants.

LIMITATIONS OF THEORY

All models are wrong, but some are useful (Box, 1976). This aphorismic logic should be applied to theories. The theories listed above help explain the wickedness of terrorism, crime, and mass shootings and offer remedies that may help prevent and mitigate the threat. They fall short of the realities and complexities of human cognition and a dynamic threat landscape; they are nonetheless helpful. Feyerabend (1975) found that theories and disciplinary methodologies inhibited thought and progress and that most scientific breakthroughs violated prevailing norms. He promoted *theoretical anarchism*—seeking the best theories and practices independent of strict rules, especially the scientific method. Bellavita (2023) argued that theories seldom provide clear guidance for prospective actions within complex social systems. Their primary value lies in post-event analysis to understand what went wrong. Similarly, Epstein (2019) found that we learn who we are in practice, not theory. Other scholars found that while theory helped develop and organize knowledge, it could privilege and legitimize certain practices while inhibiting others (Billigan, 2008; Flinders & Mills, 1993; Kahneman, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The author found that the first day of classes is the most important hence the HLS 287 course mantra *finis origine pendet*—the end depends on the beginning. Day one and most classes begin with an image on a PowerPoint slide that may be interpreted differently. Heuer (1999) and Herman (2017, 2021) provide excellent examples of such images. Students grapple with many images but eventually expect the challenge and begin to see that many things have different meanings and are subject to interpretation. Context is important. The idea of seeing things through multiple lenses is then applied to theoretical approaches to problem-solving and research. The multi-theory approach enhances students' critical thinking and success in the follow-on Research Methods (HLS 315) and Senior Seminar (HLS 490) courses. Future iterations of Theory for Homeland Security (HLS 287) will feature multi-theoretical approaches to human trafficking, climate security, organizational effectiveness/efficiency, and cybersecurity problems.

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