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A REVIEW OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL THEORIES OF TERRORISM

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**ABSTRACT**

*The aim this paper is to review the major psycho-social theories in order to understand. Thus, the paper discusses five theories, such as Drive Theory; The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis; Relative Deprivation Theory of Terrorism; The Negative Identity Hypothesis; The Narcissistic Rage Hypothesis; and Social Learning & Social Cognitive Theory. The paper argues that sociological and psychological understanding of terrorism is the most important factor to curb this phenomenon.*

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**Keywords:** Terrorism, Relative Deprivation, Theory of Terrorism, Negative Identity Hypothesis, Narcissistic Rage Hypothesis, Social Learning Theory, Psychological Perspectives

**INTRODUCTION**

Psycho-social theories of terrorism attempt to elaborate the objectives and goals of terrorists, root causes of terrorism and nature of terrorist attacks. Despite several attempts to understand the psychological nature of terrorism, it is revealed that little was explored about the causes, consequences, motivations, ideology, organization, tactics and escalation of terrorism. There is a need of further research and psycho-analysis to examine more intensely the terrorist mind-set and causes of terrorism more accurately and systematically.

In the meantime, sociological perceptions are also pertinent to the social construction of psychological aspects of terrorism. For instance, modern sociological perspectives are primarily concerned with the social construction of fear or fright and to the question that how these psycho-social expressions are addressed and handled by media and other working groups. There are several research approaches to discuss and criticize the act of terrorism, such as instrumental approaches, organizational approaches, reconciliatory approaches, political and economic approaches. However, it is essentially significant to understand the social constructivist point of view and psycho-social approaches to comprehend the causes and consequences of terrorism along with remedial approaches to terrorism.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Smelser (2010) researching the circumstances of terrorism, its causes, and also the ideologies that instigate and fuel terrorists across the globe, looks rigorously at the terrorists themselves, the ways they are recruited, their motivation behind it, the group they form, their intended audiences, and media uses for accomplishing their set agendas. He studies the largest societies (i.e., USSR and USA) unraveling the convoluted social and psychological effects of terrorist strikes and implications of counter actions. He further explains what it means to live under constant threat of terrorism, and addresses the thorny domestic and foreign policy challenges posed by it (Smelser 2010:90).

Crenshaw (1981) has discussed about the difficulties in searching the common definitions of terrorism; however, economic, political and socio-psychological origins are determined as roots causes behind terrorism. Jeffery (1993) explores three main categories of terrorism including psychological, structural and rational choices.

Federal Research Division, which researches and analyses domestic and international affairs for various agencies of USA, in its report “The Society and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?” has discussed the causes of terrorism extensively under five categories: (i) Multi-causal approaches; (ii) Political approach; (iii) Organizational approach; (iv) Physiological approach; and (v) Psychological approach. Multi-causal approach defines that terrorism is having multiple causes, therefore, it is not only psychological but other factors such as economic (inequalities, poverty) political (mal-governance) religious (sectarian and ideological clashes), and social factors (social injustice, ethnic clashes, lack of communication) are also responsible for terrorist activities and circumstances also play a key role in pushing individuals into violent activities (Hudson and Majeska, 1999). Further, political factors include dislocation of people, supply of weapons, and lack of security measures (Crenshaw, 1981). Johnson (2004) argues the imperialism and revolutionary measures are also causes of terrorism (Johnson, 2004). These national and international factors create frustration and deprivation amongst the people, which further leads them to the violent reaction. On the other hand, Crenshaw (1981) calls the terrorist actions as the result of rational strategy taken by some terrorist groups in view of cost-benefit analysis, and these terrorist groups are dominated by the decision of single person.

Randy (2003:11-14) has discussed various psychological theories of terrorism so as to comprehend the violence and terrorism. In this connection, he discussed some hypothesis such as: Instinct, drive,

cognitive, and social learning theories which discussed below in detail. However, he admitted that the subject of psychology lacks theoretical approaches for explaining terrorism and it needs to grow and discover new theories in this regard.

Role of media for exposing terrorist activities is considered as a cause of physiological harm because at one side it spreads fear amongst common people and causes various diseases like blood pressure, heart problems and nervous breakdown, on the other hand, it makes terrorists aware of the violent actions of opposite groups and also teaches them new strategies and plans (Hudson and Majeska, 1999).

**Research Approach:** This is an interpretive qualitative research mainly based on secondary data, such as scholarly articles, books and reports which focused and elaborated sociological and psychological perspectives, approaches and theories of terrorism. Actually, this research based on secondary data; hence, it does not involve personal experiences of the terrorists and affectees of terrorism and violence. However, this research paper critically analyses and compares the effects of social and psychological factors related to terrorism on the minds of a particular group, which resorts to terrorist activities under the pressure of those factors. The secondary qualitative data collected for this research are analyzed and interpreted by employing content analysis approach.

## **DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

This paper focuses psycho-social theories of understanding of terrorism and its effect on society. Thus, the detailed discussion provides understanding and analysis of various scholarly contributions from psycho-social perspective on terrorism. Five psycho-social theories of terrorism are discussed and analyzed in the following sub-sections.

**Drive Theory: The Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis:** The concept of Frustration-Aggression as a way to terrorism brings to mind that frustration and aggression are vice versa. Social disciplines assume it as a cause of social upsets derived out of governments' alienating policies (Berkowiz, 1989).

According to this theory the common people not only are deprived of their right to strengthening in the society but the means of the strengthening are also blocked for them, hence they are unable to react to those blocks. This blocking occurs by the mighty party of the society or by the established system which dominates the entire circumstances. In this case, the deprived, marginalized and frustrated individuals or groups attempt to express their frustration and annoyance. In the words of Miller, this frustration produces a variety of retaliatory actions such as

aggression, violence and terrorism (Berkowitz, 1988). The detail about the diffusion of frustration into aggression and the terrorism does not express only an individual's psychological state but it necessarily means to express about the prevailing phenomenon in the whole society/country. Further, it might be caused by internal or external factors. Internally, the basic reasons for this state are mal-governance, political destabilization which further creates economic inequality, injustice, un-employment, while the external factors can be exemplified through direct or indirect occupation (Berkowitz, 1989).

Thus, when the frustrated people are unable to fight against the mighty powers they react violently against state's writ or external occupation. Insurgency, revolutionary and sub-revolutionary terrorism and international terrorism are examples of this reaction. The main difference between the crime and terrorism as a resultant factor of aggression is this that crime is a disorganized act committed by an individual or group of individuals for materialistic interests, while terrorism is a systemic action, committed by group as a result of frustration (Tedeschi and Felson, 1994).

Frustration is not merely materialistic issue; it involves political, economic, religious and social issues. On account of it, range of the terrorist actions is very broad and managed through a complex network, which keeps under control all weaponry, informative, intelligence webs.

**Relative Deprivation Theory of Terrorism:** Relative deprivation theory bases on the conception that how socio-political settings and situations influence ways of behaving and living of the individuals living in such specific environment. Further, it sets forth the certain level where social and political factors contribute in giving birth to the violent terrorist ideologies and the mechanism. Moreover, this theory claims that those societies (countries), which thwart the natural, normal and equal expression and development, witness uprisings, militant movements, rebellion, violence and terrorists occurrence comparatively more than democratic and welfare societies. Thus, the theory claims that neither poverty nor illiteracy/ignorance is reasons behind violence and terrorism. Moreover, it also nullifies the hypothesis that terrorists or suicide bombers suffer psychopathologies because occurrences of terrorism have always been witnessed in the collective form of action (Ziemke 2006). As M. Bilal (2009:2-3) argues: "Terrorism actually operates in a goal-directed capacity rather than a pathological one...the goal-directed nature of terrorism necessitates that its participants act in a rational, rather than a pathological, manner when committing to political violence".

Explaining terrorism and its causes and consequences, Caroline Ziemke (2006) found social, political, economic and political deprivations as a point of indication for violent and terrorist happenings. Most studies on terrorism, violence and extremism during last two decades have debated and documented 'socio-political deprivations' as one of the major causes behind terrorist doings. Thus, connection between socio-political deprivation and terrorism has been augmented in the era of 1990s through certain significant instances of terrorist activities which were results of increased economic and social deprivations. As the role of relative deprivation as a framework for political violence is clear, therefore, it is essential to explore and develop understanding on the types of social deprivation and its influence on terrorist campaigns because different types of causes of distress have different objectives and implications.

Deprivation of social and economic rights causes anger and it frustration and consequently it lead towards doing acts of terrorism. Thus, socio-economic deprivation multiplies and aggravates existing complexities and frustrations that definitely escalates tensions within already socio-economically marginalized groups. In simple words, socio-economic deprivation brings up inequity, injustice and unemployment in the society which resultantly creates frustration amongst youngsters and also instigates them to snatch their rights through unfair manners (Ziemke, 2006).

Foreign or external interference is one of the contributing factors to terrorism as it not only violates territorial integrity of the intervened country, but also creates a sense of loss self-esteem and dignity. Currently, the violent militant groups in Muslim countries claim their actions as a counter action against the Western encroachment in the political affairs of their countries (Irshad, 2011). Irshad argues that emergence of Hezbollah, Taliban and Al-Qaeda aimed at to derive out western military presence from Muslim territory and their intervention in those countries.

Corruption has also been seen one of major factors of relative deprivation which causes emergence of militant groups. It is relatively crucial because it covers all the fields of life and works as generator of all other forms of relative deprivation. Corruption affects political, economic and social fields by all the means and supports terrorist activities in the form of direct and indirect modalities. Political repression, economic exploitation by foreign intervention, and social evils (structural violence) are all forms of corruption which force marginalized groups to accomplice with the violent militant groups (Jenkins, 2001). For instance,

the perpetrators of the 9/11, Madrid and Mumbai attacks all emerged from oppressive and corrupt regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan (Mahmood, 2009).

Generally, the undemocratic societies possesses a weak orientation for peaceful protests because of marginalization and deprivation among masses particularly violation of their basic political, social and economic rights. Further prevalent deteriorating economic standards, social insecurity and political instability produce vulnerability and frustration, which creates conducive environment for adopting the terrorist ideologies.

**The Negative Identity Hypothesis:** Erikson's theory of identity development is a psychoanalytical theory that reflects the influence of society over individual's personality. The basic philosophy of his identity theory is that 'identity crisis in individual's life and contemporary crisis in historical development are inter-related and they define each other' (Hudson and Majeska 1999:20). To Erikson the word 'crisis' not only mean an emotional turmoil or an emergency but an 'opportunity' as well. In his popular book 'Eight Stages of Man' he proposes life-span theory with the concept of development. Main concept of his theory is exploration of identity issues during adolescence. According to him during each stage of life an individual experiences a conflict and needs to subsume a synthesis of the conflict. If the conflict of the stage is countered properly in constructive and satisfactory means the syntonic (healthy and positive) characteristics become prominent in individual's personality. On the other hand, if the conflict is dealt unsatisfactorily the dystonic or negative characteristics will prevail upon the development and may appear in the form of psychopathology. Furthermore, he urges that both syntonic (positive) and dystonic (negative) attributes are part of the developmental process but the healthy development depends upon the balanced situation between the two (Erikson 1982:80).

Crisis and conflicts are linked to all stages of life and they are never resolved rather they turn into lifelong crises. At the first stage of life children are dependent on their parents for feed, care and love. So, if their needs are satisfactorily fulfilled it creates a sense of trust among them and child have confidence in his personality and others, but if they don't get proper attention and repeated delay occurs in their nourishment and regular needs, it makes a child timid and untrustworthy to others.

At the second stage of life which falls between 1 ½ and 3 ½ of the age the developmental task of life is between autonomy and doubt. During this span of life children are still dependent on others yet they

wish to explore the surrounding and have free choice (autonomy) in their actions. They express resentment, stubborn and temper, if parents are unable to deal them properly and try to train them through restrictions then the negative qualities hold on the child like self-doubt, self-dependency and self-consciousness. Similarly, the chance for creating sense of guilt among children are higher at the third stage of life between 3 ½ to 6 years. In this age child is full of surplus energy and curiosities, eagerly involved in the surrounding environment and much more interested in questioning about and happenings. If the child is rebuked for his curiosity it will make him feel guilty and self-destructive (Randy 2000).

The time of life cycle between school age and puberty is very important for adolescence. This stage of life makes one either industrious or inferior because it is time of getting knowledge, learning new skills as well as taking reward and pride of work. Child learns the rules of organized work and game, co-ordination and cooperation if he is appreciated for the task and accomplishment then he becomes industrious and constructive in future life. Inversely, discouragement and no appreciation make him feel inferior, irresponsible, and lazy, which further paralyses his personality and sense of futility injures the ego for the next stage (Sokol, 2009).

Stage of adolescence (12-20 years) is the most important for the youth as regard to solve the identity issue regarding their tribe, nation, religion etc. This is age when a child inclines either to extremist or moderate values. It depends upon the parents to permit them to explore and conclude their identity themselves. Which culture, religious faith or political ideology they want to select? In case pushing them to follow their ethics and values make the teen-ager confused as regard to his identity crisis. If the teens solve the issue of identity successfully it will help them in the next stage of life to be intimate with the surrounding and people. Alternatively, if they fail to solve identity issues they will be victim of isolation (Miller, 1983).

The success of the adulthood between the ages of 40-64 years depends on the resolution of development tasks between intimacy and isolation because in the later age the man will face the crisis of 'generativity'<sup>1</sup>. Production and reproduction is the achievement of this while the dystonic of this age is not having any developing quality

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<sup>1</sup> The term generativity was devised by the psycho-analyst Erik Erikson in 1950 to signify a concern for others' needs especially for nurturing and guiding younger people and to establish and contribute to the next generation.

concerning one's profession, marriage or kids' life and if this stage of life goes fail then the last stage of life (after retirement) will be full of resentment, regression, and destructive ideas for oneself, one's community and nation (Mahmood, 2009).

Using the essence of the theory "Identity Formation" a political psychologist Jeanne N. Knuston (1981) suggests that terrorists consciously reject bitterly roles and values laid to them by family, society and community and they resort to terrorism. The reason of this rejection is disappointment by failure of his aspirations to attain the expected ambitions and needs at the proper stage of life as discussed by Erikson. As a result, feeling of rage and helplessness demonstrate in the form of frustration and aggression which leads them to terrorist actions (Hudson and Majeska, 1999).

**The Narcissistic Rage Hypothesis:** Narcissistic Rage Hypothesis attempts to comprehend and illustrate terrorism. This concept of Narcissist-terrorism linkage was first introduced by Morf in 1970, and then discussed and advanced by other social psychologists (i.e., Erick 1986; Crayton 1983; Jerrold 1990; and Richard, 1991).

The argument of The Narcissistic Rage Hypothesis is that terrorist behaviour is an outcome of personality defect, which produces a destroyed and broken sense of self or selfness. It is a kind of disease in which the affected overvalues him while devalues and underestimates others. Such traits are the main instinct of terrorists (Morf, 2001).

This hypothesis is concerned with the early development of the terrorists. To Crayton (1983) terrorism is an attempt to acquire or maintain power or control by intimidation. In his words two significant narcissistic dynamic grandiose (sense of self) and idealized parental ego 'if I can't be perfect, at least I'm associated with something perfect' (Hudson and Majeska, 1999:20) is a pillar for terrorist behaviour. According to this hypothesis in case of no counter balance of the psychological form of the "grandiose self" this trait produces individuals who are sociopathic, arrogant and lacking regard for others. Similarly, if the psychological form of the "idealized parental ego" is not counter balanced it can produce a condition of helpless defeatism, and narcissistic defeat can lead to reactions of rage and a wish to destroy the source of narcissistic injury in association with something powerful. These psychological mechanisms are found in those individuals who suffer from particular type of psychological injury, called narcissistic injury in their childhood (Dickinson and Pincus, 2003)

When children are profoundly distressed, physically and sexually abused and emotionally insulted, they become vulnerable. In order to get rid of this vulnerability and sense of fear they attempt for more tolerable self-image and pettiness. They start buttering their own self and devaluing others. Thereby, whatever self-esteem they create is fragile because that is based on hatred, violence and sensitivity. This cover-up makes them more sensitive and vulnerable to insult and any expected threat to their personality, therefore, they initiate in attacking others honour and life. Such emotional injuries are known as “narcissistic injuries” which finally trigger to “narcissistic rage”. The notorious dictators of the world suffered from this psychological damage (Victoroff, 2005).

These psychological mechanisms are very much important in understanding the terrorist behaviour. In the words of Crayton (1983) any humiliating counter action against the terrorist can prove counterproductive because terrorists’ activities stem from sense of low self-esteem and humiliation (Berkowitz, 1989).

**Social Learning & Social Cognitive Theory:** Social learning theory is basically an invention of Albert Bandura who gives the notion of reciprocal determinism. This idea states that an individual’s observation, personality characteristics and socio-cultural settings also have a potential influence on his or her own behaviours.

He presented three models to understand observational learning (i) Live Model (ii) Verbal Instruction, and (iii) Symbolic model. In his view, live model is the model of demonstration of person’s desired behaviour; verbal instruction is a model of instruction for the certain behaviour; and symbolic model is about fictional characters which represents actions through media (Radio, television, literature) (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura (1977) puts more emphasis on individual’s characteristics and environment as two reciprocal determinants and dominant factors for individual’s behaviour in society. Otherwise, all these three factors influence each other and make one’s personality. According to social learning theory (Akers & Silverman, 2004) model behaviour is outcome of following four factors: Attention; Retention (remembering what one observed); Reproduction (ability to produce the behaviour); Motivation (good reason) to adopt the specific behaviour

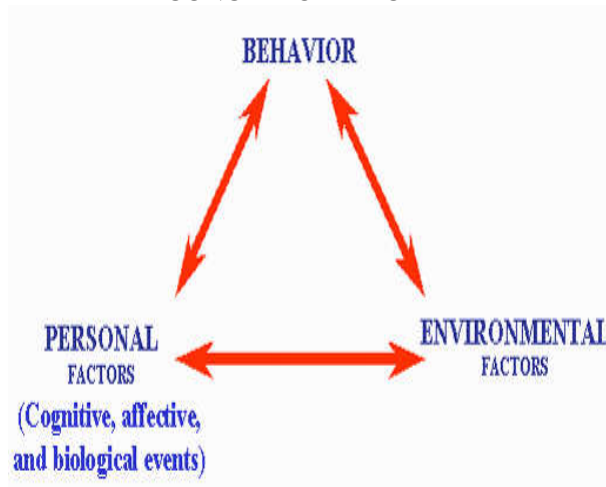
Two qualities shape an individual’s behaviour: punishment (positive and negative) and reinforcement (positive and negative). This categorisation interprets that Social Learning and Clinical Psychology teaches that the effect of behaviour influences the motivation of

individuals and group of people for some significant type of action or some specific behaviour.

This notion suggests that behaviour is not only influenced by psychological factors but environmental factors also have an influence upon the behaviours. Thus, it can be concluded that social learning theory is comprised of two aspects: (i) Behavioural Learning Aspect, and (ii) Cognitive Learning Aspect. The former one suggests that environment influences people's behaviour and motivates them for some specific behaviour while the latter assumes that psychological factors essentially influence one's behaviours (Griffin, 2008).

In 1941, an outfit of social learning theory was introduced by Miller and Dollard, called social cognitive theory, which attempts to explain that human beings make the choices in view of their senses because of their logical tendencies (Miller & Dollard, 1941). The proposition of social learning was expanded and theorized by Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura (1962). It expounds interaction of people with their environment that is based on their own perceptions and interpretation. This interlink can be termed alternatively in these words that people make an internal (cognitive) perceptions of their external (social) environment and intent for a specific behaviour. This theory also explains the way as people maintain the certain kind of behaviour. Discussing environment cognitive theory refers to two factors social and physical environment. Physical environment includes all materialistic things, such as place, money, weather, food, while social environment consists of family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbours. This environment or situation helps to understand one's behaviour because the situation affects behaviour. This inter-linkage is depicted through the following conceptual model.

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL



**Source:** Pajares (2002). Overview of social cognitive theory and of self-efficacy

In view of this model the psychological experimental literature about violence and aggression suggest that there are internal and external factors (environment / situations) that can affect one's perceptions that cause provocations or intent (behaviour). Crenshaw (1981) proposes that theory of social cognition is relevant equally to terrorists and their organizations. She observes that the dealings of terrorists are centered on a prejudiced analysis of the world rather than impartial understanding. They sort out the understanding and opinion of the social and political environment by means of the thinking and attitudes with reference to their experiences and memories (Randy, 2004).

### CONCLUSION

Social Psychology is a multidisciplinary science deriving its insights from sociology, psychology, economics, politics and anthropology. It focuses on responses of the individuals to those social incentives. Currently, the study of terrorism and terrorists is a burning issue of Social-Psychology. Social-Psychology responds to the questions why and how a person becomes Terrorist. It uses deep analysis of the following theoretical approaches (i) Motivational approaches (ii) Cognitive approaches (iii) Social Approaches to deal with the problem of terrorism.

Motivational theories focus on an individual's motivation or need for some causes. This approach discusses all motivational incentives of terrorists' decision to join terrorist act. Derive Theory (Frustration-

aggression hypotheses) and Relative Deprivation theory are two major illustration of motivational approach. Kunston (1984), Executive Director of the International Society of Political Psychology evaluated in her research project about Psychology of Political Terrorism that aggressive behavior and violent acts of terrorists come out from feelings of anger and desperation. Individuals who become terrorists often are deprived of the basic economic and social needs. Educated youths who are unemployed and having no space in the social arena they are motivated by the terrorist groups to use their technological skills and knowledge.

In line with Cognitive theories an individual's behavior depends on existing or imaginary perceptions, memories, and reasoning (interpretation of situation). With the strength of that cognition person makes a sense of the world. Lack of balanced cognitive approach produces various personality defects and gives birth to a socio-path with anti-social personality disorder such as Narcissistic personality. Individuals with Social personality disorder take no notice of right and wrong, they exploit, manipulate and victimize other people for personal gains or in the name of any Nobel social cause. They are intensively ego-centered under sense of superiority; they want to achieve their targets through intimidation, agitation, and violence. They have no regret for the negative consequences of their acts. They are risk-takers; the examples are suicide bombers. This study helps to understand well a terrorist mind set as terrorists view the world with the lenses of their own ideological perceptions whether it is political or religious. They have reasons for their violent actions to be known as legitimate actions by masses and they also want to be known as liberators or martyrs.

Social theories underline that behavior is influenced by cultural values, social norms and social rules. These values, norms and rules give them an identity. While exploring the identity an individual come across different crisis and conflicts at different stages of age. Development of personality depends upon the way of countering those crises and conflicts. A satisfactory and constructive counter action produces a strong personality. Contrarily, if the crisis and conflicts of life stages are not resolved properly they create many identity issues (Negative identity crises).

Terrorist actions aspired by religious fundamentalism is an illustration of identity crisis. For the protection of their religious culture and norms, religious fundamentalists thresh out all away from their religious ideology. Modernization is considered as a threat to their

traditional identity. Religious fundamentalists often rely on modernization theory and point to a crisis of identity.

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