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# 10

## The Role of the Quest for Personal Significance in Motivating Terrorism

ARIE W. KRUGLANSKI

*University of Maryland*

EDWARD OREHEK

*University of Groningen*

The secret of happiness is: find something more important than you are and dedicate your life to it.

**Daniel Dennett, Philosopher**

One particularly striking form of aggression is the attacking of civilians to reach political objectives, labeled *terrorism*. The use of terrorism is an extreme form of aggression because it targets individuals traditionally viewed as innocent bystanders. Thus, psychologists studying terrorism have focused their aim at understanding the reasons a person becomes a terrorist or supports terrorist activity. In short, researchers and theorists have been concerned with the factors that drive a person to attack civilians. Three general categories of explanations have been offered: (1) ideological reasons; (2) personal causes; and (3) social pressures.

Ideologies constitute belief systems in which some ideal is envisioned and compared with the current status. When a discrepancy between the ideal and the actual status of affairs is perceived, the individual is motivated to reduce it. Terrorist ideologies must identify a culprit believed to be responsible for the discrepancy. In addition to identifying a culprit, the ideology must believe that engaging in violence against the culprit would reduce the discrepancy between the actual and ideal conditions. Finally, to carry out terrorism, the ideology must provide a

justification for the attacking of civilians. One example of such an ideology was outlined by Pape (2005), who noted that terrorists often view foreign occupation of their land as the state of affairs to be corrected, the occupier as the culprit, and terrorist action as the means of remedying the situation, ultimately hoping to force the occupier to leave the land.

Personal causes include any experiences that may motivate a person to accept the previously outlined type of ideology. Researchers have proposed a plethora of such experiences, including social rejection and exclusion (Sageman, 2004; Stern, 2003; Chapter 3 in this volume), personal loss and trauma (Speckhard and Akhmedova, 2005), humiliation and injustice (Bloom, 2005; Stern), and poverty (Stern). Each of these, along with many other personal experiences, may predispose and motivate a person to perceive an injustice and to justify the use of violence against civilians as an appropriate means of retaliation.

Social pressures in the form of duty and obligation to the group as well as the acceptance of terrorism as a social norm motivate and allow the violence to be carried out. These social pressures can be internalized or induced by peer pressure. Evidence for such a role of such social pressures can be found in data on Japanese Kamikaze pilots (e.g., Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006) and also applies to present-day terrorism (Bloom, 2005; Gambetta, 2005; Stern, 2003). Consistent with this, Tom Friedman (2010) argued that the lack of outrage among Muslim populations regarding the use of terrorism by members of their community has played a critical role in allowing terrorist activity to continue. For terrorism to be used, it must be viewed as normatively acceptable among a population of people for whom the terrorists believe they are fighting. Without such acceptance, the terrorist activity would be at odds with those whom they claim to be helping.

Although these three components of terrorist motivations neatly organize the abundance of explanations for terrorism, they fall short of explicating the psychological mechanisms for violence. The Quest for Significance Theory attempts to do just that by outlining a fundamental human motivation that leads one to attach oneself to a group and to fight on its behalf. In this chapter, we will review the Quest for Significance Theory and present recent data in support of the theory that was not available at the time it was originally proposed.

## THE QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE AS THE UNDERLYING MOTIVATION FOR TERRORISM

The quest for significance has been identified as a fundamental human motivation by many psychological theorists (Becker, 1962; Frankl, 2000; Maslow, 1943, 1967). Maslow placed self-actualization concerns at the apex of his motivational hierarchy. According to Frankl, such self-actualization is encapsulated in and attained through attempts to serve a cause higher than the self. Such self-transcendence can be attained only through attachment to the social group. The recent burgeoning field of positive psychology has also argued that the quest for meaning is central to authentic happiness and can be attained by attaching oneself to a larger cause (Seligman, 2002). As noted by Becker (1973) and Terror Management

theorists (Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004), the ultimate threat to personal significance is one's own imminent mortality. To ward off the threat of personal insignificance, individuals are motivated to attach themselves to social groups, to defend the group's worldview, and to work in service to the group.

One important principle of the current framework is that perceptions of injustice and personal significance are based on relative deprivation. According to this view, the injustice or lack of personal significance is not necessarily real or objective. Indeed, poverty, poor education, and political oppression do not constitute root causes of terrorism (Atran, 2003; Berrebi, 2003; Krueger & Maleckova, 2002). Moreover, known perpetrators of terrorism such as Muhammad Atta and his 9/11 coconspirators were neither living in poverty nor lacking education. Yet it seems likely that they perceived that they had less than they deserved, perhaps because they were lacking the financial, religious, or social opportunities granted to their peers. Such a perceived discrepancy should threaten one's sense of personal significance, motivating significance restoration.

Because group memberships function as an important aspect of individuals' social identity, a perceived loss of significance to the groups to which a person belongs may motivate a similar quest for significance restoration. The perceived relative deprivation of a social class, sector, or group has been identified as an underlying factor in large-scale social movements, including those that use violence such as riots and terrorism (Gurr, 1970). We would expect, based on this account, that individuals who define themselves according to their group memberships would be more supportive of aggression against out-groups, including the use of terrorism.

### *Collectivism and Support for Terrorism*

The foregoing analysis suggests that individuals identify strongly with groups, value group memberships, and act on behalf of the group to gain personal significance. Individuals for whom group identifications are central to their worldview are more likely to perceive the boundaries between groups as rigid and clearly defined. When lines are drawn between groups, members of the out-group are derogated, and aggression against out-groups is more likely to be viewed as justifiable (Staub, 2002). As such, a collectivist orientation can lead to aggression and violence toward out-groups perceived to be in conflict with the in-group (Triandis, 2003).

If collectivism is generally related to support for violence against out-groups, then it should also be related to support for terrorism. To test this notion, two survey studies were conducted in Muslim nations (Orehek, Fishman, Kruglanski, Dechesne, & Chen, 2010). The first survey was conducted in 12 Arab countries, Pakistan, and Indonesia via the Internet. Respondents were asked whether they primarily identify as being (1) a member of their religion, (2) a member of their nation, or (3) an individual. Participants who identify primarily with their nation or religion have collective goals, whereas participants who identify as an individual have personal goals. Hence, we expected those who identified with their nation or religion would be more supportive of terrorism against the West than those who identified primarily as an individual. To assess their support for terrorism,

they were asked four questions tapping their support for violence against civilian citizens from the United States and Europe. Participants who primarily identified with their nation or religion were significantly more supportive of terrorism than were participants who primarily identified as an individual. These differences were found even when controlling for age, gender, and level of education. There were no significant differences between those who identified with their nation and those who identified with their religion.

While the first study was supportive of the hypothesis that collectivistic identifications would be associated with greater support for terrorism, we collected data as part of a second survey to replicate the findings using a slightly different methodology. Because the first survey sample was limited to individuals with Internet access, the second study used representative samples from Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan to ensure that the results would generalize to the rest of the population. Second, we measured collective identifications using a different question, more directly tapping the goals of the respondents. In this survey, respondents were asked to choose which of three statements they agreed with most: (1) "a parent's major goal should be ensuring that their children have a good education and a chance to succeed in life"; (2) "a parent's major goal should be ensuring that their children serve their nation"; or (3) "a parent's major goal should be ensuring that their children serve their religion." Replicating the findings from the first study, we found that those who identified primarily with their nation or religion were more supportive of terrorism against the West than were respondents who identified primarily with their nation. Again, we found these differences even when controlling for age, gender, and level of education. There was no difference between those who identified with their nation and those who identified with their religion.

We can see then that collectivism is associated with greater support for terrorism. There does not seem to be any difference between the collective of a nation and the collective of a religion in supporting violence. Both groups represent potential sources of social identity. When individuals view themselves according to such group memberships, it increases the likelihood that they will be supportive of the use of violence, including when the violence is aimed at civilian targets.

### *Suicidal Terrorism and the Quest for Significance*

Perhaps an even more striking form of terrorism involves the intentional taking of one's own life in the process. Because suicidal terrorism is an extreme means and the perpetrators are hailed as giving the ultimate sacrifice, it has the potential of bestowing greater significance upon the actor. One important implication of the importance placed on the social group in gaining personal significance is that "the willingness to die in an act of suicidal terrorism may be motivated by the desire to live forever" (Kruglanski et al., 2009, p. 335). That is, the significance gained by killing oneself for the sake of the group may lead the person to acquire more personal significance through gaining prestige, and the potential to be remembered by the group members for a long time may make it possible for the individual to gain more personal significance in death than he or she could during an extended

life. Consistent with this idea is the proposition offered by the philosopher Daniel Dennett (2002), who states that humans are willing to engage in “the subordination of our genetic interests to other interests. No other species does anything like it.” One possible implication of these observations is that humans are not acting in their own genetic interest and instead that ideas and culture are evolving rather than genetic material (see Chapter 15 in this volume).

Yet an alternative account could suggest that ideas are the fabric of a shared social reality that defines the group. This notion is posited by the Quest for Significance Theory and is accepted in psychological theory more generally (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). According to such an account, evolution then can occur at the group level, meaning that an act of suicide terrorism may in fact bestow an evolutionary advantage onto the close genetic relatives of the martyr. Indeed, recent advances in evolutionary theory have suggested that evolution can occur at the group level, and specific mechanisms for such evolution have been proposed (Wilson & Wilson, 2008; see also Chapter 15 in this volume). This specific theoretical advancement has been applied to the study of suicide terrorism, suggesting that it may bestow an evolutionary advantage on their kin (Victoroff, 2009). According to such an account, suicidal terrorism may be one example of altruistic suicide (Durkheim, 2007; Pedahzur, Perliger, & Weinberg, 2003). Early research suggests that Palestinian suicide bombers did indeed produce evolutionary benefits for their kin (Blackwell, 2005). Future research could profitably explore such claims, investigating whether the genetic relatives of suicide terrorists are really better off than they would have been had the person remained alive.

## TESTABLE TENETS OF THE QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE THEORY

The original formulation of the Quest for Significance Theory posited several testable tenets that have since motivated research in an attempt to test the claims. Here we will review evidence in support of three primary implications derived from the quest for significance argument. The first such implication has been thoroughly tested in research on the effects of mortality salience. The second and third implications have only recently been empirically tested, and the data in support of them were not available when the original theory was presented.

### *Mortality Salience as a Threat to Personal Significance*

The first testable tenet of the Quest for Significance Theory states that “if reminders of one’s own mortality convey one’s potential insignificance then such reminders should *augment* the quest for significance as defined by one’s cultural norms and accepted ideological frames” (Kruglanski et al., 2009, p. 338). Indeed, research in support of Terror Management Theory has consistently found that reminders of one’s mortality lead to defense of one’s worldview, including more favorable attitudes toward those who follow group norms (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, & Pyszczynski, 1995), and support for harsher treatment of deviants (e.g.,

Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Particularly relevant to the study of terrorism, Iranians reminded of their own mortality rated a person who supported martyrdom attacks against the United States more favorably than a person who did not support such attacks (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Yet participants who were not reminded of their own mortality rated the person who did not support martyrdom attacks more favorably than the person who did. We can see, then, that the threat to personal significance in the form of reminding people that their existence is temporary leads them to attempt to regain significance through defense of their social group, including the use of terrorism.

### *The Collectivistic Shift Hypothesis*

The second testable implication of the Quest for Significance Theory, as stated by Kruglanski et al. (2009, p. 338) is that a "perceived loss of significance through events other than mortality reminders should fuel efforts at significance *restoration*." Specifically, the theory proposed a novel "collectivistic shift hypothesis" in which a loss of personal significance would lead to a shift toward a more collectivistic orientation. When individuals are faced with negative feedback threatening their personal significance, they can restore their lost significance by viewing the self as interdependent with others.

Four studies have been conducted that directly test this hypothesis. In the first study, representative samples from Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan completed a survey in which they were asked the extent to which they had experienced personal success and were asked to select whether they identified primarily as a member of their nation, a member of their religion, or as an individual (Orehek, Kruglanski, et al., 2010). These items were embedded in a larger, unrelated survey. As predicted by the collectivistic shift hypothesis, participants who identified with their nation or religion (each representing collective identities) reported lower personal success than participants who identified primarily as an individual.

Although the previous study is consistent with the collectivistic shift hypothesis, the results are subject to a number of alternative interpretations because of the correlational nature of the study, including the direction of causality issue. To address this specifically, we designed three laboratory experiments to further test the hypothesis (Orehek, Belcher, Fishman, Goldman, & Kruglanski, 2010). In the first study, participants completed a language test, which they were told was a good predictor of their future academic and career success. Participants were randomly assigned to receive false feedback indicating that they either succeeded or failed the test. Participants then completed a self-report measure of interdependent self-construal (Singelis, 1995). Participants in the failure condition scored significantly higher on the interdependence scale than did participants in the success condition. It seems that the threat to personal significance engendered by the failure on an important life skills domain led participants to increase their interdependent orientation.

A second study was designed to test the additional prediction that participants who experience failure would not only increase their level of interdependence but would also show decreased independence. Participants in this study were randomly assigned to either write about a time in the past that they succeeded on

an important personal goal or a time in the past when they failed at an important personal goal. Participants then completed self-report measures of independent and interdependent self-construal (Singelis, 1995). Consistent with the results of the first study, participants in the failure condition scored significantly higher on the interdependence scale and significantly lower on the independence scale than participants in the success condition. These results suggest a true shifting away from an independent orientation toward an interdependent orientation in the face of failure.

To extend the results from the first two studies, our third study investigated the possibility that after failure participants would elect to work in a group rather than alone. To test this prediction, participants first engaged in a video game on the computer. Participants were told that their performance on this task has been demonstrated to be a reliable predictor of their intelligence and future life success. The video game was rigged so that participants were randomly assigned to either succeed or fail at the task. Following this task, participants were told that they would engage in another task with the chance to win a reward (a chocolate bar). They were told that they had the option of working alone on this task or working in a group. Participants in the success condition were significantly less likely to elect to work in a group than were participants in the failure condition. This study demonstrates that failure not only shifts the individuals' mindset from an independent way of thinking to an interdependent way of thinking but also leads to efforts to engage in collective action.

The results from these four studies provide the empirical evidence for the collectivistic shift hypothesis. Individuals who experience a decline in their personal significance as a result of personal failure seem to attempt to restore their personal significance by shifting to a collectivistic orientation and by engaging in collective action. In this way, individuals are attaching themselves to a social group to attempt significance restoration.

This initial set of data on the collectivistic shift is promising. Yet many questions remain to be answered. For example, data are needed measuring the decline in personal significance following the failure and subsequent restoration in personal significance following the shift. We could also test whether the collectivistic shift is especially likely when one's group membership is made salient. In addition, it is possible that the type of group to which one belongs moderates the tendency to shift to collectivistic goals. For instance, it might be the case that groups characterized by cohesion might be more likely to prompt a collectivistic shift than groups characterized by internal conflict. Finally, one could inquire whether the collectivistic shift may be more likely for individuals under a heightened need for cognitive closure, known for their proclivity for group centrism (Kruglanski et al., 2006).

### *Extending the Self Through Time: Interdependent Self-Construals*

The third testable implication of the Quest for Significance Theory, as stated by Kruglanski et al. (2009, p. 338), is that the "adoption of cultural causes that lend one a sense of personal significance should reduce death-anxiety." In other words, a person who views the self as interdependent with others in the social group

should experience less death anxiety than should a person who views the self independently. By viewing the self interdependently, the person is able to extend the self through time (Castano & Dechesne, 2005). Thinking about oneself as part of a group reduces the threat of death because, although the individual's life may be temporary, the group can live on. The more important the interdependence gleaned from group membership becomes relative to the independent self, the more important the group's existence should become and the less important the individual's existence should become. Therefore, priming an interdependent (vs. independent) way of thinking should reduce the aversion toward death of the individual. We tested this prediction in three laboratory experiments (Orehek, Sasota, Ridgeway, Dechesne, & Kruglanski, 2010).

In our first experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, designed to manipulate independent versus interdependent self-construal. In both conditions, participants were instructed to circle all the pronouns in an essay. Participants in the independent condition circled personal pronouns (e.g., *I, me, my*), and participants in the interdependent condition circled interpersonal pronouns (e.g., *we, us, our*). This manipulation has been shown to increase independent versus interdependent self-construals in the appropriate condition (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Participants then completed a self-report scale of death anxiety (Templer, 1970). Participants in the interdependent condition scored significantly lower on the death anxiety scale than participants in the independent condition. This finding supports our prediction regarding the link between self-construal and death anxiety.

In our second study, we measured death anxiety using a measure designed to tap implicit behavioral dispositions (Fishbach & Shah, 2006) following the same experimental manipulation of self-construal as in the first study. In one condition, participants were asked to push meaningful words (e.g., *pint*) away from them and to pull meaningless words (e.g., *pind*) toward them. In another condition, participants were asked to pull meaningful words toward them and to push meaningless words away from them. In both conditions, words related to death (e.g., *coffin*) were embedded into the task. Based on previous research (Fishbach & Shah), we assumed that faster pulling of death-related words toward the participant reflected greater willingness to approach death, and faster pushing of death-related words away from the participant reflected greater avoidance of death. We found that participants in the interdependent condition pulled death-related words toward themselves faster and pushed death-related words away slower (controlling for speed on neutral trials) than did participants in the independent condition. Thus, it seems that when people are in an interdependent mindset they avoid death to a lesser extent and approach death to a greater extent than do people with an independent mindset.

Our third study was designed to extend these findings to an additional manipulation of self-construal. In this study, participants in the independent self-construal condition were asked to think about the ways they were different from their friends and family. In the interdependent self-construal condition, they were asked to think about the things that they had in common with their friends and family. As in the second study, participants in the interdependent condition were faster to pull death-related words toward themselves and slower to push them away (controlling for speed of responding to neutral words).



Across four studies, we found a consistent pattern of results attesting to the ability of an interdependent self-construal to mitigate the fear toward death. Future research could further extend these results in important ways. For example, we do not have data demonstrating that an interdependent self-construal shifts the focus to the group's life over the individual's life. In addition, our analysis would suggest the reverse pattern for anxiety regarding the group's existence, yet these data have not yet been collected.

### *Summary of Empirical Support*

We have outlined three research programs in support of the major tenets of the Quest for Significance Theory. It has been shown that (1) collectivists support terrorism to a greater extent than do individualists, (2) reminders of one's own mortality augment the adherence to one's cultural norms and accepted ideological frames, (3) threats to personal significance in the form of personal failure leads to a collectivistic shift, and (4) a collectivist orientation reduces death anxiety compared with an individualist orientation. Taken together, these data provide initial support for the Quest for Significance Theory. Threats to one's significance, whether from impending death or personal failure, lead to attempts to restore personal significance. Individuals who attach themselves to a social group are more willing to attack out-group civilians. Finally, construing the self in interdependent ways leads to decreased anxiety about death, which may serve as a critical way of overcoming inhibitions related to martyrdom action.

## CONCLUSION

We have summarized the theory related to the quest for personal significance to terrorist activity and the empirical support for its major implications. In short, we have argued that individuals who experience a threat to their personal significance attempt to restore lost significance through their attachment to a social group and defense of that group. The significance motive improved on previous theorizing on terrorist motivations by tying the categories of *ideological reasons*, *personal causes*, and *social pressures* together and explicating the underlying psychological motivation for terrorist activity. In this chapter we have also outlined how this theory fits more generally with evolutionary theory and may explain suicidal terrorism as a form of aggressive altruism.

The quest for significance has been postulated as a fundamental human motivation, present in all people and universal across cultures. Yet only a minority of people in the world support terrorism, even in regions from which terrorism more commonly originates. Personal significance can be gained from a variety of accomplishments and group memberships. Yet when personal goals and group identities are perceived as relatively deprived, efforts to restore personal significance should be enacted. When the deprivation is perceived to be unjust, a culprit can be identified, and violence can be justified; only then are we likely to see terrorism pursued as a means of restoring significance.

This framework suggests potential ways to reduce the incidence of terrorism in the world. If terrorism is motivated by the quest for significance, then opening alternative opportunities for significance restoration that do not include violence should reduce the use of terrorism-justifying ideologies. This can occur on both the individual and group levels. On an individual level, providing support for an individual's personal aspirations and social mobility should provide alternative avenues for the gaining of personal significance. On a group level, reducing perceived injustices through diplomacy and negotiation should reduce the need for violence as a means of achieving one's objectives.

While the early results of studies in support of the Quest for Significance Theory are consistent with its tenets, future research is needed. We have already outlined multiple ways the claims could be further tested. One important limitation of the data so far is that much of them have been collected on college student samples in laboratories located in the United States. Future tests of the predictions will need to test the claims in other cultures among diverse samples. Because the theory is purported to explain terrorist behavior, testing each tenet among terrorist samples would significantly bolster the credibility of the claims. For the theory to be confidently applied to counterterrorism efforts, empirical tests of interventions relevant to the theory are needed.

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