

COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL DISENGAGEMENT FROM VIOLENCE: COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY AND POLARITIES OF DEMOCRACY MODEL UNDERPINNINGS

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ABSTRACT

Literature reviewed indicated a lack of empirical studies on why individuals renounce and disengage from acts of violence and terrorism. The studies of Tobor (2014) and Shajkovci (2015) filled that gap and added to the body of global literature on the topic. The purpose of this study was to employ cognitive dissonance theory and polarities of democracy model to offer possible explanations on why individuals may engage in or renounce violence, specifically as it is related to violence in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria. While actions of all individuals engaged in violence or terrorism cannot be explained through cognitive dissonance and polarities of democracy principles, the discussions in this article may offer invaluable insight for safety and security agencies and policy makers in African countries and the Balkans to advance effective policy initiatives that facilitate and promote disengagement from violence and terrorism. Such understandings may consequently strengthen global counter radicalization and counterterrorism efforts as well.

Keywords: The Balkans, foreign fighters, counterterrorism, Kosovo, Niger Delta, Nigeria, radicalization, terrorism, violence.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the academic discussions on topics related to acts of violence and terrorism been centered on the conditions and the processes by which individuals become indoctrinated in carrying out terrorist activities, including acts of violence. The literature reviewed indicated a lack of empirical and systematic research on factors that motivate individuals to disengage from acts of violence and terrorism (Akinwale, 2010; Amaraegbu, 2011; Egwemi, 2010; Ogege, 2011; Oluwaniyi, 2011). Several authors explained that while there has been an abundance of research on violence and the processes by which individuals become drawn to violence, there was a limited amount of research on disengagement, or research on why individuals or groups abandon extremism or acts of violence (Disley, Weed, Reding, Clutterbuck & Warnes, 2012; Horgan, 2009; Rabasa, 2013). The studies of Tobor (2014) and Shajkovci (2015) filled that gap and added to the body of global literature on the topic. The purpose of this study was to employ cognitive dissonance theory and polarities of democracy model to offer possible explanations on why individuals may engage or renounce violence, specifically as it is related to violence in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

Shajkovci (2015) noted that terrorism cases are treated as criminal offenses in many Balkan countries, and are addressed through legal means and security institutions. The author also noted how governments in the Balkans have introduced a number of programs to address the issue of radicalization and extremism. Tobor (2014) explained that the federal government of Nigeria introduced the amnesty program in 2009 as a direct response to the incessant unrest in Niger Delta, Nigeria, necessitated by extreme poverty, lack of basic infrastructural amenities, and destruction to source of livelihood (Akanji & Oyitso, 2012; Idowu, 2012; Odubo & Tobor, 2016; Ogege, 2011; Republic of Kosovo, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Much of the evidence presented in this paper derives from Tobor (2014) and Shajkovci (2015). Both studies utilized qualitative methods because the main goal of their respective study was to understand collective experiences of a particular cultural group, specifically the meanings and values that such groups portray. The ethnographic qualitative approach helped to examine the type of meaning the study participants attached to their social and political environments. Rudestam and Newton (2007) emphasized that ethnography has expanded to include critical inquiry that entails trying to understand the characteristics of the group of people that is being studied. Face-to-face interviews served as a primary data collection method. Semi-structured and open-ended interview questions were employed. The interview questions followed a consistent wording structure and were devoid of any leading questions. Secondary sources, such as court reports, published testimonies and analytic reports, were also consulted. Formal and informal observations were conducted to generate a better understanding of the phenomenon under study in order to report factual and descriptive data. Observational field notes and reflexive journals were utilized to record observations.

The purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit study participants. While Tobor (2014) interviewed 20 ex-militants from the Urhobo speaking origin, Shajkovci (2015) collected data from 12 government officials in Kosovo with direct knowledge on the issue of disengagement from terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The themes identified in both studies were content analyzed. The conventional and summative content analysis techniques were used to analyze the collected data. The conventional content analysis technique was helpful in generating coding categories from the actual text data, while the summative content was helpful with the detection of important words and concepts within the text, which was crucial to generating patterns, comparisons, and contextual interpretations (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

STUDY FINDINGS

Shajkovci (2015) found humanitarian, economic, and ideological reasons that invoked struggle in the name of Allah, protection of all Muslims by non-Muslims and the creation of an “Islamic State” in particular, as the primary motivating factors for joining terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria. According to Tobor (2014) and Shajkovci (2015), disillusionment with the group ideology and strategy, engagement in criminal activity, fear of violence, feelings of remorse, doctrinal disputes, and the influence of family friends served as some of the reasons for disengagement from violence and terrorist groups in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria. Punishment for leaving terrorist groups, detachment from family and friends, in-group solidarity, and fear of imprisonment were cited as some of the barriers to exiting terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria.

In light of the above mentioned findings—and in the analysis of disengagement from violence and acts of terrorism—in the following paragraphs, Tobor (2014) and Shajkovci (2015) employ cognitive dissonance theory and polarities of democracy model to offer possible explanations on why individuals may engage or renounce violence, specifically as it is related to disengagement from violence in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Kegley and Blanton (2013) defined cognitive dissonance theory as “the general psychological tendency to deny discrepancies between one’s preexisting beliefs (cognitions) and new information” (p. 8). The theory was applied to explain how realities of living and acting as a terrorist may affect the belief system of those engaged with terrorist groups, as well as force those engaged to reconsider their existing worldviews (Jacobson, 2010). Although mostly applied in the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance principles have found application in the field of security studies and terrorism as well, and, as such, Shajkovci (2015) applied it in the context of a number of Kosovo Muslim extremists engaged in the Syrian and the Iraq conflict.

Shajkovci (2015) explained that, given the correlation between the motivations for joining terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria (i.e., fighting Al Assad’s regime, economic prosperity, etc.) and the reasons for disengagement from terrorist organizations (i.e., deceit over the causes of war, engagement in criminal activities, etc.), the participant responses suggested that such disappointments could possibly lead to further disassociations from terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria (Jacobson, 2010). Such conclusions need to be approached with caution, however, considering the research relied on a relatively small sample size and lacked primary information from those engaged in the Syrian and the Iraq conflict (Shajkovci, 2015). Based on participant responses, and analogous to Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, a number of Kosovo extremists engaged in the Syrian and the Iraq conflict possessed inconsistent cognitions and experienced a state of psychological discomfort (i.e., dissonance). As a result, they were motivated to reduce such discomfort, such as exit the terrorist groups, which was achieved through removal of dissonant cognitions, or changing of one of the dissonant cognitions (i.e., changing the behavior to match one’s attitude).

According to Shajkovci (2015), dissonance may serve as a powerful motivation to disengage from terrorism, or engage in terrorism in the first place. When dissonance was high, as also evidenced by participant responses, a number of individuals had decided to abandon terrorist groups despite evident pressures of leaving the terrorist groups. Maikovich (2005) suggested that although pressure from terrorist groups and leadership can be powerful motivators to remain with terrorist groups, specifically through shielding their members from both damaging information and the outside world, there always will be individuals who will remain highly motivated to reduce dissonant cognitions by either increasing consonant cognitions or reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions.

Maikovich (2005) introduced five traits that act as “dissonant-reducing mechanisms,” (p. 383) or mechanisms “traditionally interpreted as doubt, guilt, uncertainty, etc.,” (p. 380) that may act as justifications for individuals and terrorist groups to overcome feelings of dissonance while engaged in violence or violent acts:

Just world bias (i.e. death justified because deserved), social support (i.e. social and political support for terrorism), protecting dream imagery over external reality (i.e. dreams and dream imagery), and diffusion of responsibility and moral disengagement (i.e. displacing responsibility onto others; not feeling responsible for actions). (pp. 383-393)

Applied to Shajkovci’s (2015) findings, participant responses suggested how world bias argument was utilized by a number of individuals engaged with terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria as a dissonance-reducing mechanism to (a) justify the war against “Al Assad’s

oppressive regime,” (b) legitimize the use of violence and use of violent means to fight Al Assad’s regime, primarily in defense of the government’s “unjust” treatment of the Syrian people, and (c) term the conflict in terms of “good v. evil,” or Muslim versus non-Muslim struggle. In some instances, the participant responses also indicated the manner in which the importance of dissonant cognitions was reduced in an effort to show how violence was necessary for the creation of an ideal society (i.e., Sharia-based “Islamic State,” etc.).

Shajkovi (2015) explained that cognitive dissonance principles may also help to understand the reasons why some individuals engaged with terrorist groups, despite high dissonance, may decide to remain with such groups. Advancements in ranks within a terrorist organization might serve as powerful motivators for reducing dissonance (Maikovich, 2005). Perhaps such argument might explain why a number of high profile Albanian extremists in Iraq and Syria (e.g., “Albanian Unit” commanders in Syria and Iraq, such as Lavdrim Muhaxheri, reportedly killed in Syria, and several others) remained with such organizations in Iraq and Syria. Another argument serves to explain how a number of individuals became drawn into conflict not because of their violent tendencies, but because of the “sense of identity and purpose that membership offers” (i.e., sense of brotherhood, similar economic concern, etc.). Such perceptions are powerful enough motivators to reduce dissonance, specifically by allowing individuals to shield themselves from the outside world, and perceive terrorist group ideals as more desirable (Maikovich, 2005, pp. 383-393).

While due to lack of data in this research, Maikovich’s (2005) trait pertaining to “diffusion of responsibility and moral disengagement” (p.383) as a dissonance-reducing mechanism was not addressed, other traits such as “strong social support” (p.383) lend support the argument on how family, friends, political entities, and so forth, also serve to reduce dissonance among individuals and terrorist organizations. More specifically, according to Post (as cited in Maikovich, 2005):

Once a potential terrorist is identified, organization leaders go to great lengths to ensure that he is continuously surrounded by supportive individuals, who both encourage him to become a terrorist, and isolate him from outsider who would present a different perspective. (p. 389)

Similarly, the act of prioritizing dream imagery over actual external reality (e.g., creation of a “pure Islamic State,” etc.), as indicated by participant responses, reflected how those engaged with terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria justify their violent actions. All of the aforementioned traits are useful in policy generating context and will be treated as such in the concluding sections.

Polarities of Democracy Model

Benet’s (2006, 2012, and 2013) polarities of democracy model can serve as a unifying theory of democracy that is able to guide social change efforts. According to Benet, this unifying theory of democracy is consistent with the philosophical perspective of critical theory which seeks to overcome oppression and achieve human emancipation. This theoretical framework, as utilized in (Tobor, 2014), gave understanding to the reasons why individuals renounce violence. Benet’s (2006, 2013) polarities of democracy were borne out of studies conducted through the philosophical perspective of critical theory. Critical theory focuses on promoting positive social change by overcoming oppression and achieving human liberation (Benet, 2012). According to Benet (2013), democracy as a concept represents a set of ideas and fundamental principles in which the ultimate power is vested in the people. In other words,

people living as or in a democratic society must be responsible for taking decisions that affect their lives, or at least partake in such decisions. Benet (2006, 2013) explained that democracy can be an effective tool to achieve positive social change, especially in areas that experience economic, environmental, and militaristic challenges, such as Niger Delta, Nigeria.

Tobor (2014) posited that the amnesty program is a social change effort aimed at improving the lot of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region, with the ultimate goal and aim to restore peace and achieve enduring stability within the region. Tobor (2014) postulated that the introduction of the amnesty program in Niger Delta, Nigeria, made many of the militants to surrender their weapons and renounce violence. All the ex-militants interviewed maintained that the amnesty program offered a new opportunity for them to change their lives (Tobor, 2014). All the participants agreed that the training opportunity offered by the amnesty program and the subsequent offer of job employment was able to restore relative peace and stability to the Niger Delta, Nigeria. The findings from Tobor (2014) indicated that the ex-militants as a people do not like violence and wanted peace to reign in their land. However, the responses of the study participants indicated that they could not bear to continue to see their people suffering and so they had to bring attention to their concerns and issues, which was the primary reason they became fighters (Tobor, 2014). Living in the creeks and destabilizing oil operations was a strategy adopted to get attention for their concerns.

Benet's polarities of democracy model consists of 10 elements that are organized as five polarity pairs, namely diversity–equality, freedom–authority, participation–representation, justice–due process, and human rights–communal obligations. Benet explained that each of these elements has negative and positive aspects, and that if true democracy is to be attained, then the aim will be to effectively manage these polarities in order to optimize the positive aspects while minimizing the negative aspects of each element. These concepts of Benet's polarities of democracy model are drawn from the conceptual framework of polarity management as developed by Johnson (1996). Benet's (2006, 2013) polarities of democracy model supports the idea of empowerment, which is an essential element of democracy and necessary to address the social, economic, political, and environmental challenges that may actually threaten the survival of the Niger Delta people. The problems of Niger Delta, Nigeria, can be associated with the aspirations of the indigenous people for effective representation in government that would translate to political, social, and economic emancipation.

Militancy is a social movement. Social movement draws attention to a cause or social action that demonstrates an act of injustice that may be particular or general in nature. Agbonifo (2009) explained that the aim is usually to champion the rights and interests of the dominated, or to put an end to a relationship of domination. It is not uncommon that the oppressed would want to identify with such a cause. People resort to militancy when they seek change. Social change can be consciously planned and executed in order to bring about desired positive change or development. Freire (1997) emphasized that people who perceive the reality of oppression as a limiting situation will engage in a struggle to transform a bad and unfair situation to a better, fair, and just situation.

Tobor (2014) demonstrated that this analogy represented the struggle of the inhabitants of Niger Delta, Nigeria. For instance, the call for developmental projects; rights to economic resources derived from their communities; social rights to education; provision of infrastructural amenities, including tarred roads, hospitals, and pipe borne water; and employment opportunities to replace displaced sources of livelihood may be construed as

calls to right the perceived injustice and fight for social justice, equity, and protection of their environment and ecology from further degradation (Tobor, 2014). The amnesty offered by the Nigerian government to the Niger Delta militants was based on renouncing violence and surrendering their weapons. This analogy may explain the arms proliferation that is a characteristic feature of the Niger Delta region. The route to peace and stability in the Niger Delta region is to encourage a democratic system, where the development of civil society, initiation, and implementation of developmental programs and initiatives, such as the amnesty program, including the universal respect for human rights, is adopted and practiced.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to employ cognitive dissonance theory and polarities of democracy model to offer possible explanations on why individuals may engage in or renounce violence, specifically as it is related to violence in Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria. Much of the evidence presented derives from the doctoral dissertations of Tobor (2014) and Shajkovci (2015). Cognitive dissonance theory, or cognitive dissonance principles, are useful to the field of terrorism in general (Maikovich, 2005), although this is not to suggest that the theory, especially from a psychological perspective, has no weaknesses or that it does not require further refinement (Brehm, 1956). As noted by Shajkovci (2015), in the case of a number of individuals engaged with terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria, contradicting beliefs (e.g., initial enlistment with groups to affect regime change versus engaging in criminal activities, etc.) led toward rethinking behavioral approaches. In line with cognitive dissonance principles, also reflected in the experiences of a number of extremists engaged with terrorist groups, when presented with the information that contradicted their moral standards, such individuals appear to have experienced discomfort and dealt with such mental conflict by abandoning the organization. Although a number of Kosovar extremists currently engaged may continue to remain and commit violent acts with terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, primarily because they have created cognitions that justify their actions, dissonance can be enthused by introducing new information in order to generate dissonance between their current behavior and new knowledge (Shajkovci, 2015). Benet's (2006, 2013) polarities of democracy model, as used in this study, gave an understanding as to the reasons why individuals renounce violence. The theoretical framework can be used to address the social, economic, political, and environmental challenges that may actually threaten the survival of the Niger Delta people.

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