Rational Choice Theory, Grounded Theory, and Their Applicability to Terrorism

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Executive Summary

The study of terrorism is complex and multifaceted. Debate surrounding the rationality behind terrorism has made Rational Choice Theory a popular research methodology within Terrorism Studies. However over the last forty years, the increased frequency and tenacity of terrorist acts has opened the door for new research and new methodological approaches such as Grounded Theory. While both epistemological frameworks have applicable utility and contextual validity, they rely on various assumptions and face extreme challenges in implementation. Two common themes emerge when assessing terrorism within the two frameworks: Rational Choice Theory is most appropriate in short run scenarios, while Grounded Theory (particularly the Glaserian school) is more insightful with a long-run focus and time span. With respect to counterterrorism policymaking, if terrorists are presented alternatives to terrorism, or are somehow forced out of the terrorism market, they may indeed alter their actions.

Introduction

The greater part of the twentieth century held Terrorism Studies to be a niche industry focused mostly on the socio-political climate in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. After September 11th, everything changed. Terrorism Studies expanded tremendously as theorists willingly contributed opinions for the cause of the unprecedented attack. In addition, historical attacks were reassessed with vigor to gain insight on the evolving global security milieu. Essentially, the study of terrorism became the *haute* field and is still more popular than ever.

The act of terrorism—the people, the causes, and the action itself—and federal counterterrorism tactics continue to be the most scrutinized fields. However the smaller body of literature that is most vibrant and ripe for research today is the existing circumstances when one chooses to, or not to, engage in terrorism. Two epistemological methodologies, Rational Choice Theory and Grounded Theory, are popular in researching this decision today. Each approach shares a unique perspective on how we should learn about and interpret terrorist motivations.

Rational Choice Theory identifies specific units of analysis (for the sake of this paper, ‘vulnerable individuals’ contemplating involvement in terrorism or established terrorists contemplating the perpetration of terrorism) and attempts to *rationalize* their decision as to why they engage in terrorist activity. Grounded Theory on the other hand essentially works in reverse order. Through field research and gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, Grounded Theory seeks to infer a hypothesis *grounded* in tangible data with respect to an act’s context. Both approaches seek to answer thorny questions such as: What motivates an individual to join a terrorist group? Why do terrorists radicalize and ultimately commit the specific acts they do? What are the alternatives to terrorism? The answers to these questions and others are as convoluted as they are elusive.

Assessing Terrorism Studies from these two approaches is vitally important because they provide various counterterrorism policy implications vis-à-vis the scope of the threat, how to
study it, how to address it, and most importantly, how to prevent it. Through these research frameworks, policymakers and law enforcement officials alike can better identify one’s vulnerability to becoming involved in terrorist acts. In addition, with the help of de-radicalized individuals, officials may potentially thwart involvement in terrorism the first place. By offering vulnerable individuals alternatives to terrorism, as Frey and Luechinger suggest, and decreasing the price of ordinary (non-violent) activities, policymakers might indeed generate a reduction in the overall level of global terrorism.3

This essay aims to do a few things. Section II provides an outline to the political, economic, and social motivations individuals face when deliberating the judiciousness of terrorism. The third section details the current variance between the utility of Rational Choice Theory and Grounded Theory, and uses terrorism ‘case studies’ to highlight the main topics of each method. Obviously, there are limitations and challenges to each approach, which are addressed in the fourth section. Concluding thoughts are summarized in the fifth. By and large, it is clear that Rational Choice Theory and Grounded Theory provide value with respect to studying terrorism, but only within clearly defined contexts.

Terrorism† as a Multifaceted Phenomenon

There are many reasons a person individually engages in terrorism or joins a terrorist organization. According to Gordon McCormick, some terrorists are simply “expressionists” and conduct violence for violence’s sake. Conversely, McCormick describes others as “rationalists” who employ terrorism on behalf of an external goal.4 In the subsequent section, the three most common motivations for engaging in terrorism are highlighted: political, economic, and social.

Political Motivations

Bruce Hoffman, one of the world’s foremost terrorism experts, states modern terrorism originally began as a political action.5 During the French Revolution’s régime de la terreur, the revolutionaries, lead by Robespierre, dictated that democracy should replace divine monarchical rule. All opposed were deemed ‘enemies of the people’ and were terrorized or killed for the advancement of the newly forming democratic state.6

David Rapoport, in his seminal paper “The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism” expands this notion. Rapoport proposed that modern terrorism occurred in four distinct waves, each essentially embodying the global political climate of the time.7 Since the French Revolution, the world has experienced Anarchist, Nationalist, Leftist, and Religious waves. According to Rapoport, the Religious wave continues to this day and it is embodied in the Islamic fundamentalism that began in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.8 These events became the political rallying cry for many Islamic terrorist organizations wanting to reestablish a pan-Arab Islamic caliphate and to expel foreign occupiers from all Muslim lands. Nevertheless, it is Fouad Ajami who offers the tersest explanation of why politically motivated individuals turn toward fundamentalism and terrorism. Ajami states the “fundamentalist call has resonance because it invite[s] men to participate...[in] contrast to a political culture that reduces citizens to spectators and asks them to leave things to their rulers.”9

Economic Motivations

Terrorism also has a transparent economic motivation, which can be further subdivided. First, individuals will turn to terrorism because it pays well and is a feasible way to satisfy one’s
economic means. In the words of Jessica Stern, “jihad is a job.” It has even been reported that in some countries, individuals imprisoned for “terror crimes” often receive a monthly salary from terrorist organizations or supporters, with longer prison sentences warranting a higher salary.

The second economic motivation gives special attention to terrorist groups and the costs of terrorism. If lone individuals ascertain terrorism is more cost-effective with the help of at least one more person, they will in-turn create or join a terrorist organization. This theory came to fruition before the Madrid train attack of 2004. Here, Islamic extremists exiled from Syria joined forces with Moroccan drug traffickers who helped finance the attack. Additionally, a terrorist organization may perpetrate an attack because it is more economically feasible than engaging in more conventional and legal methods to achieve their goals. More attention is given to economic motivations, especially with respect to both cost-benefit analysis and constrained utility maximization, in section three.

Social Motivations

Many individuals also become involved in terrorism not because of the specific aims or consequences of the terrorist act itself, but as a by-product of their personal and social conditions. For lack of a better phrase, individuals routinely join radical groups simply out of loneliness. Terrorist organizations advertise fellowship and companionship and often prey on the vulnerability of the forlorn masses. In other instances, an individual may join a terrorist group because friends or family became involved first, thus offering a friendship or kinship network. Further still, women are routinely used as ‘marriage fodder’ to recruit terrorists. Members of terrorist organizations will marry off their sisters or daughters as a way to increase or strengthen current membership. This developing trend has made it extremely complicated for individuals to disengage from the terrorist group due to the possibility of complicating or disrupting marriage.

Social motivations for terrorism is best demonstrated in immigrant neighborhoods in places like Western Europe. Here, first, second, and even third-generation immigrants are consistently labeled as ‘disconnected and disenfranchised.’ Because of their ethnicity, language constraints, religious and political beliefs, and a variety of other reasons, immigrants and the children of immigrants have been known to look for an outlet to vent their frustration, even if that means joining a terrorist group. Perhaps the best example of this is the 2004 killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. Second-generation Moroccan immigrant Mohammed Bouyeri brutally murdered Van Gogh for his part in the making of a documentary entitled Submission, which was critical of the way Islam treats women. Bouyeri stated his motives were not only disdain for Van Gogh, but Holland’s treatment of Muslims in general. This instance demonstrates how non-radicalized individuals first become radicalized. To impede this occurrence, countries like Spain and France use extra police to patrol in and around immigrant neighborhoods to disrupt terrorist groups’ recruitment tactics.

Rational Choice Theory, Grounded Theory, and Terrorism

The act of terrorism can be a logical choice—but is it a rational choice? And more tangibly, what meanings can be derived from the action itself with respect to law enforcement, policymaking, and ultimately, prevention? Terrorism is planned, coordinated, and conducted in a logical and “systematic” way. Inversely, it is not random, spontaneous, or illogical. By declaring the phenomenon systematic and therefore a rational action—and by default terrorists as rational actors—scholars seek to predict terrorists’ preferences and explain why they perpetrate
terrorism. But is it better to theorize about how terrorists think or go directly to the source and ask them? The two respective methodologies in these approaches are Rational Choice Theory and Grounded Theory.

**Rational Choice Theory**

Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which is also called Rational Actor Theory, has its origins in microeconomics but has been used in a variety of academic fields. Briefly, microeconomics is the study of behavior using economic units and is concerned with the factors that affect individual economic choices, the effect of changes in these factors on the individual decision makers, how their choices are coordinated by markets, and how prices and demand are determined in individual markets. To that end, behavior in the pursuit of personal interests, assuming the unit of analysis is a rational actor, is often mathematically calculable in an experimental framework and through careful interpretation (verstehen), is explainable. If such behavior is explainable and predictable, it is capable of being molded as well. Using RCT’s strict methods-based approach such empowers theorists to comprehend the rationality behind terrorism and hopefully edge closer to uncovering what incentives may be offered as legitimate alternatives.

**Grounded Theory**

Some academics and policymakers promulgate that the methodological framework behind RCT is too restrictive and contentious, and simulating an experiment to generate a theory about terrorism is not useful. To these theorists, it is better to conduct field research to gain access to radical individuals and ask about their motivations in a direct effort to explain why they perpetrated an attack. In its limited application thus far, GT’s alternative approach has produced very stimulating conclusions within Terrorism Studies.

In 1967, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss proposed GT to address research and policymaking using abduction, a method made popular by Peirce. This method deviates from the more traditional research angle using the scientific method and induction or deduction. In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss explain that the best way to formulate a hypothesis is to go directly to the source. In other words, one should generate theory from data, which is the inverse of the traditional scientific method. GT is applicable to both qualitative and quantitative experiments and its framework is as follows: data is collected, codified, and arranged in ‘codes’; the codes are then grouped into emerging ‘concepts’ based upon similar data elements; from the grouped concepts, ‘categories’ are created in an effort to generate a final ‘theory.’ As Glaser notes, “all is data.”

After GT’s initial founding, an ideological rift developed between Glaser and Strauss. Glaser held that one should avoid pre-conceived notions about their research subject and avoid guiding their subjects with leading questions. Glaserian GT puts forth open-ended questions in an attempt to prevent guiding its subjects, and approaches a research topic without a clearly defined set of problem statements—an approach generally ignored by Strauss.

**Applicability to Terrorism Studies**

At the outset, RCT and GT are completely separate approaches in dealing with terrorism. RCT holds the unit of analysis as an individual contemplating terrorism; while in GT, the unit of analysis is the terrorist attack or incident. Terrorists choose to engage in terrorist activity for a variety of reasons and these factors vary from country to country and amongst individuals. In
opposition, the perpetrated incident (e.g. car bombing, shooting spree, airplane hijacking) is consistently deadly across contexts. Scholars like Bruce Hoffman may be categorized as Rational Choice Theorists due to his definition of terrorism as “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change.” Others, such as Brian Jenkins, fall within the GT framework. To paraphrase Jenkins, it is not the people that perpetrate terrorism, or their motivation, cause or justification, but the act itself.

Two microeconomic methods within RCT are particularly worth addressing: cost-benefit analysis and constrained utility maximization. First, potential terrorists often consider a rudimentary form of cost-benefit analysis before perpetrating an attack. According to Gordon McCormick, terrorists try to minimize the expected costs necessary to achieve a specified set of political objectives, and terrorist organizations attempt to maximize their expected political returns for any given level of effort.

In addition, terrorists are capable of producing extraordinary political outputs with relatively few inputs as well. To illustrate, Hezbollah’s 1983 bombing of the U.S. military barracks in Beirut led U.S. President Ronald Reagan to withdraw American troops from Lebanon. Hezbollah (a Lebanese terrorist organization) consequently believed acts of terror may be employed to achieve political success. In another example, the aforementioned 2004 Madrid train bombing demonstrated how cost-benefit analysis works within terrorism. During morning rush hour on the March 11th, 2004, ten explosions rocked four separate commuter trains, killing 191 and injuring over 1,800 people. The perpetrators stated they were motivated by Spain’s involvement in the Iraq war and sought to oust then Prime Minister of Spain, José María Aznar (a staunch supporter of the Iraq war) from power. Costing an estimated total of 41,000 to 55,000 Euros, the group’s attack was so effective and efficient that shortly after the attack, Aznar and many of his fellow PP party members were indeed defeated in the subsequent national election.

Terrorists also operate under the principles of constrained utility maximization by optimizing “the highest possible level of utility, under given restrictions, when the highest overall level of utility (satisfaction) cannot be reached.” When terrorists perpetrate a terrorist act, they do indeed want to achieve a specific goal, but are often quite satisfied with coming close. For example, one of the stated goals of the September 11th attack was “bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy.” On a state level, bankruptcy is atypical; but according to some sources, the September 11th attacks cost New York City alone over $95 billion. Moreover the ‘Global War on Terror’ is expected to cost upwards of $4.4 trillion. Under the constrained utility maximization philosophy, al-Qaeda surely wanted more people killed and higher damage incurred, but its message for all intents and purposes was delivered.

As for GT, proponents cite the “unprecedented nature of the situation” is often what justifies using its approach to studying terrorism. These proponents argue that because data is gathered with qualitative interviews, observational data, time series data, and statistical analysis, more can be explained by GT as opposed to RCT’s hands-off, theorizing approach. In Terrorism Studies, GT has illuminated the importance of gathering information via police informants, captured or imprisoned terrorists, and de-radicalized terrorists who have voluntarily walked away from terrorism.

To better exemplify the effectiveness of GT, particularly Glaserian GT, it is useful to analyze lone-wolf vs. group terrorists. Lone-wolf terrorists are sole individuals that engage in terrorism. A sad but excellent example of lone-wolf terrorism occurred in Norway in the summer of 2011.
when Anders Breivik perpetrated a bombing and shooting campaign that left over 70 dead in Oslo.\textsuperscript{41} Using many GT tools, Norwegian authorities uncovered that Breivik believed he was called to action to “save Europe from Muslim immigration.”\textsuperscript{42} A 1,500-page manifesto Breivik published online before his actions aided in this discovery.\textsuperscript{43} Although RCT would be appropriate to assess Breivik’s self-perception as a holy warrior, GT efficiently revealed Breivik’s logic for acting alone and hoping to inspire thousands with his actions.\textsuperscript{44}

Regarding group terrorism, GT provides important information when analyzing the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack. On November 26, ten terrorists trained in Pakistan took the lives of 166 people—and injured more than 300—over the course of a three-day siege.\textsuperscript{45} The lone surviving gunman provided invaluable details behind the motives of the attack (Pakistani terrorists targeting the Indian state), means of attack (traveling via boat from Karachi, Pakistan) and the significance for the targets in the attack (hotels frequented by westerners, train stations and a hospital used by middle and upper class Indians, and a Jewish center).\textsuperscript{46} The incident brought up a notable point about group terrorism and GT. McCormick states that “a terrorist group...is not considered to be a collection of potentially discordant views of the world or opinions about ends and means; it is assumed to be a unitary actor, defined by a single, stable, and ordered set of preferences, that is able to identify, evaluate, and decide among competing options with a single mind.” The idea of “collective” rationality can be misleading and dangerous. GT, along with other research epistemologies, must clearly distinguish both individual and collective preferences to be most effective. Nevertheless, each of the instances was successful in generating information from the surviving terrorists that were caught.

### Limits to applying RCT and GT to terrorism

RCT and GT are quite different. RCT is based on a method-driven approach to why individuals would choose to become involved in terrorism. Conversely, GT gathers data directly from the source of terrorist activity and formulates theoretical model from that data. Essentially, there are multiple challenges to each approach with respect to their use in social science, including Terrorism Studies.

#### Challenges to RCT and Terrorism Studies

One of the most notable protestations about RCT comes from two professors of political science at Yale University, Donald Green and Ian Shapiro. They state RCT “has yet to add appreciably to the stock of knowledge” and “seldom does one encounter applications of RCT that are at once arresting and sustainable” regarding the social sciences.\textsuperscript{47} Green and Shapiro’s harsh criticism of RCT has polarized supporters and opponents of the theory and created a cleavage. Stephen Walt warns that “[i]nstead of debating and acknowledging the actual strengths and weaknesses of competing research traditions, scholars are increasingly reluctant to criticize one another openly for fear of being seen as intolerant and...the result is a narrowing of intellectual exchange.”\textsuperscript{48} While debating is necessary for knowledge to advance in any field, it has led to stalling global counterterrorism policymaking. Moreover, the frequency and lethality of terrorist attacks have increased on average since 2000.\textsuperscript{49} If disagreement persists regarding counterterrorism policy, more lives will be potentially at stake.

RCT is also a restrictive methodology often operating under the notion of \textit{ceteris paribus}. Opponents argue that RCT controls for too many assumptions, fails to recognize data constraints like cost, time, and availability, and neglects negative externalities like deception. More importantly, RCT does not accurately predict or foresee events, thus providing little use outside of its models. RCT also excludes exogenous variables that may aid in partially or fully
explaining terrorist behavior. Many traditional social science fields give strong consideration to a number of exogenous variables such as culture, history, and economy to produce valuable maxims of human behavior. Supporters of RCT like Morris Fiorina retort, “since we can never know all of the relevant variables, let alone measure all of them accurately, the empirical predictions of all models in political science—not just RCT—are about relative differences and comparative statics predictions.”

Regardless, by operating under *ceteris paribus* conditions, the resulting data may be skewed or invalid. As in almost all scenarios within social science, laboratory experiments vary from the real world.

A third problem regarding RCT is it generally operates in a post-hoc, retrospective manner. Researchers regularly look at past precedents to rationalize more recent events in hopes of predicting a similar event in the future. But, to quote Milan Zafirovski, “the problem with...post-hoc theory redevelopment as implied in an all-encompassing utility function, is some kind of uneasy relationship, even tense juxtaposition, of a variety of divergent human motives and purposes.”

This use of false causality is invalid and methodologically flawed. Scholars that use RCT in a predictive manner are often attacked for many of the same aforementioned reasons that post-hoc analysts are attacked. With respect to the predictive nature, again, with terrorism people’s lives are at stake. If a prediction fails, people die. In summary, the terrorism industry operates around “worst case fantasies.”

Challenges to GT and Terrorism Studies

There are various challenges to using GT in Terrorism Studies as well. Primarily, GT’s founders Glaser and Strauss disagree over the methodology’s application. Glaser took issue with Strauss’s evolving idea regarding the “coding paradigm” of GT. In Glaser’s opinion, Strauss began to ‘force’ data while conducting research thereby rendering the results invalid. This challenged the effectiveness of field research and the resulting academic publications and counterterrorism policies. Gathered data must be verified by at least one other source to be most effective.

But what incentives to terrorists have to tell the truth? After September 11th, interrogations of al-Qaeda detainees revealed that some were trained to lie in an effort to disrupt American counterterrorism efforts. According to Glaser, the aim of GT is to either create a set of probability statements about potential relationships, or to create an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses developed from empirical data. To that end, validity is not the goal. Rather, it should be judged by fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability. This approach could create bias amongst scholars looking to emphasize their respective hypotheses.

A second problem in GT is the structure of the approach: gaining access to terrorists to conduct research is difficult. Terrorists that have—or intend to—violate the law are constantly en garde to assure police informants do not infiltrate their groups. The various small studies with known terrorists almost always occur in a prison setting. Should access be granted to these individuals, Glaser mandates a researcher must not formulate opinions or perceptions about the people and the actions with which they are studying. This is challenging because one of the purposes of terrorism is to create as much publicity as possible, which generates preconceived notions that are mostly pejorative in nature. Glaser recommends that information ought to be gathered in a manner that avoids pre-data gathering research or analysis. In addition, Glaser believes researchers should not tape interviews or create a biased interview environment. Moreover, researchers should be cognizant of selection bias or selecting a non-representative sample. Individuals that commit terrorism are on the fringe of radical extremists and one must delineate between the two; a common mistake in research and policy making is to lump them together.
A third problem concerns lone-wolf and suicide terrorists. These types of terrorists generate a problematic gap for GT because lone-wolves often self-radicalize (normally via the Internet) procure weapons on their own, and perpetrate an attack individually. This was demonstrated in the Norway massacre of 2011. While perpetrating the attack, there is binary probability that the killer will survive. And if they do survive, there is binary probability that they will talk. Stated plainly, there is only one person to gather data from; this has been referred to as plotting in a ‘vacuum’. However, there are instances where lone-wolf terrorists do communicate with others before they act alone. This is demonstrated in the Fort Hood Massacre and the failed Underwear Bomber attack on Christmas Day in 2009. In both instances, the terrorist and would-be terrorist were in direct communication with the late Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

Suicide bombers are even more of a liability in GT. If the suicide terrorist is a lone wolf-terrorist who hatched his plan in a ‘vacuum’, there is no surviving guilty party and by default, no one left to interview. Although some leave evidence behind for publicity purposes that espouses their motivations, this is rare. If a lone-wolf terrorist did not self-radicalize, law enforcement must successfully trace the group radicalization process because many suicide terrorists are often part of a larger group. The researcher’s onus is then to track down the other terrorists, extract viable information from them, and hopefully use it for beneficial means. This too is challenging. When conducted properly, GT is extremely time consuming and due to the post-hoc nature of the theory, people are often killed before research can be fully performed.

**Conclusion**

RCT and GT can be quite useful in explaining and comprehending terrorism, albeit when the conditions and context are ideal for the respective research methods. As with many methodological frameworks, there are challenges that must be accounted for. Nevertheless, if these challenges are overcome they can yield precious material for counterterrorism policies.

So how should researchers use RCT and GT to aid policymakers in thinking about counterterrorism? At a basic level, researchers should emphasize that terrorists make informed decisions with respect to choosing terrorism. Put another way, terrorists have a choice between terrorism and all other activities. By providing alternatives, this distinction between strategic ‘benevolence’ and ‘deterrence’ can be used to create policies that attempt to dissuade terrorists from violent activities. A confrontational deterrence strategy is zero-sum and raises the opportunity cost of terrorist activities by defending potential targets, hitting terrorist training centers, and infiltrating terrorist groups. On the other hand, a benevolence strategy raises the opportunity cost of terrorist violence while reducing the cost of non-violent activity. Policymakers should assess these two approaches and determine which is more effective at winning the hearts and minds of multiple would-be terrorists.

Terrorists have farfetched aims, but when they draw upon successes like the Madrid bombings and the 1983 Beirut barracks bombings, they believe their actions are both effective and rational. Policymakers should therefore use RCT in the short run when actions can be quickly ‘gamed’ and the resulting policy implications rapidly employed. Still, if one cannot change what Martha Crenshaw calls the ‘preconditions’ (the factors that set the stage for terrorism in the long run) or the ‘precipitants’ (the specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism), then policymakers must pursue alternative measures. This strategy calls for more time, longer research, and generally speaking, GT.
To that end, policymakers and law enforcement officials alike should engage captured terrorists and elicit ways to aid counterterrorism tactics. This includes drawing out the ‘preconditions’ and ‘precipitants.’ Furthermore, counterterrorism officials should engage individuals who have voluntarily de-radicalized from terrorism. If the conditions that forced individuals away from terrorism are replicated, (although at times it is because a group became too radical or violent) policymakers and law enforcement officials can potentially change the course of an individual or a group with valuable policies. The notion of de-radicalization has been effectively demonstrated in many countries’ initiatives, such as the Care Rehabilitation Center in Saudi Arabia. Admittedly, there is no single approach or answer, but as terrorism continues to rise, the debate will undoubtedly continue.

Sources


† There is no universal definition for terrorism. Multiple scholars argue an act constitutes terrorism based upon the tactics used, the target audience, the motivations, the perpetrators, or often a combination. One constant theme regarding terrorism is its pejorative connotation in present vernacular. For the sake of this paper, terrorism is defined similar to Thornton in 1964: “the deliberate use of symbolic violence or the threat of violence against non-combatants for political purposes.” (Thornton, TP. “Terror as a weapon of political agitation.” Internal War. New York: Free. 1964. 71-99.


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