

The Psychology of Terrorists: The Third Floor of the Staircase

So some individuals move up from the second to the third floor of the staircase to terrorism. These individuals have been not only frustrated, they feel very anxious and uncomfortable about their situation, and they have been directed to particular targets. They move up to the third floor where the main psychological process is disengagement from morality of the rest of us, the majority. The kind of morality that says killing is wrong, that terrorism is wrong. And they become gradually engaged with the morality that says under some conditions at least, terrorism is justified.

So some individuals adopt this morality that says, if you can't fight them in any other way, terrorism is justified. That it is something that you can do as a means to an end. Now on the third floor, this shift to a morality that endorses terrorism does not mean that somebody will inevitably become a terrorist in terms of action. It simply means a shift in attitudes.

There is a long history in psychology, going back to the early 20th century, of research on attitudes and its links to actual action. We know that's just because a person expresses an attitude does not mean they're going to carry out an action. For example, there are lots of people who express attitudes about voting in elections, but they never go out and vote. There are people who make threats, but they don't carry out those threats.

So just because there is an endorsement of terrorism on the moral level doesn't mean the person is going to go out and carry out the action. However, it does mean that this person has now shifted in a very important way. Morally become engaged with terrorism, seeing terrorism as a justified means to an end. Also this links up, again, to identity.

Throughout the staircase to terrorism, a very important theme is threatened identity. Not only at the individual level, but at the collective level. When people feel that their identity is being directly threatened, that they could be wiped out, that is a very important motivation for action.

Now in response, we could say that this threat or perceived threat seems to be unjustified. Surely, they should not feel that they are being threatened collectively, that they are going to be wiped out. However, history shows that there are a lot of very good reasons for certain groups to feel threatened.

For example, the research on language death demonstrates that in the last 500 years or so, approximately 9,000 languages have been wiped out. When Columbus arrived in North America there were about 15,000 languages in the world. There are now approximately 6,000 languages left.

The majority of languages have been wiped out. A lot of groups do feel threatened by globalization. Traditional and fundamentalist religious groups of all stripes feel threatened by globalization. And particularly, traditional and fundamentalist Muslim men feel threatened by globalization and the liberalization of gender roles.

The modern role of women is a threat to traditionalists. Some individuals who have now become engaged with the morality endorsing terrorism on the third floor move up to the fourth floor.