

Part III

Beyond Terrorism

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Desistance from Terrorism

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Desistance is one of the primary goals for counterterrorism and is of paramount theoretical importance for the study of terrorism in general. Particularly as recent evidence suggests that the likelihood of recidivism for terrorism is higher than the likelihood of terrorism within the general population (Hasisi et al., 2020), promoting desistance presents a key arm of any comprehensive counterterrorism approach. There are, however, many conceptual and methodological challenges for identifying what desistance is and when desistance from terrorism occurs. Terrorism is a rare event (Arva & Piazza, 2016), and, like crime (Liggins et al., 2019; Sherman, 2007; Wolfgang et al., 1972), it is concentrated within a small number of people (Horgan, 2008) and a small number of places (Fisher & Becker, 2019; LaFree & Bersani, 2014; Perry, 2020). Each of these attributes of terrorism raises their own methodological challenges that need to be accounted for in studying the prevalence of desistance. Especially considering the relative abundance of crime and terrorism opportunities (see Bjørge, 2005; Clarke & Newman, 2006; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Klein et al., 2017), there are also numerous challenges for understanding the mechanisms behind why people cease committing these acts after previously offending. Recent research has also produced findings that terrorism desistance varies greatly across study settings (see Altier et al., 2019; Hasisi et al., 2020; Hodwitz, 2019; Schuurman & Bakker, 2016), raising the importance of further exploration into what desistance from terrorism means and what factors influence its likelihood.

It has been a long-standing criticism of criminology that more attention is paid to why people commit crime than why people desist from crime (see Laub & Sampson, 2001). In recent years, many studies have acted to remedy this by providing greater conceptual clarity (see Giordano et al., 2002; Kurlychek et al., 2012) and to expand theoretical understandings of the underlying mechanisms of desistance (see Copp et al., 2020; Giordano et al., 2008; Paternoster et al., 2015, 2016; Rocque et al., 2016). Despite the recent increased interest in studying the prevalence and patterns of terrorism desistance, this area at present is still vastly understudied (Hasisi et al., 2020). As will be further discussed in this chapter, developments in the criminological literature, coupled with greater theoretical understanding of terrorism, provide numerous opportunities for knowledge on desistance from terrorism. Enhanced by methodological and statistical advances, there are increased domains to build off of this previous work that may prove to be pivotal in designing measures that increase desistance from terrorism and reduce the incidence of terrorism within specific individuals and in the aggregate.

Theorizing and research about desistance from crime is one of the most exciting, vibrant, and dynamic areas in criminology today.

(Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1156)

Echoing the above quote from Paternoster and Bushway (2009) regarding criminology in general, there are numerous fertile and vital areas of inquiry within the study of terrorism specifically. To explore these areas, this chapter begins by discussing some of the key perspectives on the nature, definition, and measurement of desistance gleaned from criminology. It then examines some of the theoretical perspectives on desistance from the criminological literature, including deterrence, rational choice theory, control theories, and general strain theory, and explores how these perspectives inform our understanding of desistance from terrorism. The chapter concludes by discussing the empirical literature on desistance from terrorism and provides some guidance on opportunities for future research.

What is Desistance?

Defining desistance poses problems that are unique from understanding the incidence of crime and terrorism. In addition to the greatly discussed definitional disputes surrounding the nature of terrorism (see

Freilich et al., 2009; Schmid & Jongman, 1988; Young & Findley, 2011), Maruna (2001, p. 17) laments that measuring and understanding desistance from any crime adds additional challenges as “it is not an event that happens, but rather it is the sustained absence of a certain type of event.” As noted elsewhere in the terrorism literature, the absence of terrorism cannot confirm counterterrorism success (Lynch, 2011), and any observed inaction after a terror attack may be due to planning and preparation for a subsequent attack (Cothren et al., 2008). Consequently, discerning how long the absence of terrorism needs to be before it is considered to be desistance is a central and difficult question to answer. Stemming from these issues, it is unsurprising that the study of desistance within criminology has been impeded by definitional issues, theoretical incoherence, and measurement difficulties (Laub & Sampson, 2001). These issues are exacerbated by many of the intrinsic factors of terrorism, and consequently, it is important to investigate some of these factors in greater detail before examining the applicability of criminological conceptions of desistance to terrorism.

LaFree and Miller (2008) argue that the issues identified by Laub and Sampson (2001) are compounded within the domain of terrorism due to the collective nature of terrorist offending, its covert nature, and its rarity. Taken together, these three factors make having firm definitions of desistance from terrorism vital. The collective nature of terrorism offenses allows for individuals to provide meaningful contribution to an attack, but to potentially not be included among those indicted or recognized as being responsible for an attack. As terrorism is covert and the perpetrators of many attacks are unknown (LaFree & Dugan, 2007), there is potential for false negatives regarding terrorism desistance, whereby previous offenders may be responsible for attacks that are unattributed to any perpetrator. Due to the infrequency of terrorism and the time taken to plan and execute a terror attack (Cothren et al., 2008; Smith & Damphousse, 2009), studies on desistance from terrorism with short temporal horizons could erroneously conclude that an individual had desisted from terrorism despite them actively progressing toward a terror attack in the future, during the observation window. Problematically, all three of these attributes of terrorism lead to the increased likelihood that a person might be judged to have desisted from terrorism when, in reality, they had continued or increased their rate or severity of terrorism offending. Concordantly, many methods that could be used to measure desistance have the potential to produce misleading theoretical inferences through the increased likelihood of erroneously

concluding desistance has occurred, resulting in the overestimation of the value and impact of any intervention aimed at increasing desistance.

These factors have led to the argument that desistance from terrorism should be seen to be a process of deradicalization rather than the cessation of participation in terror attacks (Horgan, 2008). This conceptualization has also been observed to have its own challenges. Kruglanski and colleagues (2013) for example note that the inconsistent use of deradicalization, disengagement, and desistance have created a number of conceptual obstacles, and are often used synonymously within the academic literature and beyond. Further, Horgan and Altier (2012) observe that one does not necessarily need to “deradicalize” in order to cease committing terrorism. This renders it important to distinguish whether the focus of desistance within studies of terrorism should be the curtailment of violence or the abandonment of ideologies conducive to terrorism. As former terrorists may wield their former actions to pursue political goals and other nonviolent aims (Cordes, 1987), and can also intentionally conceal their actual beliefs from researchers (Altier et al., 2014), a strong case can be made for focusing on desisting from offending behavior regardless of personal or ideological beliefs. This is reinforced by some criminological theories as well. From the perspective of self-control theory, for example (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), the motivation for crime is invariant across the population as the benefits from crime are abundantly apparent and desirable to all (see Burt & Simons (2013) for an empirical examination of this assumption). If true, then examining the motivations for terrorism would be a moot point where the variation in motivation within a sample could instead be driven by deception, aliases, mistaken identities, and other measurement factors (Miller, 2016). As such, while measuring desistance from terrorism is replete with factors that would lead to over-estimations of the prevalence of desistance, from many theoretical and instrumental perspectives focusing on the cessation of terrorist behavior has greater merit. Concordantly, for the remainder of this chapter, desistance will be viewed in terms of reductions in violent actions rather than in terms of “the elimination of one’s violent belief in a violent, extremist ideology” (Altier et al., 2014, p. 647; Kruglanski et al., 2013).

From the criminological literature, desistance has similarly proven difficult to operationalize and measure as “even a five-year or ten-year crime-free period is no guarantee that offending has terminated” (Farrington, 1986, p. 201). In light of these early observations, permanent desistance would only be possible to ascertain after the death

of an individual, as the possibility of future offending would otherwise always remain (Huizinga et al., 1989). Given the impracticalities of waiting until the death of all participants in a study (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009), much of the criminological research has essentially equated extended periods of non-offending to desistance (Bushway et al., 2001). This pragmatic approach does raise important concerns that should be noted. As the observation periods and methods of data collection procedures have varied greatly within the criminological empirical literature on desistance, Uggen and Massoglia (2003, pp. 316–317) concluded that “it is difficult to draw empirical generalizations from the growing literature on desistance from crime.” Importantly, studies with longer temporal windows of observation would be more likely to see lower levels of desistance as there are increased opportunities to offend. Further, as the aforementioned measurement issues are addressed (see LaFree & Miller, 2008; Miller, 2016), higher quality studies would also be less likely to observe desistance compared to less rigorous studies. In light of this persistent potential for overestimating rates of desistance and the rarity of terrorism, the importance of having an extended follow-up period is vital for future studies. Given the time and resources needed to create such datasets, however, this chapter highlights the importance of triangulating existing findings across methodological approaches and across study contexts to better identify the presence and absence of desistance.

The criminological literature has identified a number of important insights that have revealed much about patterns of desistance. An increasing body of empirical literature has demonstrated that desistance is not uniform. It has been observed that desistance can be an immediate knifing-off of the past from some offenders (Kirk, 2012), and an extended declining process for others that can be influenced by a string of important events (Laub et al., 1998). This has led to those such as Kurlychek et al. (2012) to posit that desistance can be both instantaneous in nature whereby the offender immediately ceases their criminal behavior, and an incremental process where offending declines over a period of time. Evidenced with 18 years of follow-up data on a cohort of felony convicts from the state of New Jersey in the United States, Kurlychek et al. (2012) find that some offenders had already desisted at the beginning of the follow-up period (instantaneous desistance), while others exhibited a more gradual decline in their offending rate (desistance as a process). Although the theoretical explanations for the mechanisms underlying either of these two conceptualizations of

desistance differ, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, criminological theories and the above compiled evidence from this discipline have already yielded much that can be applied to the understanding of desistance from terrorism.

Theoretical Explanations of Desistance

A range of criminological theories has been applied to understanding desistance and many have contradictory predictions as to the nature, possibility, and mechanisms for desistance. Criminology as a field and its theories have yielded many benefits for the study of terrorism (Fisher & Dugan, 2019a), although much of this has been relatively recent in nature (see Black, 2004). Making greater proportionate use of statistical analyses, systematically collected data, and established theories compared to other approaches (Lum et al., 2006; Silke, 2001), criminological research has helped to dispel intuitively popular but inaccurate theories of terrorism, including personal narcissism and paranoia (Victoroff, 2005). As will be seen in the discussion below, not all criminological theories have been paid equal attention in the extant literature (Freilich & LaFree, 2015), particularly with regard to desistance from terrorism. With this notable limitation, this section provides a brief overview of a range of criminological theories, discusses their predictions for desistance, and summarizes their application with regard to desistance from terrorism.

Deterrence and Rational Choice

Both deterrence and rational choice theories share the underlying assumption that people are rational, and if left to their own devices, would naturally commit crime. This approach stems from the seminal works of Beccaria (1764) and Bentham (1781) who argued that humans are self-interested, possess free will, and seek to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain through their decisions. Individuals will thus engage in crime, or in this case terrorism, when the expected benefits are greater than the expected risks (Becker, 1968). Empirical research on deterrence and rational choice has revealed that decisions to commit crime are not purely based on incentives and punishments. Clarke and Cornish (1985) along with Loewenstein (1996) have observed that criminal decisions vary greatly across situations and offenses. This avenue of research has led to the present understanding that the perceptions of

risks and rewards are often more important than objective probabilities of punishment for decision-making (Nagin, 2013). Rather than possessing pure and objective rationality, people instead practice “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1982), whereby individuals select actions that are “good enough” instead of maximizing their objective utility (Berrebi, 2009, p. 170). This more nuanced understanding of rationality has been observed in a range of terrorism environments, revealing important insights into the strategic calculus of terrorists (Dugan & Chenoweth, 2012; Frey & Luechinger, 2003; Kydd & Walter, 2006; Pape, 2003).

Following the assumptions of rationality, deterrence theory argues for an inverse relationship between the certainty and celerity of punishment and crime in the presence of proportionate punishment (Beccaria, 1764). Deterrence can be general in nature by preventing would-be offenders from offending; or it can be specific by stopping perpetrators from reoffending (Stafford & Warr, 1993). Although general deterrence has been argued to be an essential mechanism for counterterrorism (Fisher & Becker, 2019; Ross & Gurr, 1989), desistance is more directly concerned with specific deterrence. General deterrence may play a role in desistance by advertising the credibility of apprehension and threat of punishment in general, however this influence is likely to be minimal. Instead, the experiences of the individual with their own criminal offending and the experiences of their direct family and peers have a greater impact on one’s perceived risk of detection and punishment (van Veen & Sattler, 2020; Wilson et al., 2017). Given that to desist from crime one must have previously committed crime, this evidence suggests that focusing on mechanisms in line with specific deterrence are of greater relevance for understanding desistance from terrorism.

Specific deterrence is a separate mechanism from incapacitation where an individual is deprived from being able to choose to commit a crime (Auerhahn, 1999). Whether death is considered desistance within terrorism is an important question worth its own targeted analysis. Reiss (1989) for example questioned whether desistance need always be a voluntary decision. Particularly as high-risk offenders (Lattimore et al., 1997) are more likely to suffer a premature death, there are important theoretical and practical consequences for whether individuals who desist through death are included in calculations or whether this is considered to be conflating theoretical mechanisms. Targeted killings, imprisonment for one’s natural life, and other responses to terrorism aimed at the incapacitation of terrorists are not policies aimed at specific deterrence. If one is concerned with desistance (cessation

of violence) through any means, however, then this theoretical distinction would be moot. Theoretically, desistance through death would not diminish the capacity for other terrorists and groups to observe this and desist through general deterrence mechanisms. Nevertheless, recent studies demonstrate that targeted killings, for example, yield negligible general deterrent impacts on terrorism even in the most notable cases (Carson, 2017; Fisher & Becker, 2019). Government actions aimed at achieving specific deterrence also have the potential to incidentally increase terrorism by inciting a violent terrorism backlash (Argomaniz & Vidal-Diez, 2015; Kattelman, 2020; LaFree et al., 2009). To account for this, future studies examining desistance from terrorism, from the perspective of deterrence and/or incapacitation, would benefit from identifying cases of desistance through death within their sample and observing how their inclusion and exclusion within estimates impacts any conclusions. Further, when examining general deterrence as the mechanism for desistance, the deaths of key figures (whether through targeted killings or other sources of premature death) within a terrorist organization provide important opportunities to test hypotheses that are central to desistance through deterrence and distinguishing the impacts of incapacitation.

For many years, the deterrence perspective has been theoretically criticized for its inability to anticipate the complex and variable utility structures of terrorists and the reactions of terrorists to stimuli beyond punishments (Victoroff, 2005). The previously discussed findings supporting backlash hypotheses (see Argomaniz & Vidal-Diez, 2015; Kattelman, 2020; LaFree et al., 2009), also indicate that there are mechanisms beyond deterrence that are important for terrorism. These findings are not without pattern however, indicating that terrorists are not irrational, as has oft been claimed (Abrahms & Lula, 2012; Fisher & Dugan, 2019a). The observable trends within these studies instead indicate that there is a rational component to terrorist decision-making. Indeed, a growing list of studies has provided evidence that terrorist decisions are likely influenced by a broad array of actions, including government incentives for not committing terrorism (Dugan & Chenoweth, 2012), government handling of natural disasters (Fisher & Dugan, 2019b), and that complex rational decision-making is evident for suicide bombers as well (Pape, 2003; Perry & Hasisi, 2015). This suite of findings provides evidence that there are likely rational mechanisms beyond deterrence and incapacitation that could be leveraged to encourage desistance.

The potential for rational choice mechanisms to result in terrorist desistance was discussed and demonstrated in case studies on both terrorist groups and specific terrorists in a special issue of *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* (see Dugan et al., 2008; LaFree & Miller, 2008; McCauley, 2008), and has conceptual roots going back to Ross and Gurr (1989) and Crenshaw (1991). Studies have also provided evidence indicating that there are rational processes that underlie decisions to support or engage in violent extremism (Dhami & Murray, 2016). One of the biggest challenges in this domain, which is holding back systematic and individual-level research on desistance from terrorism, is that “reliable data on recidivism rates among extremists and terrorists tends to be scarce and anecdotal” (Schuurman & Bakker, 2016, p. 66). Databases like the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS, see National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2018) dataset, the American Terrorism Study (ATS), and the Profiles of Perpetrators of Terrorism in the United States (PPT-US), all provide opportunities for testing hypotheses related to rational choice and other theoretical perspectives, especially when integrated with other data sources and analytic techniques (see Becker, 2019). Pursuing data improvements and laying the foundations for the collection of data in line with the Pathways to Desistance dataset (Mulvey et al., 2004), for example, would also help spur along this branch of research. Replicating criminological studies focused on human agency, changing subjective expectations, and changing marginal utilities (see Thomas & Vogel, 2019), and the intersection of identity and rational choice (see Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster et al., 2015) provide promising avenues for future terrorism research on desistance from the rational choice perspective.

Control Theories

Control theories differ from all other criminological theories as they ask: why do people not commit crime? Many different control theories have emerged since Reiss (1951), who presented that it was the individual’s submission or acceptance of rules that cause their actions to line up with accepted norms, morals, and values of a society. For control theories, crime then results when there is a relative absence of internalized norms and rules governing behavior that conform to socialized norms and rules (Reiss, 1951). There have been numerous iterations within this tradition that have focused upon stakes in

conformity (Toby, 1957), techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1958), containment (Reckless, 1967), social control (Hirschi, 1969), and self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), and the control theory perspective is the most frequently tested and endorsed theory within criminology (Walsh & Ellis, 1999). Each of these theories offer their own predictions and are worthy of exploration, despite being incorporated into later control theories: notably Hirschi's Social Control Theory (1969), Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime (1990), and in Hirschi's combination of social and self-control (2004). Meta analyses have revealed that self-control is an important predictor of crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2000), providing increased empirical support that low self-control and the absence of other forms of social control predict a range of crimes.

It was previously discussed that the control perspective yields some unique predictions for the motivations and opportunities for crime. Notably within control theory, the motivation to commit crime is ubiquitous (LaFree & Miller, 2008), and the opportunities for crime are omnipresent (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Previous studies on terrorism do question these assumptions as there is variation in support for violent extremism (Dhimi & Murray, 2016; Nivette et al., 2017), and not all practicable opportunities for terrorism have the potential to advance terrorist goals (Asal et al., 2009). As there is also evidence for a diffusion of benefits stemming terrorism interventions rather than a displacement from one terrorist opportunity to another (Hsu et al., 2018), current evidence suggests that there are important differences in opportunities for terrorism that would need to be explained from this perspective (see also Grasmick et al., 1993). At present there is little research directly exploring control theories and terrorism, and direct examinations of these assumptions within the terrorism literature would be of great value. Of the few existing studies, Oliverio and Lauderdale (2005) have also suggested that social control mechanisms could be used to justify terrorism instead of providing the foundation for abstaining or desisting from terrorism, though recent analyses have demonstrated that there is empirical support for social control reducing the likelihood of participating in a violent and ideologically motivated act (Becker, 2019).

These factors do not diminish the potential value of control theories for understanding terrorism, and other important criticisms have led to theoretical advances that may be of great promise for future research. These additional criticisms that have been leveled at control theory include: that it does not explain corporate crime and organizational

offending well (Simpson & Piquero, 2002); it does not explain gender differences in crime or changes in crime rates over time well (Tittle et al., 2003); and that it denies the impact of external social factors in later life (Laub & Sampson, 1993). This last criticism is especially important for desistance and is addressed directly by life-course theory (Sampson & Laub, 2003). This theory builds upon social control theory and the age-crime curve, which suggests that all people eventually desist from crime but the rate of desistance differs across the population (Sampson & Laub, 2003). This age-graded theory of informal social control presents that key life “turning points” like marriage, having children, gaining and losing employment, gaining education, and engaging in military service can alter the trajectory of an individual’s desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson, 1993, p. 7). Supported by qualitative and quantitative research, Sampson and Laub (2003, pp. 279–280) find that those who desisted from crime had “structures, situations, and persons [that] offered nurturing and informal social control.” Research found links between education and terrorism (Brockhoff et al., 2015), although this national-level research was unable to investigate the individual impacts of education as a turning point that leads toward desistance.

Life-course theory also offers an avenue for examination that would be of particular interest to the study of desistance from terrorism. The observation that crime declines with age is one of the most enduring and consistent findings in criminology (Matza, 1964), and was part of the basis for self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), changes in criminal offending over a lifetime are likely to be unidirectional, with a peak in offending during adolescence giving way to desistance in adulthood. This theory thus does not allow for adult-onset offenders, otherwise known as late bloomers, whereas life-course theory does allow that traumatic events may also act as turning points that may lead to introductions into crime later in life. Given that it has long been observed that terrorists are typically older than other criminal offenders (Russell & Miller, 1977), identifying the presence of adult-onset terrorists and examining any precursor turning points would yield important insights for desistance from terrorism and for criminology more generally. Particularly as Sohoni and colleagues (2014) found no evidence of true adult-onset offenders, investigations in this area would be particularly fruitful. Considering that control theory has been the most tested criminological theory, there are abundant avenues to replicate previous studies and examine this perspective to better understand desistance from terrorism.

Strain Theories

Based upon the premise that “some social structures *exert a definite pressure* upon certain persons in the society to engage in non-conformist rather than conformist conduct” (Merton, 1938, p. 672, emphasis in original), strain theories within criminology have been among the most prominent criminological theories of the past century. Early strain theories argued that crime results from individuals being structurally precluded from access to culturally approved means (e.g., education and gainful employment) to gain culturally defined aspirations (e.g., the accumulation of wealth or social status) (Merton, 1938). Reformulated by Agnew (1992) as General Strain Theory (GST), this version of strain theory presents that individuals are pressured into crime by the strains and stressors that they experience. Instead of being a result of utilitarian calculus like rational choice theories, Agnew (2006) suggests that individuals engage in crime as a reaction to the strains experienced from the loss of positive stimuli, the experience of negative stimuli, and the inability to achieve desired goals. Also occurring indirectly through experiencing negative emotions like anger and frustration (Agnew et al., 2002), from the perspective of GST, crime is thus a form of corrective action aiming to resolve the perceived source of the strain.

Regarding terrorism, Agnew (2010, p. 131) argues terrorism is most likely to be committed when people experience “collective strains” that are: high in magnitude, with civilians affected; unjust; and inflicted by substantially more powerful others. As strains that fit these criteria are far more common than the incidence of terrorism, the theory in this form would overpredict the incidence of terrorism and suffer from the embarrassment-of-riches problem leveled at earlier conceptions of strain theory (Matza, 1964). Agnew (2010, p. 131) however presents that these conditions will not always lead to terrorism, as “a range of factors condition” the effect of these strains. Although this premise allows GST to avoid overprediction issues in theory, Agnew (2010) does present additional data and methodological issues that would need to be overcome in order to adequately test GST on terrorism. In reviewing previous examinations, Agnew (2010, p. 149) laments in his opinion that previous empirical tests have been too simplistic as “they fail to measure the key dimensions of strain, including magnitude, injustice, and the nature of the source ... [and that] these tests do not examine intervening mechanisms, the subjective interpretation of strain, or conditioning variables.”

This lofty data requirement is not beyond the realms of possibility, and important research has begun to rise to this challenge. Testing the key strain hypotheses that “exposure to collective strain is associated with higher support for violent extremism and the effect of collective strain is conditional on perceptions of moral and legal constraints,” Nivette et al. (2017, p. 755) find that exposure to collective strains does not have a direct impact on violent extremist attitudes when modeled correctly and that individuals who previously had internalized justifications for violence were more vulnerable to extremist violent pathways after being exposed to stressors. Given that the data from this study come from seven waves of an ongoing prospective longitudinal study based on a stratified random sampling of schools in the Swiss city of Zurich, replication of these findings would be difficult in other contexts. In addition, finding equivalent data on an adult population to meet Agnew’s (2010) requirement would pose even greater challenges. Heeding the approach used by Nivette et al. (2017), identifying longitudinal datasets that have been compiled for other means may present opportunities for examining the links between strain and desistance from terrorism as well. While it would be many years before any of the youths in this sample from Zurich engage in terrorism and subsequently desist (if any ever do), investing in this approach would present numerous benefits over analyzing terrorist autobiographies to examine the impact of strain and distress on terrorist engagement and terrorism desistance (see Corner & Gill, 2020).

Support has been found within the criminological literature that the propositions of GST also can predict desistance. Using data from a longitudinal study of males in South Florida, Eitle (2010) found support for a relationship between experiences of strain and desistance from crime (see also Gunnison & Mazerolle, 2007). However, this study also found no support for the claim that changes in self-esteem and social support moderate the relationship between strain and criminal activity (Eitle, 2010), potentially limiting the policy mechanisms that could be used from this perspective to encourage desistance from terrorism. Whether these findings apply to desistance from terrorism remains an open question, and one worthy of exploration. Particularly as some of the potential policy responses from this theoretical perspective include a wide array of options, ranging from the fostering of better coping mechanisms for individuals to the cessation of underlying grievances, this chapter highlights that if appropriate data can be gained, this may prove to be a fruitful theoretical avenue for future research on desistance from terrorism.

Collective Desistance and Terrorist Organizations

Much of the literature discussed above, and in criminology in general, focuses upon individuals and their relationship to crime rather than groups and crime. Criminal gangs, terrorist organizations, and other such organizations may provide pathways for people into crime and may be intrinsic in developing their members' criminal abilities (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Miller, 2016; Thrasher, 1927). Terrorist groups may also operate differently and respond differently to a host of stimuli. Atran (2006), for example, argues that group dynamics may supersede individual goals and attributes with regard to terrorism, and the viable strategic options for an organization may differ markedly compared to individuals based upon practical and political realities (DeVore, 2012). Shapiro (2012, p. 5) highlights these internal and external group dynamics as being part of the reasons why "terrorist groups repeatedly take actions that are ultimately politically counter-productive." Exemplified by the overreaching tactics employed by the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), Dugan and colleagues (2008) display how this presents an opportunity for governments to discredit these terrorist organizations specifically and terrorism in general to increase the likelihood of desistance. Combined with the knowledge that government disruptions of criminal networks can also influence group actions, priorities, and patterns of desistance (Fabiani & Behlendorf, 2020), there is growing evidence to suggest that there are policy options that are available to facilitate collective desistance from terrorism that may not exist at the individual level. Indeed, factors unique to the group level for desistance have been identified, including the influence of competition between other terror groups (Young & Dugan, 2014), indicating the need for additional research in this area. Datasets like the Big Allied and Dangerous Version 2 database (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2015) could be used in conjunction with other datasets to test the aforementioned criminological theories to observe whether terrorist groups respond similarly to individual terrorists with regard to desistance.

Studying desistance at the group level does pose its own challenges, with most studies at this point engaging in descriptive analyses. In addition to the aforementioned difficulties with measuring individual-level desistance from terrorism, Miller (2016) provides a key description of some of the additional challenges for measuring the desistance of terrorist organizations. Terrorist groups range in level of organization, level of contact, organizational hierarchy, sophistication, objectives,

longevity, and capacity (Miller, 2016). This makes the definition of terrorist groups problematic, with broader definitions suggesting shorter lifespans before desistance (see Rapoport, 1992) compared to longer average lifespans for more conservative terrorism group definitions (Blomberg et al., 2010). In light of these observations, using different definitions of terrorist groups to triangulate findings within a single study would help to provide more nuanced estimates of the impact of different government interventions and other criminological influences on group or collective desistance from terrorism.

When one considers both group and individual desistance simultaneously, a host of new issues emerges. While a terror group may desist, any individual member may then be able to join another terrorist organization as individual allegiances change or as groups splinter into many entities (Gaibulloev & Sandler, 2014). Conversely, a group may persist in terror actions despite the majority of its members individually desisting from terrorism (this may also lead to eventual desistance for the group as well; see Dugan et al., 2008). In either case, should this be considered desistance from terrorism? While sufficient data to test these ideas and their practical implications do not exist at present, this theoretical issue stems back to Plutarch:

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

(Plutarch, 1850 [c. 75 AD], p. 26)

The question of identity posed by Plutarch for the ship of Theseus in the above quote has practical implications for understanding desistance within terrorist organizations. For the ship of Theseus, it is debatable whether it is still the same ship after all of the component parts have been replaced. Particularly for organizations that have existed for long periods (more than 40 years) of time like those identified by Miller (2016) in Colombia, Israel and Palestine, Northern Ireland, and Spain, desistance may be occurring while these groups persist. For these few but important terrorist organizations, there may be no original remaining members. In a case like this, is it then possible for a group to persist but

for there to be complete individual-level desistance? This may be considered a moot point in research that solely focuses on the persistence and desistance of specific terrorist groups. However, if one is concerned with the profile of terrorism in a nation, globally, or at the individual level, this may be an important dynamic that conditions the incidence and lethality of terrorism. Although a resolution to the paradox posed by the ship of Theseus is unlikely to be forthcoming, parsing out what this means for our understanding of collective desistance from terrorism has theoretical and practical implications for the overall understanding of desistance from terrorism.

Conclusions

Over the past two decades much has been learned about terrorism, and empirical research driven by criminological theories has begun to flourish. This chapter has documented many of these advances, but other theories, including Differential Association/Learning theory, Labeling theory, and to a lesser extent Social Disorganization, provide much untapped potential for understanding terrorism and patterns of desistance. As we improve our descriptive understanding and measurement of terrorism through ground-breaking work on desistance from terrorism (see Altier et al., 2019; Hasisi et al., 2020; Hodwitz, 2019; Schuurman and Bakker, 2016), the value of collecting long-term data on the incidence of terrorism and who commits these acts becomes increasingly evident. It is difficult to generalize findings across these studies due to idiosyncratic difference in study settings and scope, however all of these studies do demonstrate that desistance from terrorism does occur with identifiable factors conditioning its likelihood.

This variation in findings demonstrates the need and the value for increased theoretically driven examinations of desistance from terrorism. The identification of risk factors for recidivism and desistance does have value, and identifying when those who previously committed terrorism return to the same likelihood of offending as the rest of the population would be a major step forward for this literature (see Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009). Incorporating criminological theories to refine these observations and to enable an increased number of testable propositions still marks a key path forward in this domain (Crenshaw, 1981). Employing this theoretical-driven approach, studying desistance from terrorism may prove to be “one of the most exciting, vibrant, and dynamic areas” of terrorism research over the coming years (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1156).

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