Applying Moral Foundations Theory to Identify Terrorist Group Motivations

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Previous research distinguishing terrorist groups has employed categorical schemes that are (1) ideologically broad and ambiguous (e.g., right-wing versus left-wing) or (2) focused on single-issues (e.g., guns, abortion). Broad schemes often fail to clearly distinguish groups’ motivations, and single-issue schemes provide no coherent theoretical structure for understanding terrorist behavior. To address these limitations, we applied the conceptual framework of moral foundations theory (MFT) to derive a content-analytic scheme identifying universal instincts we term “moral motivations.” We then applied this scheme to classify descriptions found in the Profiles of Perpetrators of Terrorism in the United States, an open-sourced dataset providing information on terrorist organizations that committed violence on U.S. soil. Analyses examined how terrorist-group activities are associated with specific moral motivations in order to distinguish dominant motives among different groups. Results showed that extremist right-wing, religious, and ethno-nationalist/separatist ideologies were associated with the binding motivations of loyalty, authority, and purity. Extremist left-wing and single-issue ideologies were associated with the individualizing motivations of care and fairness. These findings are discussed regarding the value of using MFT’s motivations to distinguish terrorist groups and how describing their moral motivations might advance efforts to curtail their activities.

**KEY WORDS:** content analysis, moral foundations theory, motivations, terrorism

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, efforts to identify terrorist groups and understand the motivations that drive their violent activity have become a major public concern. Initial attempts have been made to address these concerns with the hope that doing so could help thwart violent terrorism in the United States and abroad. Accompanying this public concern, terrorist motivations have received both popular (e.g., Siddique, 2008) and scholarly (e.g., Singh, Vatsa, & Noor, 2009) attention. Empirical efforts have offered several drives for terrorist behavior,
such as a quest for significance (i.e., becoming “immortalized;” Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009) and strong group identification (Ginges & Atran, 2009; Wright, 2015). Though valuable, these contributions are limited in their explanatory scope, focusing on singular reasons for terrorism (e.g., a quest for significance, group identity) or single types of terrorism (e.g., suicidal bombings; Kruglanski et al., 2009). Further, research in this domain is limited in terms of providing (1) ideological schemes that are broad and ambiguous (e.g., right-wing versus left-wing) or (2) schemes that identify a set of single issues (e.g., gun rights, abortion).

Although existing approaches may offer benefit, broad schemes often fail to distinguish motivations with great clarity, and single-issue schemes offer no coherent theoretical structure. As we argue, our research provides a more comprehensive scheme, one capable of explaining a range of deeply rooted moral concerns driving human behavior, including behavior enacted by violent terrorist organizations. In the current article, we attempt to show that moral motivations feature prominently in the principles that guide the activities of violent terrorist groups. We believe that identifying these motivations can increase understanding of intuitive mechanisms that drive the violent behavior of terrorist groups.

To accomplish this, we applied the conceptual framework of moral foundations theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2007) to derive a content-analytic scheme that identifies universal moral instincts (termed “intuitive motivations”). MFT provides a framework to classify behaviors in terms of five evolutionarily developed intuitive motivations. To date, research examining characteristics that distinguish terrorist groups has paid little attention to the moral principles that underlie the concerns of these organizations. This is notable considering assertions that terrorists see their actions as an effort to uphold moral values they deem most important (Bandura, 1990). That is, terrorist groups may harm innocent others because they are driven by some other moral value they regard as more important. Recognizing the intuitive moral motivations that terrorists deem important above all other concerns and understanding that the supremacy of these motivations can lead terrorists to harm innocent others may prove useful to policymakers engaged in efforts to curtail terrorist activities. Identifying and understanding the forces triggering terrorist activities is a necessary step toward prevention.

We begin by discussing research on terrorist group motivations and some of the limitations associated with work in this area, and we go on to examine the potential benefits of applying a scheme rooted in MFT. In this section, we argue that terrorist groups are indeed morally engaged, despite the fact that their heinous actions may seem purely immoral to others. Following this, we describe a content analytic study designed to identify (1) the presence of moral motivations in the historical activities and founding principles of terrorist organizations and (2) the extent to which these motivations vary as a function of either the organizations’ political ideology or region of origin.

Research on Terrorist Groups’ Motivations

As almost all humans have compassion-driven psychological restraints against harming others (Bandura, 1990), understanding how terrorists can justify their extremely injurious acts is difficult at first glance. Asal et al. (2009) argued that the desire for political change is one of the most common driving factors of violent terrorist activity. When terrorists feel threatened by their political-social system, they are particularly likely to be violent (Sprinzak, 1995). Several researchers suggest that to justify their violent behavior, members of terrorist groups use a variety of moral disengagement techniques, such as blaming the victim, viewing the victim as subhuman, and downplaying the severity of the act (e.g., Bandura, 1990; Crenshaw, 2000; Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, & Castano, 2012).

Despite any natural aversions to heinous acts such as murder, individuals may view murder as morally justified if they perceive that they are working toward the greater good, such as eliminating threats to society (Wright, 2015) or combatting presumable political unfairness/deprivation (Moghaddam, 2005). As Coady (2004) remarks, the distinction between the revolutionary action
of freedom fighters and terrorism toward noncombatants is subjective, as many terrorists consider their actions to be in line with the former. In a similar manner, terrorists may see themselves as performing service to their country or group, and therefore they view their actions as patriotic. Many terrorists commit heinous acts in a quest for meaning in their life, giving their life to benefit their group and be remembered as a hero (Kruglanski et al., 2009). They consider the comparatively smaller-scale destruction of their attacks to merit the larger political and collective gains that might result. For example, though attacks often directly victimize innocent civilians, victims are seen as agents representing the larger ruling entity toward which the underlying message of attacks is focused (Primoratz, 1997). In this way, the symbolic moral impact that terrorist group attacks have on societies is what drives the violent behavior.

These examples demonstrate how the structure of moral values can vary among groups and even individuals. In essence, terrorists prioritize particular moral values (e.g., protecting their ingroup or obeying a higher authority) over others (e.g., compassion for innocent people; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2012). By sublimating the importance of moral principles that would constrain violent behavior to other principles deemed superordinate, members of terrorist groups can eradicate the inherent human tendency to believe that injurious acts intentionally perpetrated against innocuous others is wrong. In this manner, terrorist groups’ violent acts may be driven by moral concerns, even if those moral concerns are not immediately apparent to observers.

Although previous investigations have begun to consider the motivations of terrorist organizations (e.g., Smith, 2008), research in this area has not incorporated recent advances in moral psychology. These advances explicate some of the deeply seated moral mechanisms likely to play an important role in our understanding of the previously unidentified motivations that may drive these groups. Applying the mechanisms identified in MFT to examine the forces that prompt terrorist group behavior helps to avoid problems of subjectivity surrounding the morality of terrorism discussed in previous research (e.g., Coady, 2004; Ganor, 2002). That is, MFT allows for the classification of motivations to occur in a scheme of universal moral values that are not dependent on the perspective of the observer. Moreover, this provides a scheme for categorizing moral motivations that may enable us to distinguish the dominant motives among violent terrorist groups. Learning how these moral motivations are incorporated into terrorist organizations’ historical activities and founding principles offers the potential to increase our understanding of the mechanisms and motivations that drive their violent behavior.

**Moral Foundations Theory**

Moral foundations theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2007) takes a functionalist approach to form a systematic theory of moral judgment. MFT adopts from Sperber (1994, 2005) the idea that humans have innate systems organized within the brain that adapt over time. These systems guide social behavior and can be made weaker or stronger through socialization. Moral foundations provide the substructure for generating social intuitions or the rapid connection of some action to an affective, evaluative response. For example, the response of most people when considering acts of incest is immediate disgust. The disgust experienced in this situation is an intuitive response; that is, an immediate affective reaction to a behavior that is based on evolution and developed through experience. MFT alternatively refers to these evaluative responses as intuitive motivations as they are thought to drive human social behavior (Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008).

**Intuitive motivations.** MFT identifies five moral intuitive motivations that shape social behavior. These include care, which pertains to compassion and concern for the welfare of others; fairness, which relates to reciprocity and equity/equality; loyalty, which describes feelings of solidarity toward an ingroup and against an outgroup; authority, which is associated with respect for benevolent leaders and group traditions; and purity, which pertains to a desire to avoid social contamination and
a belief in group dogmas concerning cleanliness. These motivations function to shape behavior and allow humans to live socially. They do this by facilitating cooperative, altruistic behavior that benefits others. For example, the loyalty motivation is based on bias in favor of the ingroup and against the outgroup. Behaviors resulting from this motivation could range from school pride to patriotism or from bigotry to violence against minorities (e.g., hate crimes).

When considering previous research suggesting that terrorist groups often believe what they are doing is moral (Coady, 2004), we might explain violent behavior by terrorist groups as resulting from one of MFT’s intuitive moral drives. Recent work based on MFT suggests that the degree to which a motivation is central to an individual or group can affect that individual’s or group’s moral judgment (Eden et al., 2014; Hahn, Tamborini, Prabhu, Grall, et al., 2017) and related behavior (Hahn, 2018; Tamborini et al., 2016; Tamborini, Hofer et al., 2017). In this manner, human behavior is said to be driven by moral hierarchies in which some motivations are deemed more important than others. Although people may be concerned with more than one motivation at any given time, their judgments and behaviors are often driven by the one most salient, or that they considered most important (Tamborini, 2013). While beyond the scope of the present study, we might expect this of terrorist groups as well, considering that they have been characterized as committing “incidental violence” (i.e., sublimating concerns of care) in pursuit of “broader aims” (i.e., what they might perceive as an act of greater moral importance; Bandura, 1990, p. 161).

Implicit in the “broader aims” suggested by Bandura (1990) is the fact that all violent terrorist groups harm others seemingly to act in accord with what they see as right, or moral. In this manner, violent groups are willing to violate care in order to uphold some other motivation they consider more important. Identifying this “more important” moral motivation could be crucial in pinpointing the root cause of their acts, and ultimately stopping further violent behavior before it occurs. For example, if a group commits a terrorist attack to establish a caliphate (i.e., a State based on Islamic teachings), determining whether the action was driven by authority (the desire for a leader perceived to be more benevolent) or purity (the desire for a culturally uncorrupted society) could be central in identifying a peaceful solution to the problem and curb future attacks.

MFT holds that members of the general public have moral hierarchies wherein they deem some motivations as more important than others (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Although speculative, we argue that terrorists have moral hierarchies just like members of the general public, in which some moral motivations are prioritized over others. However, it appears that compassion for innocent others may be low on the moral hierarchy of terrorists. Thus, they are willing to violate care in order to uphold moral values they consider to be more important. In this article, we develop a scheme designed to identify the motivations that are most important to violent terrorist organizations.

**Individualizing versus binding motivations.** Early MFT research developed with a focus on the care and fairness motivations, but in later, cross-cultural applications, Haidt and Joseph (2007) identified the dominant presence of the loyalty, authority, and purity motivations. Subsequently, two higher-order categories were created to subsume the five motivations. These are labeled “individualizing” and “binding” motivations. Individualizing motivations, which consist of the care and fairness motivations, can be characterized by their focus on “teaching individuals to respect the rights of other individuals” (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1030). Binding motivations, which consist of loyalty, authority, and purity, can be characterized by their focus on “strengthening groups and institutions and by binding individuals into roles and duties” (p. 1030). The present study set out to examine whether the importance of individualizing and binding motivations varies across terrorist groups according to their political ideology and region of origin.
The importance placed on different moral motivations varies among individuals as a function of political preference (Graham et al., 2009). For instance, Graham et al. (2009) found that left-wing individuals place more importance on individualizing motivations than binding motivations. Diversely, Graham and colleagues also found that right-wing individuals equally value all motivations, although they value loyalty, authority, and purity more than their left-wing counterparts.

Previous terrorism research outside of MFT has investigated differences in terrorist groups’ motivations based on their political ideology. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START; Miller & Smarick, 2011) has identified five categories representing typical ideologies associated with terrorist groups: The extremist far-right, which consists of groups that believe that their culture and heritage are being threatened by external forces; the extremist far-left, which is characterized by a dissatisfaction with the speed at which change occurs in established political systems; ethno-nationalists/separatists, which are typically dedicated to the independence of their perceived ingroup (whether that may be their nation or race); religious groups, which focus on the role of their religion in determining the proper way of thinking and living; and single-issue groups, which focus on one specific issue around which their terrorist behavior revolves (e.g., tax reform groups or antiabortion groups). While these ideologies may be useful distinctions in some circumstances, this scheme is not based on a coherent, theoretical framework, and the categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, xenophobic undertones within ideologies of far-right groups may overlap with the forces that drive ethno-nationalist/separatist groups as well. Similarly, the manner in which single-issue, animal rights extremists value the welfare and protective legislation of nonhuman living things (Hadley, 2009) is in line with left-wing extremists who value the rights and welfare of humans.

Combining MFT’s motivational distinctions with previous terrorism research on political ideology not only helps to clarify definitional confusion surrounding terrorist group motivations, but it also provides a comprehensive and coherent scheme that allows us to distinguish among these groups based on similarities and differences in the forces that drive their behavior. Although schemes based on factors such as region of origin or political ideology may have value, an MFT-based scheme’s ability to examine terrorist organizations can add to this by identifying the extent to which specific moral drives are common to different terrorist groups. For instance, a motivation-based approach would explicate similarities in the binding motivations that drive far-right groups and separatists as well as the individualizing motivations that drive animal rights activists and left-wing extremists.

Based on previous MFT research (Graham et al., 2009) suggesting that right-wing individuals tend to place the most importance on the binding motivations of loyalty, authority, and purity, we expect the same motivations to be associated with terrorist groups characterized by the extremist far-right ideology. For instance, given the focus of right-wing groups on traditionalism and social order, we would expect that the motivation of authority would be reflected in both their historical actions and guiding philosophies. Similarly, given their focus on advancing interests that benefit their national or racial ingroup specifically, we would expect that accounts detailing the history and philosophy of ethno-nationalist/separatist groups would reflect the motivation of loyalty. Finally, we would expect that the motivation of purity would be reflected in historical and philosophical accounts of the religious groups, given their drive to adhere to religious doctrine.

**H1:** Groups identified with ideologies that are (1) extremist right-wing, (2) religious, or (3) ethno-nationalist/separatist will be associated more with binding motivations.

Conversely, due to their focus on equal distribution of resources and the welfare of individuals, the historical accounts and guiding philosophies of terrorist groups adopting the extremist left-wing
ideology might be expected to reflect the care and fairness (i.e., individualizing) motivations most often.

H2: Groups identified with the extremist left-wing ideology will be associated more with individualizing motivations.

Because the single-issue category does not tell us about the individual ideology of the groups within it, we make no predictions regarding the motivations that are featured more often in the historical accounts and guiding philosophies of single-issue groups:

RQ1: Will groups identified with ideologies that are single issue will be associated more with binding or individualizing motivations?

Region of Origin

Similar to the distinction between liberal and conservative moral values, MFT distinguishes between values held by Western (e.g., Western Europe, Canada, and United States) and Eastern (e.g., South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia) societies (e.g., Graham et al., 2011). In a cross-cultural study using MFT, Graham et al. (2011) found that Eastern cultures more strongly valued two of the binding motivations (loyalty and purity) than Western cultures. However, these differences were smaller than those found in liberal versus conservative subculture research. Notably, care, fairness, and authority were not significantly different between the two cultures. The representation of moral values across different cultures is therefore not as pronounced as it is across liberal or conservative political philosophies.

Other research argues that differences between cultures are more pronounced when responses are not confined to a predefined set of domains. Vauclair, Wilson, and Fischer (2014) found that, although people from Eastern and Western cultures frequently favored welfare and fairness concerns (i.e., individualizing motivations), Easterners were more likely to list duty-based (i.e., binding) concerns than Westerners. Further, Westerners were more likely to list human rights-based (i.e., individualizing) concerns than Easterners.

The above research on region of origin and morality draws a cloudy picture of how the East and West differ in values. Even less clarity on this distinction is available considering that little empirical research has compared the difference in terrorist motivations by region of origin. Yet given distinctions made in past MFT research comparing Eastern and Western moral salience (e.g., Graham et al., 2011), we might expect differences in the extent to which the behavior of East versus West terrorist groups is driven by different moral motivations.

RQ2: Will groups originating in Eastern cultures be associated more with binding motivations than those originating in Western cultures?

RQ3: Will groups originating in Western cultures be associated more with individualizing motivations than those originating in Eastern cultures?

Method

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) provides open-sourced datasets containing detailed information on various aspects of terrorist
organizations throughout history. Our study examines the Profiles of Perpetrators of Terrorism in
the U.S. (PPT-US) dataset from Miller and Smarick (2012) at START, which provides information
on all terrorist organizations that have committed a violent attack on United States soil since 1970.
Although this dataset was developed in 2011, it has since been updated to include data up to April
2016. In this dataset, START compiled information on 143 terrorist organizations “to produce sys-
tematic and comprehensive profiles of terrorist perpetrators” (Miller & Smarick, 2011, p. 4). In addi-
tion to over 100 categorical-based variables that were collected to describe aspects of each terrorist
organization, researchers at START also generated text descriptions of each group’s (1) history and
(2) founding philosophy. These scholars represent their dataset as valid, systematically reliable state-
ments detailing each organization’s historical activities and founding principles (Miller & Smarick,
2011). As such, this dataset provides researchers a unique opportunity to assess the extent to which
each group is driven by moral principles.

We begin this section by giving an overview of the PPT-US’ sample,\(^1\) coding procedure for
variables of interest to the current study, and intercoder reliability, and follow with a description of
the current study’s content analysis applying MFT to the PPT-US.

PPT-US Dataset

**PPT-US sample.** The PPT-US drew its population of terrorist groups to investigate from The
Global Terrorism Database (GTD; START, 2016). The GTD defines terrorism as “the threatened or
actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious,
or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation” (Miller & Smarick, 2011, p. 2). To be included
in the GTD, an organization must have met several criteria, such as acting deliberately as a group of
subnational actors and conducting some violent activity (or threatening violence) against people or
property. For inclusion in the PPT-US dataset (which the current study uses), terrorist organizations
selected from the GTD had to meet additional criteria: (1) They were identified as having committed
at least one terrorist act against targets in the United States; (2) there was no question among GTD
coders that the act was terrorism (and not a nonterrorist violent act); and (3) there was a high level of
confidence that the group was responsible for the attack(s) in the United States. \(^2\) This method re-
sulted in identifying \(N = 143\) terrorist groups for inclusion in the PPT-US.

**PPT-US coding procedure.** After identifying a population of groups to include in the PPT-US
(i.e., all terrorist groups who have committed a violent attack against a U.S. target between 1970 and
2016), two START research assistants worked to populate information for the rest of the variables
identified by START’s primary researchers. In order to obtain information for the dataset, research
assistants were instructed to search sources including Lexis-Nexis, Proquest, Infotrac, World Quest,
Yahoo, Google, Google Scholar, Google Books, All the Web, and Infomine. All sources used to
gather data about a group were also included in the PPT-US dataset (to view these sources, and for a
summary of the coding procedure, see Miller & Smarick, 2011).

\(^1\)The PPT-US dataset and its associated codebook can be accessed at https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/
profiles-perpetrators-terrorism-united-statesppt-us.

\(^2\)According to the PPT-US Codebook (Miller & Smarick, 2011), to be included in the PPT-US, (1) the actions of the group
must be deliberate and calculated, (2) the group must have conducted some violent activity (including the threat of violence)
against people or property, and (3) the group must be subnational, or not state-sponsored, actors. In addition to these base-
line criteria, two of the following three conditions must also be met. First, the goal of the actions carried out by the organi-
zation must be ideological, not profit-driven; the organizations must be looking to alter some overarching system, be it reli-
gious, political, economic, or societal. Second, the organization must have committed violent actions with the express
intention of influencing a larger population than simply the immediate victims of a given incident; in other words, the
leaders of the organization hope to impress a message via intimidation or coercion upon the broader population. Third, the
actions perpetrated by the group must exceed those governed by international law (especially those governing the targeting
of civilians and noncombatants). In other words, the actions could not be mistaken for simple acts of war.
This method produced information on a wide variety of characteristics for each group and their activities. Of interest to the current study were the variables identifying each group’s (1) ideology, (2) the location of their headquarters, and (3) both their history of activities and founding philosophy. Sources that were used in identifying the content of these variables are all included in the START dataset and were double-checked by a separate, independent coder in the current study for accuracy. Our coder found no issues with the accuracy of START’s content.

**Ideology.** Hypotheses 1 and 2 and Research Question 1 seek to determine whether the moral motivations of groups differ according to what ideology they subscribe. In the PPT-US, START provided information on whether each group’s ideology is extremist right-wing (n = 16 groups), extremist left-wing (n = 31 groups), religious (n = 9 groups), ethno-nationalist/separatist (n = 42 groups), or single-issue (n = 39 groups). Six groups’ ideologies were not identifiable by the PPT-US coders. Appendix A provides definitions and examples of groups within these ideologies.

**Location of headquarters.** Research Questions 2 and 3 seek to investigate whether the moral motivations of groups differ according to their region of origin. The PPT-US dataset provided the region of origin by indicating the country in which the groups’ headquarters were located. START (Miller & Smarick, 2011, p. 13) defined a group’s headquarters as “the place where attacks are planned, members are trained and/or public relations/marketing tools (e.g., written statements, audio, and video broadcasts, etc.) are produced.” This information was provided for 84 of the 143 groups. Of the 84 for which it provided a location, 73 were headquartered in the United States, and 11 were headquartered elsewhere including Afghanistan (n = 1), Pakistan (n = 1), El Salvador (n = 1), Haiti (n = 1), Lebanon (n = 1), Jordan (n = 2), Yemen (n = 1), France (n = 1), Great Britain (n = 1), and Northern Ireland (n = 1; Miller & Smarick, 2011, p. 13).

**History of activities and founding philosophy.** Finally, the main goal of this study is to examine the extent to which moral motivations differ across terrorist organizations. In the PPT-US, START provided separate statements on each group’s history of activities and their guiding philosophy. Unlike ideology and region of origin, both the history and philosophy statements are text-based variables constructed by START’s coders. Whereas the two quantitative variables above often involved categorizing available data on a group as representing a certain ideology or country, the two qualitative variables on each group’s history and philosophy involved constructing a narrative on the “precipitating events surrounding the birth of the group, the history and evolution of the group, as well as its mission or raison d’être” (Miller & Smarick, 2011, p. 5). START coders crafted separate narratives for each of the 143 groups’ history and philosophy. The separate narratives were then entered in the PPT-US to populate these two variables in the dataset. To validate the information contained in all PPT-US variables, the dataset was (1) compared with the Big, Allied, and Dangerous database, which featured similar information to PPT-US, (2) recoded by a third, independent coder, and (3) reviewed variable-by-variable by the project leaders (see Miller and Smarick [2011, p. 10] for details on all of these validation steps).

**PPT-US coder reliability.** To check for (1) coder reliability and (2) validity of the coding scheme used to create their dataset, three profiles (al-Qa’ida, the Weather Underground Organization, and Omega-7) were coded by both the PPT-US’ two primary researchers and two research assistant coders (Miller & Smarick, 2011). Miller and Smarick (2011) noted that these three groups “were selected to test intercoder reliability because of the varying amounts of open-sourced data on each them, and because each represents a distinct ideology with diverse group characteristics” (p. 8). The percentage of agreement between the two coders for the three profiles was 95% for al-Qa’ida and the Weather Underground Organization and 98% for Omega-7 (Miller & Smarick, 2011). This was deemed acceptable by both START’s researchers and the authors of the current study.

**Modifications to PPT-US location of headquarters data.** For Research Questions 2 and 3, because we were interested in only the difference between Eastern and Western groups as defined by Graham et al. (2009), we collapsed groups’ locations into a dichotomous variable that simply
identified whether they originated in the East or West. Graham et al. (2009) identify Eastern cultures as those located in Asia and Western cultures and those located in the Americas and Europe. Based on this definition, and of the 84 groups with identified headquarters location in the PPT-US, six groups were identified by START’s coding procedure as originating in the East, and 78 were identified as originating in the West.

Notably, START researchers limited their definition of region of origin to a group’s headquarters. This limited definition meant that if a group’s actors could be identified as having been born, raised, and currently living in a location, but no information was able to be found pinpointing the location of where they planned their attacks, that the group’s location was not identified in the PPT-US. This also meant that we were unable to analyze data from 59 of the 143 groups for Research Questions 2 and 3. To address this, we broadened the definition of “region of origin” used in START to include a group’s “founding place of origin.” In doing so, we were able to find the region of origin for an additional 17 groups, leaving us with the locations for 101 of the 143 groups. After identifying the region of origin for the additional 17 groups, a total of nine groups (6.3% of the total sample) were coded as originating in Eastern cultures, and 92 (64.3% of the total sample) were coded as originating in Western cultures.3

Current Study

**Study sample and unit of analysis.** Our study examined data provided on groups identified in START’s PPT-US dataset. START's efforts in creating the PPT-US included all organizations known to have committed a terrorist act in the United States from 1970 to 2016. As such, we examined data from all known groups in this population. The separate statements on each group’s history and philosophy, provided in the PPT-US dataset, served as units of observation in our study. Data from these two units of observation were subsequently combined for each terrorist group to form the single unit of analysis used in this study. Trained raters examined separately the history and philosophy statements for each group. These raters coded for the presence of the MFT motivations, if any, in each statement for each terrorist group. Based on these codes, our study examined whether the salience of moral motivations varied among terrorist groups by (1) ideology and (2) region of origin.

**Coding protocol.** In order to operationally define the presence of intuitive motivations in our dataset, we utilized a coding manual that has been used successfully in past content analyses examining MFT’s motivations in message content (see Hahn, Tamborini, Prabhu, Klebig, et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2018; Tamborini, Hahn, Prabhu, Klebig, & Grall, 2017). In line with previous research, the coding manual used in the current study focused on the moral motivations expressed by a set of entities, in this case, terrorist groups. Our raters were instructed to separately code the motivations that were most salient in both the descriptive history and philosophy statements provided by the PPT-US. For example, care would be coded for if the most salient motivation in a terrorist group’s philosophy statement (or, separately, history statement) was to save innocent animals (e.g., “The Animal Liberation Front took direct action against animal abuse by rescuing animals”). Fairness would be coded for if this motivation was to restore equitable taxation between the rich and poor (e.g., “The Mexican Revolutionary Movement … protested against both the social injustices within Third World countries and the economic inequalities between Latin America and the United States.”). Loyalty would be coded for if the group’s motivation was situated in bias toward one’s in-group or against one’s perceived outgroup (e.g., “members of the KKK also operate politically through the Knights Party of America to … put American troops on our borders to stop the flood of illegal aliens [and] promote love and appreciation of our unique European culture.”). Authority would be coded for if this was to restore/overthrow what the group believed was benevolent/3A complete list of sources used to identify these additional regions of origin is available at https://osf.io/ezcwh/?view_only=66f470920e0d4a088a66af8ec103a7a32.
Table 1. Percent Agreement for Coding MFT’s Motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percent agreement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualizing overall</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binding overall</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>74%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average agreement</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
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malevolent power (e.g., “The George Jackson Brigade … was committed to overthrowing the present governmental and business structure, and to establishing a system of communism.”). Finally, purity would be coded for if this was motivated by a religious doctrine dealing with cleanliness (e.g., “The Phineas Priesthood … [focused on] fomenting a racial holy war and establishing a racially/culturally pure society.”). Coders received three months of training in identifying the presence of each motivation.4

Coding procedure. Following this three-month training period, two independent raters coded the extent to which each organization’s history and philosophy statements featured any of the moral motivations. After they coded both the history statements and the philosophy statements from the PPT-US dataset, we combined these codes into one variable that indicated for each group either (1) the absence of all motivations, (2) the presence of one of the five MFT motivations, or (3) the presence of more than one motivation (i.e., if different motivations were made most salient in the history and philosophy statements) for each group.

Coder reliability. Intercoder agreement was calculated for the presence of each motivation separately, revealing that each motivation was present in only a small proportion (18% on average) of the history and philosophy statements. Scholars (e.g., Krippendorff, 2013) have acknowledged that skews such as this can act as a major obstacle in the accurate detection of intercoder agreement. Consequently, Neuendorf (2002) suggests that when restricting factors are present, such as a skew in the presence/absence of variables, or when variables can only be coded for a small number of values (categories in this study could only be coded for one value), it is acceptable to rely on the percent agreement as a measure of intercoder agreement. Therefore, Neuendorf’s threshold of 80% agreement was adopted by the present study to determine intercoder reliability. This was also START’s method for determining intercoder agreement in the PPT-US.

Overall reliabilities for the individualizing (87%) and binding (91%) motivations represented in our hypotheses and research questions were acceptably high. Although we posed no hypotheses or research questions regarding individual motivations, intercoder agreement for all five specific MFT motivation variables were inspected. Agreement exceeded the threshold of 80% for care (95%), authority (94%), and purity (93%). Two variables (fairness and loyalty) did not reach the 80% threshold but were close to the threshold at 78% and 74% agreement respectively. Considering that the variables used in our hypotheses exceeded our 80% threshold, and following an approach used in similar research (Tamborini, Hahn et al., 2017) with a comparable level of agreement, a third trained independent coder served as referee to resolve disagreements, and all variables were subsequently retained for use in the study. Percent agreement for all variables is presented in Table 1.

4The coding manual is available at https://osf.io/ezcwh/?view_only=6f6470920e0d4a088a66af6d13a7a32.
The PPT-US contained information on 143 terrorist organizations. Of the 143 organizations in the database, 134 (93.71%) were associated with at least one of MFT’s motivations. Of those groups that were associated with at least one motivation, 42 were associated with two motivations, and four were associated with three motivations. Regardless of ideology or region of origin, loyalty was featured in the most groups’ statements (90; 62.50%), followed by fairness being reflected in 49 groups’ statements (34.03%), care in 20 groups’ statements (13.89%), authority in 14 groups’ statements (9.72%), and purity in 11 groups’ statements (7.64%).

Our first two hypotheses suggested that right-wing, religious, and separatist groups should be associated more with binding motivations (H1), and left-wing groups should be associated more with individualizing motivations (H2). Although making no predictions, Research Question 1 asked whether single-issue groups would be associated most often with individualizing or binding motivations. Overall, 16 (11.19%) of the groups in the PPT-US were classified as right-wing, 31 (21.68%) were classified as left-wing, nine (6.29%) were classified as religious, 42 (29.37%) were classified as nationalist/separatist, and 39 (27.27%) were classified as single-issue groups. Six groups’ (4.20%) ideologies were not identifiable by the PPT-US coders.

To examine our first two hypotheses and Research Question 1, we conducted a 5 (group ideology: right-wing, left-wing, religious, separatist, single-issue) × 2 (motivation: individualizing, binding) chi-square test. Overall results were statistically significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 182) = 37.89, p < .01, \text{Cramer’s } V = .46$. In particular, binding motivations were overrepresented for groups whose ideologies were identified as right-wing (adjusted standardized residual = 2.6), religious (adjusted standardized residual = 2.3), and separatist (adjusted standardized residual = 3.2; offering support for all of H1). Individualizing motivations were overrepresented for groups whose ideologies were identified as left-wing (adjusted standardized residual = 4.2; offering support for H2) and single-issue (adjusted standardized residual = 2.9; answering Research Question 1).

To examine what specific motivations these groups’ statements were often associated with, we then conducted a follow-up 5 (group ideology: right-wing, left-wing, religious, separatist, single-issue) × 5 (motivation: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) chi-square test, $\chi^2(16, N = 182) = 73.58, p < .01, \text{Cramer’s } V = .32$. Results of this test revealed that purity was proportionally overrepresented in statements about extremist right-wing groups (adjusted standardized residual = 2.4) and religious groups (adjusted standardized residual = 3.2). Notably, statements on religious groups were also found to proportionally underrepresent the motivation of fairness (adjusted standardized residual = −2.1). Separatist groups were proportionally most likely to be associated with loyalty (adjusted standardized residual = 4.7) and proportionally least likely to be associated with care (adjusted standardized residual = −2.6). Left-wing groups were proportionally most likely to be associated with the motivation of fairness (adjusted standardized residual = 4.3) and proportionally less likely to be associated with loyalty (adjusted standardized residual = −3.6). Finally, single-issue groups were proportionally most likely to be associated with care (adjusted standardized residual = 4.1) and least likely to be associated with loyalty (adjusted standardized residual = −2.3).

Research Questions 2 and 3 asked whether groups originating in Eastern cultures were associated more with binding motivations, and groups originating in Western cultures were associated more with individualizing motivations. Overall, nine groups (6.3% of the total sample) were coded

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A table listing all terrorist groups included in this study, their ideologies, countries of origin, and associated motivations can be accessed at https://osf.io/ezcwhi/?view_only=6f6470920e0d44a08a6f6c03a7a32.

Adjusted standardized residuals are useful in interpreting deviance from proportionality. Adjusted for the row and column totals of their associated chi-square test, they indicate which cells contribute to a statistically significant chi-square value. These can be interpreted like any standard score: If the adjusted standardized residual is beyond the range of ±2 standard deviations from the mean (rounded up from 1.96), then that cell can be considered to be a major contributor to the chi-square value either because the frequency is overrepresented (if it is > +2) or underrepresented (if it is < −2).
as originating in Eastern cultures, and 92 (64.3% of the total sample) were coded as originating in Western cultures. Comparisons revealed that groups originating in the West were coded for 47 individualizing motivations and 74 binding motivations, whereas groups originating in the East were coded for two individualizing motivations and 12 binding motivations.

A region of origin was unable to be validly determined for the remaining 42 groups. Because only nine groups (coded for 14 motivations) were identified as having originated in the East, this limits the conclusions that can be drawn from any associated inferential test. As such, we cannot answer Research Questions 2 or 3 with any acceptable degree of confidence.7

Discussion

We began with an attempt to determine whether the moral motivations of terrorist organizations differed according to their group ideology (H1, H2, and RQ1) and/or region of origin (RQ2 and RQ3). Overall, our results showed support for Hypothesis 1, suggesting that groups identifying with extremist right-wing, religious, and ethno-nationalist/separatist ideologies were more likely to be associated with the binding motivations of loyalty, authority, and purity. Similarly, support was found for Hypothesis 2, suggesting that groups identifying with extremist left-wing ideologies were more likely to be associated with the individualizing motivations of care and fairness. Single-issue groups (RQ1) were also associated with the individualizing motivations most often. As only nine of the terrorist groups included in our population originated in the East (compared to the 92 which originated in the West), we were unable to draw any meaningful inferences for Research Questions 2 or 3. Below, we discuss our findings’ implications and the potential value of using MFT’s motivations to distinguish terrorist groups.

The current study extends previous research suggesting that moral motivations can distinguish different political groups (Graham et al., 2009) to demonstrate the ability of an MFT-based scheme to help us identify motivations expressed in the historical activities and founding principles of violent terrorist organizations. In addition to offering support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, our investigation found specific motivational differences according to group ideology. Our results suggest that right-wing and religious ideologies were most associated with purity. This makes sense considering that terrorist groups adhering to these (often overlapping) ideologies may be driven to eradicate what they perceive as social contamination or corrupted behavior in society (e.g., antihomosexual hate groups, antiabortion groups). Similarly, our finding that separatist groups were most often associated with loyalty makes sense; because separatist groups by definition would adhere to an “us versus them” mentality. The finding that left-wing groups valued fairness the most is consistent with results from Graham et al. (2009), as liberals tend to value care and fairness above all other motivations. Finally, the finding that single-issue groups were associated most often with care indicates that these groups may be most prone to violence in the form of fighting for individual welfare. Although the single-issue category was not constructed by START researchers as representing a shared ideology, this finding offers future researchers some insight into a common motivation (care) that might provide conceptual coherence to this patchwork category.

Our findings for ideology are consistent with MFT’s suggestion that moral subcultures exist within larger societies, such that adherents to different ideologies often place varying degrees of importance on distinct moral motivations. In extending MFT, the findings indicate that ideological differences that distinguish terrorist groups can be understood in terms of evolutionarily developed, instinctive moral motivations that are discrete and identifiable. Knowledge of moral values shared

7We again note that a table listing all terrorist groups included in this study, their ideologies, country of origin, and associated motivations can be accessed at https://osf.io/ezcwh/?view_only=6f6470920e06a4a088a6f6ca103a7a32. This table includes frequency counts for the number of individualizing and binding motivations associated with terrorist groups who have originated in the East and West.
across groups can advance theoretical investigations into terrorist motivations by identifying broad patterns of needs these groups seek to address. By finding such commonalities, policymakers can focus on these needs in efforts to curtail the groups’ violent activities.

**Defining Terrorism with MFT’s Motivations**

The current study suggests that the moral motivations identified by MFT provide a useful scheme to understand the root causes of terrorist activities. By identifying motivations that underlie terrorist activity, this scheme can aid a negotiator’s attempt to both understand the inherent appeal of terrorist groups to potential followers and resolve the needs that instigate their terrorist activities. First, regarding inherent appeal, the moral motivations most salient to terrorist groups are likely central to information disseminated by these organizations. If terrorist organizations appeal to others who share the same salient motivations, then identifying these motivations may offer insight into how members are recruited in the first place. While speculative, future research in this area could test this logic by identifying the presence of MFT’s motivations in other forms of communication (e.g., rally speeches, recruitment statements, etc.) from terrorist organizations. If similar motivations are found across an organization’s messages and activities, then knowledge of salient motivations could help identify a means to address the group’s needs and preempt their violent acts.

Second, with regard to resolving needs, MFT’s ability to identify specific terrorist motivations could potentially help policymakers address these motivations and curtail terrorism before it occurs. Previous research has suggested that political change (Asal et al., 2009) is one of the most common driving factors of violent terrorist activity. Knowing political situations may be useful for understanding the organizations’ macro goals. However, simply addressing terrorist goals may be dysfunctional, as it can involve conceding to these goals to appease them. This is exactly the reaction they seek when committing violence and can be akin to giving in to fear. Conversely, addressing terrorist motivations can satisfy the underlying needs of terrorist groups without meeting unrealistic and often dangerous goals. For example, consider how diplomats with knowledge of moral motivations may communicate to a far-left terrorist group’s leader. The diplomats may legitimize the terrorist group’s need for equality but offer solutions to this need that are less irreconcilable than violent terrorist acts (such as sponsoring peaceful acts of civil disobedience).

**Limitations**

There are three main limitations associated with the present study. First, while overall intercoder reliabilities for the individualizing (87%) and binding (91%) motivations involved in our hypotheses and research questions were acceptably high, the study’s intercoder agreement for the individual motivations of fairness and loyalty was less than the ideal threshold of 80%. Although utilizing percent agreement as a measure of intercoder agreement is in line with previous research (Neuendorf, 2002), it would be good to use a more rigorous measure of intercoder reliability (Scott’s Pi or Cohen’s Kappa) in future studies.

A second limitation involves the restricted ability to compare Eastern and Western terrorist organizations due to the fact that (1) region of origin was unavailable for 42 of the 143 groups, and (2) only nine out of 143 terrorist groups were coded as originating in the East. The unavailability of region of origin for 42 groups limited the sample size overall. More importantly, because only nine of the remaining groups were from the East, comparisons between regions in the available sample were impossible. Although we were only interested in groups who have committed violence in the United States, future studies could expand their goals to include groups who have committed terrorist acts abroad in order to allow for comparisons based on region of origin.
A third limitation concerns the fact that our sample was drawn from a secondary source (i.e., START’s PPT-US). Because there is no single objective source that describes the history and philosophy of terrorist organizations, we relied on the interpretations crafted by START. Hence, we cannot guarantee that the PPT-US statements accurately represent terrorist groups’ historical activities and founding principles. Nevertheless, START affirms the validity and reliability of their dataset (Miller & Smarick, 2011). Without this type of database, insight into terrorist groups’ motivations would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that terrorist groups are indeed morally engaged rather than disengaged and that the moral motivations identified by MFT may provide a useful categorical scheme for understanding the root causes of terrorist activities. The present article adds to research on terrorist motivations by (1) extending logic from MFT to consider how moral motivations might underlie terrorist groups’ behavior and (2) developing and applying a scheme to identify these motivations in their philosophies and activities.

Feinberg and Willer (2013) argue that a person who wants to persuade members of a target group that dogmatically hold certain values will fail in this effort if his attempts at persuasion focus only on values that matter to him instead of those that matter to his target. Our study attempts to lay the foundation for successful communication with terrorist groups (our target) by identifying the moral motivations that these groups hold in highest regard as a first step in efforts to communicate effectively with them.

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REFERENCES


8We thank Reviewer 3 for providing language that was ultimately used in the conclusion of our article.


### Appendix A. Definitions for Ideologies Given by START on p. 18 of Miller and Smarick (2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Definition Provided by START</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremist Right-Wing (including all racist ideologies)</td>
<td>Extreme right-wing groups … believe that one’s personal and/or national “way of life” is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent … . … Groups may also be fiercely nationalistic, … anti-global, suspicious of centralized federal authority, … and believe in conspiracy theories that involve grave threat to national sovereignty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• N = 16 (11.19%)</td>
<td>E.g., <em>Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nation, Up the IRS, Inc.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremist Left-Wing</td>
<td>Extreme left-wing perpetrator groups want to bring about change … through established political processes. In addition, this category includes secular left-wing groups that rely heavily on terrorism to overthrow the capitalist system and either establish “a dictatorship of the proletariat” or, a decentralized, non-hierarchical sociopolitical system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• N = 31 (21.68%)</td>
<td>E.g., <em>Black Panthers, Gay Liberation Front, Weather Underground/ Weathermen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Religious perpetrator groups … seek to smite the enemies of God and other evildoers, impose strict religious tenets or laws on society, forcibly insert religion into the political sphere (i.e., those who seek to politicize religion, such as Christian Reconstructionists and Islamists), and/or bring about Armageddon (apocalyptic millenarian cults).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• N = 9 (6.29%)</td>
<td>E.g., <em>Al-Qaida, Covenant, Sword, and the Arm of the Lord, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethno-Nationalist/Separatist</td>
<td>[Ethno-nationalists/Separatists] are regionally concentrated with a history of organized political autonomy with their own state, traditional ruler, or regional government, and who are committed to gaining or regaining political independence through any means and who have supported political movements for autonomy ….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• N = 42 (29.37%)</td>
<td>E.g., <em>American Indian Movement, Croatian Liberation Army, Jewish Committee of Concern</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-Issue</td>
<td>Single issue perpetrator groups … rely heavily on violence motivated by very specific or narrowly-defined causes of various sorts. This category includes groups from all sides of the political spectrum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• N = 39 (27.27%)</td>
<td>E.g., <em>Animal Liberation Front, Earth First!, Veterans United for Non-Religious Memorials</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>