Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist

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Individual-level analysis II: Terrorists as psychologically distinctive

This chapter completes the two-part examination of the individual-level of analysis. The explanations discussed in the following pages share a focus on explaining involvement in terrorism as resulting from the distinct psychological features of individual perpetrators. The first three paragraphs in particular embody the assumption that terrorists are somehow different from 'normal' individuals. They assess mental illness, psychological trauma, and personality characteristics as factors that can increase the likeliness of involvement in terrorism. The chapter’s second half departs from the focus on psychological abnormality to look at the role of emotions in bringing about involvement in terrorist groups and terrorist attacks. In particular, frustration-induced anger and fear of death are discussed as potentially relevant explanatory variables.

Two recurrent trends in research on terrorism have been the search for a distinctive terrorist personality or profile and the idea that terrorism can be explained as the result of mental illness or psychological damage incurred during childhood. In particular, the argument that terrorists are psychopaths has attracted considerable attention and criticism. Numerous authors have lamented the empirically poorly substantiated nature of such claims.¹ The difficulty of accessing terrorists for research purposes, let alone carrying out clinical studies on them, means that explanations which hold that involvement in terrorism stems from distinct psychological qualities must be treated with care.² On the basis of a literature review, the author identified five themes in this literature that form the main points of discussion (Table 10).

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9.1 Terrorists as psychopaths

Perhaps because it is comforting to see terrorist violence as the work of mentally disturbed individuals, terrorists are frequently seen as psychopathic individuals, particularly in the popular perception.\(^3\) Research on the subject has reached far more cautious conclusions, however. Numerous scholars have cautioned that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support the notion that terrorists are psychopaths.\(^4\) Psychopaths would also make highly unreliable and dangerous operatives, making it likely that they would be shunned by terrorist groups.\(^5\) Neither is it convincing to argue that terrorism’s severe ‘occupational hazards’ would only be acceptable to the mentally unstable. There is a wide range of people who hold dangerous jobs, such as police officers and soldiers, who are not considered mentally disturbed.\(^6\) For these reasons, psychopathy ranks among the most criticized explanations for involvement in terrorism.

Psychopathy, however, is a specific personality disorder. While it is no longer seen as a viable explanation for involvement in terrorism by most scholars, research on the broader spectrum of mental health problems paints a far more nuanced picture. For instance, a study by Kleinmann cites evidence that terrorists are more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as schizophrenia than the general population.\(^7\) Lankford addresses this topic in greater detail and reports that a significant percentage of suicide attackers suffered from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and ‘other mental health problems’.\(^8\) In an explorative study based on access to police files, Weenink writes that just under 50% of his sample of Dutch jihadists displayed ‘problem behavior’ and that 6% had diagnosed mental health problems.\(^9\)

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Corner and Gill found that some 42% of lone actors experienced mental health problems, compared with some 28% for the general population and approximately 3% for group-based terrorists. When accounting for the potential influence of mental health problems, it is therefore important to distinguish between various forms of terrorism. It is also crucial to not blindly equate the diagnosis of a mental health issue with an explanation for how that person became involved in terrorism. Mental health problems encompass a broad spectrum of ailments, including many relatively benign ones. With the exception of serious disorders such as psychopathy, which can be directly linked to lowered barriers towards the use of violence, it is often not immediately clear if and how a particular mental health disorder contributed to the involvement process. For example, many people will suffer some form of depression during their lives yet the vast majority of these individuals will not become involved in any kind of violent behavior.

Studies like Weenink’s and Corner and Gill’s lend considerable credibility to the notion that behavioral issues and mental health problems other than psychopathology can play a role in bringing about involvement in terrorism. They also illustrate that the mental health question cannot be seen dichotomously. Terrorists are not either psychopathic or mentally healthy individuals, but, like the population in general, may suffer from a range of issues whose potential to influence their behavior is often far from immediately clear. Given the history of poorly supported claims of terrorists’ abnormality, caution remains in order when looking at terrorism from this perspective. Perhaps the most significant issue here has been the ongoing difficulty of carrying out clinical diagnoses on actual terrorists. Hopefully, future studies will be able to gather more evidence and further advance a debate that has been at the core of the study of terrorism for decades.

The only two participants subjected to extensive psychological and psychiatric assessments were Van Gogh’s killer and the individual who videotaped threats to the Dutch public in 2005. Van Gogh’s assailant steadfastly refused to cooperate with specialists at the psychiatric observation clinic Pieter Baan Center (PBC) in Utrecht. Nevertheless, in the report presented during his trial, PBC experts concluded that there was no indication that he had refused cooperation on pathological grounds and that the little data they had gathered was insufficient to warrant the view

10 Corner, Gill, and Mason, ‘Mental Health Disorders’, 562.
11 Gill and Corner, ‘There and Back Again’, 239.
12 Merari, ‘Psychological Aspects of Suicide Terrorism’, 104.
13 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, ‘Personal Interview 2’, 3-4.
that Van Gogh’s killer suffered from some kind of disorder.\textsuperscript{14} Initially, the participant who videotaped threats also refused to cooperate.\textsuperscript{15} But by early 2005, a psychological report was submitted to the court that concluded he too did not suffer from a personality disorder.\textsuperscript{16}

Within the broader Hofstadgroup, reliable indications of mental illness are virtually absent. The one clear case concerns a young man on the fringes of 2005’s Piranha group. In October 2007, he escaped from a psychiatric hospital and stabbed two police officers, one of whom then shot the assailant dead.\textsuperscript{17} While this individual clearly suffered from mental health problems, at present there are simply no indications that these issues contributed to his (peripheral) participation in the group. There is therefore little cause to amend the overall conclusion that mental health problems do not offer an explanation for involvement in the Hofstadgroup.

\subsection*{9.2 Psychoanalysis}

Psychoanalysis was pioneered by Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century. In explaining human behavior, it affords a key role to the influence of repressed or unconsciously held desires.\textsuperscript{18} The origins of these desires are attributed to various phases of childhood mental development, with particular emphasis on ‘unresolved intrapsychic conflict’ that occurred during this period.\textsuperscript{19} In the second half of the twentieth century, psychoanalytical approaches began to be used to explain involvement in terrorism. Narcissism-aggression theory, for instance, holds that ego-damage suffered during childhood or adolescence can lead individuals to terrorism as a way of projecting inner pain on external targets.\textsuperscript{20} Another approach posits that the inability to live up to societal expectations and norms can prompt the adoption of ‘negative identities’, whereby the damaged individual embraces precisely those values that society abhors and becomes somebody by embodying the ‘nobody’.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Amsterdam District Court, ‘IJN AU0025’, 8-9.
\item \textsuperscript{15} ‘Psychisch Onderzoek Naar Samir A. Levert Niets Op’.
\item \textsuperscript{16} ‘Rechter Wil Meer Getuigen’.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Groen, Kranenberg, and Schenk, ‘Bilal B. Was Bekende Van Hofstadgroep’.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Arena and Arrigo, \textit{The Terrorist Identity}, 3-4; Horgan, \textit{The Psychology of Terrorism}, 57.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Victoroff, ‘The Mind of the Terrorist’, 22.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Hudson, ‘The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism’, 20; Crenshaw, ‘The Psychology of Political Terrorism’, 393.
\end{thebibliography}
Psychoanalytical approaches have lost ground in contemporary psychological and psychiatric research.\(^22\) One problematic aspect of these theories is their lack of strong empirical support.\(^23\) Another issue is their embodiment of the ‘fundamental attribution error’. That is the human tendency to ascribe the behavior of others to innate qualities and to downplay the role of circumstances. Essentially, psychoanalytical approaches ‘overestimate the internal causes of terrorist behavior’.\(^24\) Finally, psychoanalytical explanations are hard to falsify; how can the assertion of an *unconsciously held* desire be refuted?\(^25\)

While Post acknowledges the absence of ‘major psychopathology’, he holds to the psychoanalytical approach essentially as a way of continuing the argument that terrorists are intrinsically different.\(^26\) Likewise, Merari and colleagues assert in one publication that the suicide terrorists they studied showed no evidence of psychopathic tendencies, but argue in another that 40\% of the same sample did display subclinical (i.e. not definitely observed) suicidal tendencies that, moreover, the subjects themselves may have held without being aware of them.\(^27\) As Silke and Horgan point out, psychoanalytical approaches essentially provide a way of promulgating the questionable argument that terrorism results from some form of mental illness.\(^28\)

Given their empirical and theoretical deficiencies, ‘classic’ psychoanalytical approaches such as narcissism-aggression theory will not be used to study involvement in the Hofstad group. Instead, the discussion continues with two more recently coined explanations that depart from the psychoanalytical tradition of subconsciously held desires and psychological damage incurred during childhood and adolescence, yet also resemble it in their emphasis on (perceived) shortcomings in an individual’s sense of self as motivating behavior. These lines of inquiry focus on ‘significance quests’ and identity-related alienation.

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9.3 Significance quests and identity-related alienation

Psychological research has identified the wish to attain and maintain a sense of personal significance as a key human need. Kruglanski et al. present this ‘fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect’ as terrorists’ overarching motivation. Such a yearning may be triggered by real, perceived, or potential significance loss, which itself may be brought about by, for instance, existential anxiety, social isolation, (group-based) humiliation, or deprivation. Significance quests are not envisioned as purely defensive reactions to (potential) significance loss, however. Involvement in terrorism may also come about as the result of an opportunity for marked ‘significance gain’, such as the chance to acquire social standing by committing a ‘martyrdom’ (suicide) attack.

Research has provided empirical support for the notion that the desire to (re)gain a sense of personal significance can contribute to processes of involvement in terrorism. However, it should be noted that a desire for significance is of course not unique to terrorists. The likeliness that such quests will increase the probability of involvement in terrorism appears dependent on contextual factors. These are the perception of unjust personal or group-based deprivation, the ability to point to a hostile responsible party and the availability of justifications for violence.

Identity-related alienation essentially holds that children of Muslim immigrants to Western countries can come to feel that they neither belong to the country and culture of their parents, nor to the country and culture of their birth. Too modern to fit into the first and too different in appearance and upbringing to fit seamlessly into the latter, these second- and third-generation immigrants may come to lack a clear sense of identity. Experiences with discrimination or exclusion can exacerbate this feeling of alienation and add a keen sense of frustration and anger towards their fellow citizens. In such a setting, radical and extremist interpretations of Islam can become especially attractive through their ability to offer straightforward explanations (‘you didn’t get the job because unbelievers hate Muslims’),

29 Kruglanski and Orehek, ‘The Role of the Quest’, 154.
32 Kruglanski et al., ‘The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization’, 75-76.
34 Kruglanski and Orehek, ‘The Role of the Quest’, 163.
provide a clear sense of identity (‘you’re not Dutch or Moroccan, but a Muslim’) and a militant purpose (‘you must defend your religion’).\(^{35}\)

The clearest and most consequential significance quest among Hofstadgroup participants was the one that Van Gogh’s future murderer underwent. The killer himself made this very clear in a farewell letter he wrote to his family: ‘It has not eluded you that I have changed since the death of my mother. In the wake of her death I have undertaken a search to uncover the truth. […] I have chosen to fulfill my duty to Allah and to trade my soul for paradise’.\(^{36}\) The death of his mother triggered a cognitive opening that set Van Gogh’s killer on a quest for answers that led him, in rapid succession, to embrace fundamentalist, radical, and extremist interpretations of Islam.\(^{37}\) Ultimately, his desire to be a ‘true’ Muslim resulted in the belief that blasphemers should be killed and that it was his personal duty to carry out the punishment, thus restoring some of the significance lost by the Prophet Muhammad at the hands of Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali.

The partial autobiography written by the individual who tried to reach Chechnya in 2003 and who videotaped a threat to the Dutch public in 2005 reveals that he too experienced a significance quest. In a revealing passage, he states:

> [o]n the Internet, I went looking for answers about Islam, I looked at websites belonging to Hamas and later I discovered al-Qaeda. I no longer watched gruesome images [of Muslim suffering], I had seen enough. Now I went looking for answers; ‘how should a Muslim react to all this injustice?’\(^{38}\)


\(^{36}\) ‘Het is jullie niet ontgaan dat ik sinds het overlijden van mijn moeder veranderd ben. Ik heb sinds haar overlijden een zoektocht ondernomen om de waarheid te achterhalen. […] Ik heb ervoor gekozen om mijn plicht tegenover Allah te vervullen en mijn ziel in te ruilen voor het Paradijs.’ Dienst Nationale Recherche, ‘RL8026’, AHB03/27: 4040-41; Alberts et al., ‘De Wereld Van Mohammed B.’


\(^{38}\) ‘Op het Internet, ging ik op zoek naar antwoorden over de Islam, ik keek op websites van Hamas en later ontdekte ik die van al-Qaida. Ik keek niet meer naar gruwelijke beelden, ik had genoeg gezien. Nu ging ik op zoek naar antwoorden; “hoe dient een moslim te reageren op al deze onrechtvaardigheid?”’: A[.], ‘Deurwaarders Van Allah’, 11.
The desire for vengeance, according to Kruglanski et al., focuses on restoring an individual or group's loss of significance. The quest to restore significance to Muslims affected by armed conflict, and to attain status as a ‘true’ Muslim in the process, would play a key role in this individual’s behavior throughout the 2002-2005 existence of the group.

With regard to the broader group, significance quests drew participants to the group and motivated their continued presence. Numerous individuals were searching for the ‘true’ or ‘right’ interpretation of Islam and were able to address such questions within the group. Groen and Kranenberg’s interviews with female Hofstadgroup participants show that at least some of these young women were drawn to radical Islam by a search for identity and that, more generally, they were exploring what roles women were allowed or expected to fulfill in jihad. Lastly, the various recent converts in the group’s ranks are also considered to have undergone significance quests around the time of their involvement, as conversion to a religion suggests a search for meaning and answers to the larger questions of life and death. Indeed, one convert described how the desire to become a ‘perfect Muslim’ brought about the adoption of jihadist beliefs, which this individual saw as representing ‘true’ Islam.

Many Hofstadgroup participants wanted to deepen their understanding of their faith and to ascertain what it meant to be a Muslim in a time when across the globe large numbers of co-religionists were affected by armed conflict. The sense of injustice, the perception that Western nations and ‘apostate’ Muslims were responsible for this state of affairs, and the availability of ideological justifications for violence, both online and within the group, created a context in which significance quests led to an increased likeliness of involvement in extremism and even terrorism. For the group’s most militant participants, the significance quest concept suggests that the (intended) use of terrorism stemmed in part from their desire to become ‘true’ Muslims and to restore some of the significance they perceived their co-religionists and the faith as a whole had lost at the hands of Western military interventions in Muslim countries and the actions of blasphemers like Van Gogh.

41 Groen and Kranenberg, Women Warriors, 18, 65.
These findings complement the conclusion of Chapter 7 that strategic and organizational rationales for the group's planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism were largely absent. The significance quest concept suggests that these acts are better understood as distinctly personal in origin. They resembled what McCormick labels the ‘expressionist’ tradition of terrorism; rooted in a nineteenth-century philosophy of revolutionary violence, it sees the use of violence as a means of personal expression and redemption, rather than as a means for achieving political objectives.44 The Hofstadgroup's most militant participants were looking to restore significance lost by themselves and their co-religionists, and in the process solidify their own sense of identity and purpose, rather than aiming to achieve strategic goals.45

Several publications on the Hofstadgroup raise identity-related alienation as a possible explanation for the adoption of radical and extremist views by the group's participants.46 It also features prominently in the autobiography of a young Dutch Muslim who was arrested on terrorism-related charges in September 2004.47 Although not part of the Hofstadgroup, his background and convictions were similar to those who were, suggesting that identity-related alienation could have played a role in the Hofstadgroup. The available empirical evidence, however, paints a different picture. It is clear that some participants strongly identified with an imagined worldwide community of believers, an association that superseded their national identities.48 But there is simply insufficient evidence to suppose that this self-perception as a member of the global ummah stemmed from identity-related issues.

Only one explicit reference to identity-related alienation was encountered. It stems from a chat session in which one of the men who traveled to Pakistan or Afghanistan in 2003 reprimanded a chat-partner for indicating she struggled with reconciling her Moroccan heritage and her Dutch upbringing. Such problems were irrelevant, according to the traveler, as she should not see herself as Moroccan or Dutch but as Muslim.49 While it may be argued that his reply signified his own struggles with a lack of

45 Former Hofstadgroup Participant 5, 'Personal Interview 1', 4.
47 Kaddouri, Lach Met De Duivel, 24, 28, 35.
belonging, there is no actual evidence to support this possibility. In lieu of clear evidence to the contrary, identity-related alienation does not appear to offer an explanation for involvement in the Hofstad group.

**9.4 The terrorist personality or profile**

Another line of inquiry at the individual-level of analysis questions whether there is a particular ‘terrorist personality’. This immediately raises objections on a conceptual level, as ‘terrorist’ is not a singular or clearly defined typology. Terrorists fulfill a variety of roles, adhere to different ideological convictions, and come together in numerous organizational structures, ranging from strict hierarchies to loosely constituted networks. It is therefore likely that, as Victoroff writes, ‘any effort to uncover the “terrorist mind” will more likely result in uncovering a spectrum of terrorist minds’. In light of these considerations it comes as little surprise that attempts to compose a distinct terrorist personality profile have floundered. Personality factors alone simply do not offer a credible explanation for why some people become involved in terrorist groups and political violence.

Neither does an examination of terrorists' backgrounds reveal a distinctive profile; socioeconomic, demographic, or otherwise. Writing of terrorists in the 1980s, McCauley and Segal characterized them as mostly male, mostly young, predominantly from middle-class families, and usually in possession of at least some university education. These characteristics are too generic to offer explanations for involvement in terrorism. Similar research on 21st-century jihadists has likewise failed to produce a profile specific enough to have much explanatory value. In his study of 336 European jihadists, Bakker concludes that ‘there is

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53 Nevertheless, the appeal of profiles is such that their use in a law enforcement setting has continued. See, for instance: Eijkman, ‘Has the Genie Been Let out of the Bottle?’, 1-21.
no standard jihadi terrorist’. The individuals in his sample were mostly single males who were not particularly young, often hailed from the lower socioeconomic strata, and often had a criminal record. In similar work, Sageman found that the jihadists he studied mostly led middle-class existences, a contrast with Bakker’s work that adds further diversity to the profile of the ‘average’ jihadist.

Recognizing the heterogeneity of terrorists’ backgrounds, several efforts have been made to differentiate between ‘typical’ members of jihadist groups based on their motivations for involvement instead. Nesser distinguishes between idealistic and militant ‘entrepreneurs’, their equally ideologically motivated and loyal ‘protégés’ who occupy junior leadership positions, the ‘misfits’ who are motivated more by personal problems than ideological commitment, and ‘drifters’ who become involved more or less through chance. More recent empirical work on the Provisional IRA has disaggregated data on terrorists’ backgrounds based on the roles or functions they performed within that organization. One such study found that younger members were more likely to be involved in violent front-line activities. While these important efforts draw attention to the various roles that exist within terrorist organizations, they are not specific enough to provide an explanation for involvement based on particular personality characteristics.

Some researchers have looked at personality characteristics as predisposing risk factors for involvement in terrorism. Aggressiveness, for instance, has been linked to an increased likelihood of involvement in criminal violence. Della Porta found prior experience with using violence for political means to be one of the most important factors in the backgrounds of Italian terrorists of the 1970s and 1980s. Several authors argue that terrorism

57 Ibid., 140-42.
58 Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks, 73-74.
64 Silke, Terrorism, 67-68; Taylor, ‘Is Terrorism a Group Phenomenon?’, 125.
65 Della Porta, ‘Recruitment Processes’, 313.
might be especially attractive to highly authoritarian individuals. People for whom honor is an important value are more likely to favor an aggressive response to perceived external threats. Alternatively, individuals with a higher preference for social inequality (social-dominance orientation) and hierarchical social relations are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards out-groups which, in turn, might signify a lower threshold to using violence or seeing its use as legitimate.

Other characteristics that could potentially heighten the likeliness of involvement in terrorism are prejudice, youth and immaturity, a desire for action, glory, adventure or the thrill of war and violence, the lack of a clear sense of purpose, impatience with words or a dissatisfaction with the efficacy of political activities, and a desire for status. Horgan also notes anger or alienation, identification with victims of injustice, and the belief that violence is not inherently immoral. Doosje et al. add that personal uncertainty with regard to self and worldviews, and perceived intergroup threat can contribute to support for a radical belief system. Some scholars argue that altruism should also be counted among these characteristics, as terrorists are liable to view their own actions as the selfless promotion of a common good. Finally, Pedahzur et al. find that suicide terrorism is partly motivated by fatalism.

The literature indicates that there is no such thing as a terrorist personality or profile. These findings once again underline the fallacy of seeing

66 Taylor, The Fanatics, 70–71; Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, Terrorism, 544; McCauley and Segal, Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups, 333.
68 Levin et al., Social Dominance and Social Identity in Lebanon, 253–55; Pratto et al., Social Dominance Orientation, 741–58.
70 Crenshaw, Explaining Terrorism, 100–01; Locicero and Sinclair, Terrorism and Terrorist Leaders, 236, 242.
72 Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, Terrorism, 544–45.
73 Horgan, From Profiles to Pathways, 85; McCauley and Segal, Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups, 333.
74 Bartlett and Miller, The Edge of Violence, 15; McCauley and Moskalenko, Friction, 62–64.
75 Horgan, From Profiles to Pathways, 84–85.
76 Doosje, Loseman, and Van den Bos, Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth, 587, 589–91.
77 Silke, Terrorism, 68–70; Pedahzur, Perliger, and Weinberg, Altruism and Fatalism, 408–09.
78 Pedahzur, Perliger, and Weinberg, Altruism and Fatalism, 409.
terrorists as people who are somehow distinct in terms of psychology, mental illness, or character. However, the potential relevance of personality characteristics for understanding involvement in terrorism should not be ruled out altogether. There may be predisposing risk factors that increase the likeliness, however slightly, of certain individuals becoming involved in terrorism.

Several findings stand out which suggest that personality characteristics had a role to play in influencing the behavior of several leading Hofstadgroup participants. The clearest and most important of these is Van Gogh’s murderer’s history of violent behavior. In June 2000, this individual was detained after having been involved in a bar fight. A year later, he displayed threatening behavior to officers who visited his parental home on a matter related to his sister. In July 2001, he stabbed a policeman in an Amsterdam park and then threw the knife at another officer. These offenses resulted in a sentence of twelve weeks’ imprisonment. In May 2004, another incident involving Van Gogh’s future assailant was registered; this time he had threatened to kill a social services employee. Finally, on 24 September of the same year, he was arrested for aggressive behavior towards police officers after having been caught using public transport without a valid ticket.79

None of these observations form a clinical diagnosis of an aggressive predisposition. Yet it is striking that this person is the only Hofstadgroup participant who had such an extensive history of violent behavior and the only one to have committed an act of premeditated aggression.80 Although it is hard to evaluate their accuracy, there are also several descriptions of Van Gogh’s murderer by former colleagues, friends, and other group participants that paint him as someone who could be short-tempered and who was prone to (verbally) aggressive outbursts.81 Furthermore, the professionals who sought to examine him at the PBC speculated that he may have suffered from an aggression disorder.82 At the very least, his history of violent behavior showed him to be an individual who could match the

80 Although he was not the only participant to have previously engaged in violent behavior: Vermaat, Nederlandse Jihad, 109.
82 ‘Mohammed Bleef Gesloten Boek in Observatiekliniek’.
intention to use violence with a proven capability to do so. It is likely that this disposition contributed to his ability to commit murder.

One of the men who traveled to Pakistan or Afghanistan was clearly influenced by a longing for adventure, excitement, and a boyish fascination with weapons. The descriptions of his experiences that he gave to others frequently revolved around his self-described expertise with various weapons, the interesting people he met, and the hardships he had to endure; from vigorous physical training to diets that allegedly included eating tree bark.83 Based on the degree of self-aggrandizement in his chat conversations with others, it also seems clear that this person sought and enjoyed the status of being (seen as) a warrior for his faith.84 Likewise, an interviewee described a longing for adventure and romantic notions of what it meant to participate in jihad as partly motivating his attraction to Salafi-Jihadism and his involvement in the group. He also reflected that he had been driven by 'youthful naiveté'.85

While not so much a personality characteristic as an element of someone's personal background, data suggests that being a recent convert made at least some participants more susceptible to adopting extremist views. As newcomers to Islam, converts' lack of knowledge about their religion appears to have made them more likely to see the group's 'born Muslims' as sources of religious authority, especially when they had (some) command of Arabic.86 Two final 'predisposing risk factors' found among a larger number of Hofstadgroup participants, were identification with the victims of perceived injustice, and the belief that violence is not inherently immoral.87

None of the personality characteristics described in the previous paragraphs preordained these individuals' future participation in the Hofstadgroup. Still, personality characteristics appear to have played a secondary, supportive role in bringing about involvement. That contribution was to make those who had these characteristics more likely to become

84 Ibid., AHA05/22: 2166; AHDo8/37: 8571, 8593-95, 8635, 8716, 8767-768, 8773, 8880, 8919, 8928; AHDo9/38: 9048-49, 9054-56.
interested in radical or extremist interpretations of Islam, the company of like-minded individuals and, in some cases, involvement in acts of terrorism.

9.5 The role of emotions: anger

Emotions, in particular anger, have played a background role in many of the explanations discussed over the past several chapters. The final two sections of this chapter delve deeper into how they can influence involvement in terrorism. It does so by highlighting two emotional states that the literature earmarks as being especially relevant; frustration-induced anger and fear of death.

     Aggressive behavior can be instrumental or emotional. In the first case, aggression is consciously chosen as the means to achieve certain ends; in the latter, aggression is brought on by anger which in turn is a response to insult, physical pain, or frustration. Anger is frequently encountered as a (contributing) factor in explanations for involvement in terrorism, particularly in the shape of a personal grievance and a desire for revenge. Of the triggers of anger, it is the link between frustration and aggression in particular that has become a frequently encountered explanation for terrorism and political violence. In its original incarnation, frustration-aggression theory held that frustration occurs when an individual’s expectancy of reward is thwarted, prompting aggression towards the source of that thwarting. However, if, for instance, fear of punishment makes such a course of action ill-advised, the intended aggression may also be displaced onto substitutes.

     Frustration-aggression theory has found its way into numerous explanations for political violence, such as Gurr’s thesis that deprivation can lead to rebellion through the activation of the frustration-aggression mechanism. Despite its popularity, the theory has also attracted considerable criticism, most notably based on the straightforward observation that virtually everyone experience frustrations but only very few people engage in violence because of it. This has led Berkowitz to propose a modification of the

89 McCauley and Moskalenko, Friction, 13–18; Merari, ‘Psychological Aspects of Suicide Terrorism’, 107.
91 Gurr, Why Men Rebel, 9.
original theory which stresses the importance of situational and personal factors in bringing about an actual aggressive response to frustration, notably the degree to which the frustrating event is perceived as unpleasant, deliberate, and personal. As it is largely subjective whether frustration leads to aggression, the presence of relative deprivation as an explanatory variable can be difficult to ascertain objectively.

Anger forms a key explanatory variable when accounting for the behavior of the group’s most militant participants. Consider the vicariously experienced insult and pain in one future participant’s reaction to what he saw as the injustices being perpetrated against Muslims in places like Chechnya and Palestine:

[W]hy is a Muslim casualty worth less than a non-Muslim casualty? [...] Why do [the U.S. and Europe] only attack the Muslim world? [...] [E]ach time on television when they called the perpetrators of the attacks of 11 September terrorists, I always shouted at the television: ‘You are the terrorists!’ [...] [T]he oppression, that gripped me, many videos were available, from babies with a hole of 10 cm in their stomach because a bullet came out there, to children who were taken from under the rubble, horrible things that were done with women, it was never warriors that I saw, the innocent were the target, they were hit.

The desire to address these injustices by meting out vengeance to those he held responsible remained this person’s predominant motivation throughout his involvement with the Hofstadgroup. But his aggression was also fed by what appears to have been a personal vendetta against the state institutions that had monitored, arrested, and imprisoned him, frequently in what he experienced as a hard-handed and humiliating fashion. This may explain why this individual appeared to be conducting reconnaissance

94 ‘waarom is een moslim dode minder waard dan een niet-moslim dode?’, ‘waarom vallen ze alleen de islamitische wereld aan?’, ‘elke keer als ze op de televisie de plegers van de aanslagen van 11 september terroristen noemde, schreeuwde ik altijd naar de televisie: “Jullie zijn terroristen” [...] de onderdrukking, dat greep mij aan, veel video’s waren er te zien, van baby’s die een gat van 10 cm in hun buik hebben omdat daar een kogel uit is gekomen, kinderen die vanonder de puin werden gehaald, verschrikkelijke dingen die met vrouwen werden gedaan, het waren nooit strijders die ik zag, de onschuldige waren het doelwit, zij werden getroffen’: A[.], ‘Deurwaarders’, 4-5, 8-9.
95 Ibid., 11-12; Erkel, Samir, 227; NOVA, ‘Videotestament Samir A.’
of the AIVD headquarters in 2004 and why he appeared interested in planning attacks against the same organization in 2005.\(^{97}\) It also fits with a police intelligence report earmarked as ‘reliable’ which indicated that upon his release in early 2005 this participant was driven to rectify the ‘1-0’ in the unbelievers favor.\(^{98}\) Essentially, his aggression appears to have been motivated by a desire to avenge both the injustices suffered by Muslims worldwide and the affronts he had suffered personally.

Aggression brought on by insult-induced anger appears the most likely explanation for what triggered the murder of Van Gogh. The assailant’s discovery of religious injunctions that mandated him to kill blasphemers occurred in the summer of 2004.\(^{99}\) The Van Gogh production of Hirsi Ali’s movie *Submission, part 1* aired on 29 August and was met with revulsion and anger by people in and around the Hofstadgroup, precisely because it was considered blasphemous.\(^{100}\) As one participant reflected on the murder during questioning: ‘I think that [...] Van Gogh apparently hurt [the killer] so much that this happened. This speaks of revenge’.\(^{101}\) It seems likely that Van Gogh was killed not just because he had violated the murderer’s religious beliefs, but deeply insulted him in the process.

Within the broader Hofstadgroup there were a number of people for whom anger factored into bringing about their initial involvement. For some, this anger was a response to the perceived persecution of Muslims similar to the example given above, triggering a search for answers which ultimately led to the adoption of extremist ideas and to making the acquaintance of like-minded individuals.\(^{102}\) Others were angered by Dutch imams’ unwillingness to address questions related to the legitimacy of violent jihad or to discuss the wars taking place in Muslim countries. Frustrated by what they saw as cowardice, these individuals looked for alternative sources of religious authority, finding it online and within the Hofstadgroup.\(^{103}\) Anger also contributed to sharper in-group/out-group

\(^{98}\) Dienst Nationale Recherche, ‘Piranha’, REL00: 29.
\(^{102}\) Vermaat, *Nederlandse Jihad*, 163.
distinctions; the aforementioned individuals came to feel a strong disdain for ‘mainstream’ Salafism and several individuals came to hate the Dutch authorities after being arrested and imprisoned.104

Anger played an important role in bringing about involvement in the Hofstadgroup and contributed to (planned) acts of terrorism. As an explanatory factor, anger also underlines the need to qualify the role that beliefs play in these processes. The individual who wanted to go to Chechnya was guided by a sense of idealism; a desire to help what he saw as the victims of oppression. Although his adoption of Salafi-Jihadist beliefs gave him a religious vocabulary in which to express and justify that desire, it was his anger at perceived mistreatment that initially sparked his interest in militancy and it remained a factor of influence throughout his involvement in the group. While data pertaining to the role of anger is limited to a relatively small number of participants, its influence among those individuals was considerable.

9.6 Mortality salience

Terror Management Theory holds that thinking about the finality of life (‘mortality salience’) can give rise to considerable existential anxiety (‘terror’), and motivate people to look for ways of relieving these fears by imbuing their existence with meaning.105 Religion and its promise of life-after-death is one way in which people can alleviate such stress. But worldly ideologies or straightforward membership of a group can also fulfill this function by making individuals part of something larger than themselves or by providing them with an opportunity to obtain a degree of immortality by contributing to something that will outlast their death. Terrorist groups’ trumpeting of clear ideological goals and a righteous cause, as well as their ability to offer members a chance to live on in communal memory as martyrs and the promise of a place in heaven, can make them powerful beacons to those looking for existential meaning.106

104 Vermaat, Nederlandse Jihad, 215; Groen and Kranenberg, Women Warriors, 147, 183; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, ‘Personal Interview 1’, 4.
Mortality salience has been shown to lead to heightened esteem for an individual’s own group, culture, and ideology.\(^{107}\) This is directly related to such groups’ ability to lower the fear of death by providing their members with meaning and significance. Conversely, mortality salience can lead to heightened hostility towards out-groups and alternative ideologies, as their existence competes with, and thus undermines, the ability to the in-group or a particular ideology to alleviate the fear of death.\(^{108}\) Mortality salience may increase support for violent measures against out-groups perceived to be threatening.\(^{109}\) An interesting aspect of mortality salience in the context of involvement in terrorism is that it can establish a feedback loop that traps members in loyalty to both the cause and the group. As participation in acts of terrorism increases the chance of death, existential anxiety is renewed, leading to a stronger focusing on the group and its ideology to alleviate this stress, thereby prolonging involvement in terrorism and prompting the next round of existential anxiety.\(^{110}\)

Several participants feared punishments in an afterlife.\(^{111}\) Those who experienced such anxieties appear to have become more closely tied to the beliefs they thought would save them from the tortures of hell. In a telling example, one female participant told police officers that during her involvement in the group she experienced a period of great anxiety concerning the right interpretation of Islam. She was shocked by the extremist interpretation promulgated within the group, especially as it meant denouncing her own family as apostates. At the same time, she worried that it might actually represent ‘true’ Islam and that her failure to uphold such views would lead to terrible punishments in the afterlife.\(^{112}\) Although she eventually disengaged from the group, these existential fears initially tied her more closely to the group and its extremist views.\(^{113}\)

It was not simply a fear of what an afterlife might hold that influenced the behavior of some Hofstadgroup participants. The obverse also applied. In at least one case, a participant was motivated to become a ‘true’ Muslim not just to avoid eternal punishment, but to garner eternal reward. In

\(^{107}\) Kruglanski and Fishman, ‘Psychological Factors’, 11.  
\(^{113}\) Ibid., 4028-32, 4051.
addition to fear of hell there was the desire to gain a place in paradise.\textsuperscript{114} This desire for personal salvation was also a factor in the acts of terrorism planned and perpetrated by the group’s militant inner circle. Van Gogh’s assailant and the individual who recorded a threatening video message in 2005 both stated that their actions were driven by the desire to avoid god’s displeasure and to attain a place in paradise.\textsuperscript{115} Fear of death and a longing for paradise were powerful and distinctly personal existential motives underlying several participants’ involvement process and, in some cases, the planning or perpetration of acts of terrorism.

9.7 Conclusion

A first clear conclusion to emerge from this chapter is that there is no current empirical basis to assume that major psychopathology or mental health issues more generally offer a viable explanation for Hofstadgroup participants’ behavior. Neither was there data to suggest that identity-related alienation formed an explanation for involvement. Quests to gain or restore both personal and communal significance, on the other hand, appear to have been a crucial element driving participation at the individual level of analysis. They led to political and religious awakenings, the desire to become a ‘true’ Muslim and, in some cases, the wish to avenge personal or communally experienced ‘significance loss’ through violence. This concept suggests that the group’s planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism were a form of personal expression rather than grounded in strategic or organizational rationales.

The discussion then turned to the role of personality characteristics. It is questionable whether there is such a thing as a ‘terrorist profile’. However, research does indicate that certain predisposing risk factors may increase the likeliness of involvement in terrorism. Applied to the Hofstadgroup, this analytical perspective highlighted a keenness for adventure, identification with victims of perceived injustice, and, in the case of Van Gogh’s future assailant, a history of violent behavior. Predisposing risk factors that played a supportive role in explaining what made at least some of the Hofstadgroup’s participants more susceptible to adopt extremist views and to plan or perpetrate acts of terrorism.

\textsuperscript{114} Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, ‘Personal Interview 2’; 2.
For some participants, frustration-induced anger influenced their initial involvement process. Unable to get satisfactory answers to their questions about jihad-related topics at their mosques, some of these young men and women became dissatisfied with ‘mainstream’ Islam and were drawn towards venues where they could discuss the themes they were interested in, such as Hofstadgroup gatherings. Anger also features prominently in the acts of violence that were plotted or undertaken by the group’s most extremist participants. The individual who tried to reach Chechnya in 2003 was angered by the perceived injustices suffered by his co-religionists around the world, as well as his increasingly antagonistic relationship with the Dutch authorities. Likewise, it appears that the immediate trigger for the attack on Van Gogh was the anger and hurt that Submission’s release provoked in the filmmaker’s assailant.

One final factor that appears to have influenced at least several Hofstadgroup participants was a fear of death and of ending up in hell in particular. This formed a powerful existential motive that kept at least several participants closely wedded to their extremist beliefs, albeit in at least one case for only a brief period of time, as these beliefs were thought to offer the best way of avoiding punishments in the afterlife. Fear of displeasing their god and, conversely, a desire to attain paradise was also a factor in the planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism committed by the group’s militant inner-circle. This factor once again underlined the distinctly personal, as opposed to strategic or organizational, rationales for the use of terrorism found among the Hofstadgroup’s participants.