

This section applies different theories of crime to one of the primary offenses discussed in this chapter—terrorism. Empirical studies show that the most likely theory to best explain this category of criminal behavior is strain theory, both traditional and more recent versions of this framework.⁸² Further, social learning perspectives (differential association/reinforcement theory) are another theoretical framework that applies directly to such terrorist activities. Although other theories can also be applied to explaining terrorist behavior, versions of strain theory and social process/learning are currently among the leading theories for understanding why individuals engage in such activities.

Many notable recent acts of terrorism are based on the loss of some key positive element, whether it be land/territory (such as in the Israeli–Palestine conflict) or other types of principles/goals, such as what motivated Timothy McVeigh in his bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. These incidents of terrorism fit well in the framework of strain theory, including both Merton’s traditional strain theory and the more modern versions of general strain theory, such as Agnew’s. After all, most elements of terrorism are rooted in a feeling of strain or frustration, whether it be frustration with the current government structure or some other source (often anger with another government/state).

Specifically, in the case of the current dispute over land in Israel, the reason people revolt is because many feel that the Palestinian citizens’ lands were taken from them (via the ruling by worldwide bodies that concluded that they belong to the state of Israel), which is clearly a case of losing a positive aspect of their livelihood. The Palestinian revolt over the past five decades or so has revealed this frustration and anger at having their land taken from them. This creates a great amount of strain and frustration, which has resulted in lashing out against the

existing Israeli state that they believe took this important positive aspect. This type of anger and strain clearly fits into the general strain theory model of criminal offending, which emphasizes the loss of a positive stimulus (e.g., land/territory), without compensation for this loss.

A recent study by Agnew has shown that terrorism fits well in the framework of general strain theory, due to the feelings of anger and strain that create strong motivations for engaging in terrorist attacks against those who are primarily to blame for the loss of positive stimuli (in this case, land/territory, the Palestinian state, etc.).⁸³ And it certainly fits regarding the anger and frustration of the Palestinians in trying to reacquire their land in the face of an overwhelming force—the state of Israel (with the backing of the United States and other governments).

Another example is that of McVeigh, who was responsible for one of the worst cases of domestic terrorism. As a sympathizer of militia movements, McVeigh’s goal in his bombings was to try to get revenge against the U.S. federal government regarding its handling of the 1993 siege (which killed 76 people) in Waco, Texas, as well as the killing of militia citizens at Ruby Ridge in 1992. Ultimately, his goals fit well in traditional strain theory,⁸⁴ especially regarding the adaptation of rebel or rebellion, in which a person desires certain means and goals for society but strongly disagrees with the current conventionally established means and goals and therefore seeks to change them. This is exactly what McVeigh sought to do by bombing the federal building. Unfortunately, many of the victims of his attack were children in the building’s day care center. Thus, his act was seen not as an attack on authority or the current political state but, rather, as a massacre of innocent victims who had nothing to do with the ideological and political climate he was fighting against.

Other theories can also help explain the terrorism we have discussed in

this section. For example, the social process/learning theories of differential association/reinforcement⁸⁵ offer a good explanation for why certain individuals engage in terrorist activity. To clarify, these theories emphasize the influence of significant others (e.g., peers, family) in promoting such behavior. Regarding the two notable incidents of terrorism described in this section, it is obvious that both cases involve a social learning element. Specifically, in both the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the McVeigh bombing of the federal building, certain ideals are being internalized by the offenders via their peers and other significant others. In fact, a rather extensive doctoral dissertation study by Silverman supported the fact that social learning played an important role in various forms of terrorism.⁸⁶ It is quite certain that such social learning factors play a key role in the ongoing conflict within the state of Israel, which appears to be socialized from generation to generation via families and peers, as well as in McVeigh’s motivation for bombing the federal building, which was documented by his association with coconspirator Terry Nichols, who taught him how to make explosives.

Ultimately, these two examples of terrorism fit well in the framework of strain theory (both traditional and modern versions), as well as various social learning components. There are other theories that also help explain modern terrorism (e.g., culture theory), but this section has showed that strain theory and social learning theory are two of the most likely explanatory models for understanding modern forms of terrorism.

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. What theoretical framework would help understanding the June 2016 shooting in the Orlando, Florida nightclub?
2. What theoretical framework would help understand the July 2016 attack with a cargo truck in Nice, France?