

Understanding Ideological Motivations for Terrorism: A Case Study for Public Health Preparedness Planners and Responders

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Background

- On March 20, 1995, the Aum Shinriko cult placed sarin-filled packages on five Tokyo subway cars
 - When each package punctured, vaporous agent spread throughout the subway cars
 - Fifteen stations affected in world's busiest subway system killing 13 and injuring over 6,000 people¹
- Subsequent investigations revealed Aum had previously produced media containing 10-20 metric tons of *anthrax* spores and several hundred metric tons of *botulinum toxin*²
- Many complicated *historical, cultural, economic, political, psychological, social, ideological and religious* factors influence terrorism. This poster focuses on one of these factors: the Ideological Motivations for Terrorism (IMT).

Goals

- To determine the frequency of key IMT themes in the literature
- To summarize these themes for a public health audience, and
- To present a Case Study of the Aum Shinriko's use of Religious Ideology to recruit and influence members.

Methods

Literature review of 6 previously identified key themes:

- Religious Ideology deviates from mainstream religion
 - Recruitment of persons experiencing humiliation
 - Isolation of communities and individuals
 - Indoctrination to group ideology of good and evil
 - Provision of sense of identity and empowerment
 - Use of symbolic meaning/performance violence
- Search engines PubMed, ATLA, Google
 - Key words: *Religious Violence, Terrorism, Aum Shinriko*
 - Other articles identified through reference lists

Figure 1: Tokyo Subway system

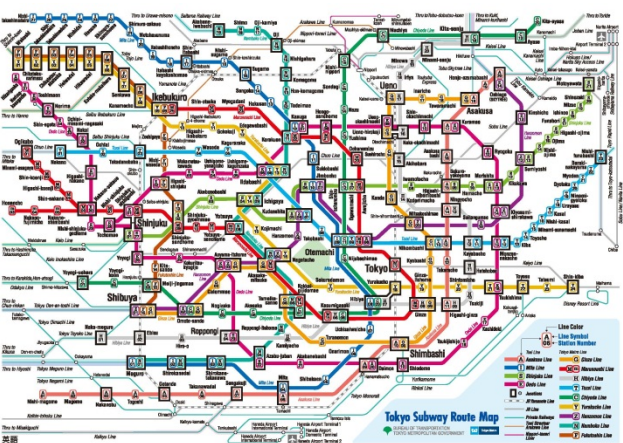


Photo Source: Tokyo Metro, "Subway Map," Accessed 4 Dec 2012 at www.tokyo-metro.jp/en/

Results

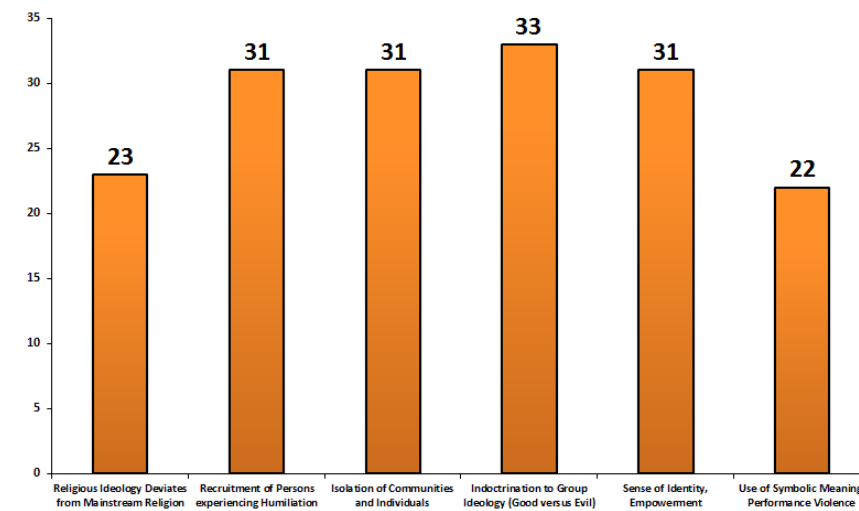
Table: Literature Review

n = 40 sources Years: 1993-2011

No.	Type	No.	Subject
19	Policy paper, white paper	14	Political Science
14	Academic article	10	Psychology
3	Textbook	5	Law Enforcement, Military
2	News article or website	4	Religion
1	Chapter	3	Sociology/Anthropology
1	Report	2	Economics/Finance
40	Total	2	Science/Technology, Public Health
		40	Total

Figure 2: Frequency of 6 Key Themes

n = 40 sources



1. Religious Ideology deviates from Mainstream Religion

Key Theme

"Activists...imagined themselves as defenders of ancient faiths. But in fact they have created new religious forms"²

"used the language of traditional religion to build bulwarks around aspects of modernity that have threatened them"²

Aum Shinriko Case Study

"(Aum Shinriko's) operations were worldwide, promoting a theology drawn from different sources."³

"What impressed (the Aum recruit) was the movement's critique of traditional Japanese religion."²

2. Recruitment of Persons Experiencing Humiliation

Key Theme

"One of the primary tasks of a religious terrorist leader is to capitalize on some feeling of *humiliation*"⁴

"Terrorist leaders capitalize on *humiliation* -- they try to strengthen it, and urge their followers to take action against the entity purportedly responsible for humiliating them."⁴

Aum Shinriko Case Study

Ian Reader "linked Aum's concept of cosmic war to a feeling of *humiliation*. The concept of Armageddon went hand in hand with a history of rejection experienced both by (cult leader) Asahara and by members of his movement."²

3. Isolation of Communities and Individuals

Key Theme

Charismatic leaders who *isolate* their followers from the rest of society often instill extreme paranoia among their followers. Such groups can be susceptible to extreme acts of violence.⁵

Aum Shinriko Case Study

(The practice of) Shukkesha demands that individuals sever all ties with family and cease communication.⁵ He and other members were to avoid reading or listening to reports from the news media because of "the impurity of the data that one receives about the world"²

4. Indoctrination to Group Ideology of Good versus Evil

Key Theme

Religion brings to a situation of conflict images of grand struggle and an abiding absolutism.

Religion often "centered around themes that can be inherently polarizing — concepts of truth, notions of good, of absolutes and ultimate realities."⁷

Aum Shinriko Case Study

Aum is Sanskrit for "powers of destruction and creation in the universe;" Shinrikyo is "teaching of supreme truth"⁵

Once one is caught up in cosmic war, (cult leader) Asahara explained, the ordinary rules of conduct do not apply.⁷

5. Providing a Sense of Identity and Empowerment

Key Theme

One thing (terrorist recruits) have in common is a frustration with establishing a clear *identity*.

What extremist groups offer is a very clear *identity*. It's very clear who we are, and it's very clear who the outsiders are, and what makes us different from them.⁴

Aum Shinriko Case Study

(Aum Shinrikyo) spoke to the needs of people to find certainty and a framework for understanding the world.⁷ Ashara seemed (to the recruit) so profound in his knowledge of religion, so certain in his predictions, so clear in explaining the forces that caused the world to be fractious and confused.⁷

6. Use of Symbolic Meaning and Performance Violence

Key Theme

"The conventional wisdom among experts has been that terrorists 'want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead' and are unlikely to turn to weapons of mass destruction."⁶

Not done to achieve a strategic goal but to make a symbolic statement. "Terrorism without its horrified witnesses would be as pointless as a play without an audience"⁷

Aum Shinriko Case Study

"The point of the Aum Shinrikyo attack was not to kill large numbers of people but to demonstrate the veracity of the leader's prophecies."⁷ "Choosing (the Kasumigaseki station) as a target illustrated the fragility of Japan's security, and reinforced (cult leader) Asahara's claim that only his movement could save the Japanese people when Armageddon began."⁷

Figure 3: 1995 Tokyo Sarin Attack



Photo Source: CNBC "Notorious Domsday Prophets and Cults." Accessed 4 Dec 2012 at http://www.cnbc.com/id/42415993/Notorious_Domsday_Prophets_and_Cults

Conclusion: Public Health Implications

- In addition to preparing for large-scale emergencies (e.g. pandemics), public health should prepare for small-scale attacks that may have symbolic meaning to perpetrators
- Exercise planning may benefit from input from sociologists, religious scholars, former cult members, and affected communities familiar with terrorist ideologies to increase likelihood that exercise scenarios reflect potential threats
- Public health staff should be vigilant in monitoring access to potential bioterrorism agents to prevent unauthorized individuals from obtaining these pathogens
- Factors influencing terrorism are multifaceted and complex. Future studies should investigate other factors (e.g. political, economic, psychological, sociological) influencing terrorism

Select References:

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