The unconscious in terror: An overview of psychoanalytic contributions to the psychology of terrorism and violent radicalization

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Abstract

This overview provides a brief survey of the major psychoanalytic frameworks and concepts that were put forth throughout the years for understanding socio-political violence and terrorism. In lieu of exhaustiveness, which is hindered by scope limitations, this overview maps the general ‘phylogenesis’, or the intellectual evolution and derivation of psychoanalytic theorizing about the subject, while putting more specific models within the context of the major developments (or splintering) in psychoanalytic theory that inspired or preceded them. Geared towards the English-speaking reader, this overview attempts to undo some of the Americanocentric cultural bias that may still exist in the psychoanalytic literature in general and that of political violence in particular - especially after 9/11. As such, it preferentially expounds upon theories that may be more popular outside the United States and/or have not yet been comprehensively translated to English, such as Marxist, post-structuralist and ‘continental’ philosophical approaches to political violence. Further, since theories of political violence are arguably more prone to amnesia and to ‘reinvention of the wheel’ for a variety of reasons, this overview is slightly more detailed in describing early concepts and scholars that may still be useful in conceptualizing present-day terrorism. The overview ends with a selective survey of innovative clinical and empirical approaches that allow for integration of psychoanalytic frameworks to flexibly understand
A fundamental ambition of psychoanalysis from its inception has been to understand and mitigate aggression and violence, which were considered primordial, pervasive, and essential for psychic functioning. Whether presumed to originate from a “death drive”—an innate impulse towards destruction and the return to prenatal quiescence (Freud, 1920; Kristeva, 2015; Segal, 1993; Spielrein, 1912)—or as a putative manifestation of unconscious conflicts and the defensive mechanisms leveled against them (Eissler, 2000; Klein, 1946; Twemlow & Sacco, 2002), psychoanalytic paradigms were ostensibly multifocal, aiming to address individual, interpersonal, and intergroup aggression by employing the same internally consistent set of theoretical operators (Bion, 1961; Casoni & Brunet, 2002; Cohen, 2012; Freud, 1921, 1928; Fromm, 1932; Kaye, 2018; Kibel, 2005; Reich, 1933; Rice, 1969; Scheidlinger, 1997; Zaretsky, 2015).

Yet the psychoanalytic gaze has gradually drifted away from global, political, and social issues to focus on individual concerns with an ever-growing reliance on models of intrapsychic conflict—leaving the task of explaining aggression and offering group-level interventions to the growing areas of sociology and later also to social psychology (Segal, 1987; Ward, 2002). Clinical practice followed models of psychopathology that increasingly emphasized individual rather than sociopolitical etiological determinants (Prilleltensky, 1989; Proctor, 2005; Roazen, 2017). Correspondingly, although the subjective neutrality of the psychoanalyst was successfully problematized and challenged in recent developments in clinical psychoanalysis, such as the intersubjective, relational, and feminist approaches (Benjamin, 2013; Eagly et al., 2012; Kernberg, 2011; Mitchell & Aron, 1999; Stolorow & Atwood, 1997), the role of unconscious countertransference biases that might emanate from implicit political ideologies and prejudice has rarely become a subject of debate or concern (Aibel, 2018; Altman et al., 2004; Hollander, 2006; Hopper, 1996; Milton & Legg, 2000; Prilleltensky, 2008).

More specifically, psychoanalytic attempts to understand and mitigate political extremism and terrorism have been curiously on the decline throughout the 20th and the 21st centuries, despite several global “waves” of terrorism, each oftentimes more harrowing than its predecessor due to technological advances in both weaponry, persuasion sophistry and media reach (Kaplan, 2017; Rapoport, 2013). More striking still is the relatively cursory stance that psychoanalysis as a field of inquiry exhibited vis-à-vis the worldwide surge of interest in terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. For example, systematic queries on Google Scholar show that the scientific output of psychological papers from 2001 onwards concerning terrorism (i.e., the including terms “terrorists,” “terrorism,” “paramilitary,” “radicals,” or “revolutionaries”) accelerated at twice the rate of the equivalent growth in psychoanalytic output concerning the same keywords within the same time span. In sum, it seems that in the past two decades, terrorism (and politically motivated violence in general) had become a major topic of interest for almost every field of inquiry—with psychoanalysis serving as a notable exception.

This overview attempts to rekindle the appreciation of psychoanalysis as a useful framework for understanding and potentially mitigating political violence and terrorism. It purports to do so by integrating the often-overlooked sociohistorical consideration of group-level psychodynamics with the more familiar literature on individual factors that undergird political violence. To overcome its scope limitations, this overview selectively highlights novel ideas that have furthered (or have the potential to further) our knowledge in the form of clinically meaningful and potentially testable psychodynamic models. As such, these comments purposefully underemphasize circular speculations concerning the “terrorist psyche,” and unfalsifiable psychoanalytic theories of the type that toppled the field from grace in the scientific, legal, and national security circles (Beck, 2002; Rosenberg, 2002; Sharaf, 1983; Zepf, 2010).
Despite the aforementioned smaller output of psychoanalytic papers on sociopolitical violence and terrorism, there nonetheless exists a tangible body of valuable psychoanalytic literature on the subject, especially after 9/11. This body of literature is important in its complementarity to cognitive and social psychological models of political violence, especially in considering the unconscious and symbolic aspects of intergroup political and ideological conflicts and in providing a template for clinicians who may encounter early signs of radicalization in patients before any organizational affiliation and tactical measures take place.

The most frequently mentioned psychoanalytic frameworks in this rather eclectic body of literature can be traced—with some regrettable yet inevitable simplifications—to three major psychoanalytic traditions: The Neo- Classical Psychoanalytic framework, the Object Relations framework, and the Ego Psychological Psychoanalytic framework.

Less traditional and more integrative approaches, which have emerged recently will be briefly mentioned at the end of this overview.

2 THE NEO-CLASSICAL PSYCHOANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

The inception of the Neo-Classical framework for understanding sociopolitical violence can be traced to the immediate successors of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who shared his overall vision (Freud, 1930, 1932) of developing psychoanalytic tools for understanding the unconscious conflicts and defense mechanisms of large groups (e.g., nations and ethnic minorities) and their manifestation in political violence. Freud’s followers also shared his conviction that—akin to the treatment of neurotic individuals—communal and global awareness of these unconscious drives and mechanisms is the best route for mitigating or even preventing sociopolitical conflicts and wars.

Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), though a contemporary of Freud and not post-Freudian in the strict sense, is nonetheless important to understanding the fervor with which psychoanalysis was embraced as a panacea for conjointly curing neurotic societies along with the patients therein. For example, Reich identified the authoritarian family structure and values of the average German family as the ideological germ cell (“ideologische Keimzelle”) that reproduces adherents of (but also has the potential to produce reactionaries to) the hegemonic ideology (Reich, 1933a, p. 155). The identification of authoritarianism as the common mechanism of oppression on both the intrapsychic and the national (and international) levels, and conceptualizing it as an interplay between social psychological and personality determinants, has permeated the fields of political science, philosophy, and psychology ever since (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1981; Lijtmaer, 2019; Rokeach, 1960).

By considering cultural repression (of which the sexual variety received distracting notoriety for Reich) and socioeconomic distress to the Freudian largely intrapsychic etiology of neurosis, Reich paved the way to understanding political aggression as a potentially healthy resistance against neurotic ideologies and government policies (Elkind, 1971; Sharaf, 1994). Using similar logic, Reich also paved the way to understanding character flaws as a defensive reaction, serving as a coping “armor” (“Charakterpanzer”; Reich, 1933b) against both internal and external oppression—and in so doing contributed to Anna Freud’s formulation of ego defenses.

In this context, it is also worthy to note the theories of Erich Fromm and, in particular, his emphasis on the unconscious conflict that paradoxically intensifies in the individual following societal progress, individualism, and permissiveness. Specifically, Fromm considered authoritarianism one solution to this unconscious conflict, in which the ego defensively relinquishes control to the hegemonic power. Other solutions include automaton conformity, whereby the ego ideal conforms to societal norms. Most pertinent here, however, is a solution that entails the destruction of the world as an “almost desperate attempt to save myself from being crushed by it” (Fromm, 1941, p. 177; See also Horney, 1994). Fromm consistently rejected the straightforward attribution of sociopolitical violence uniquely to intrapsychic conflict as a cowardly kowtowing to the bourgeois status quo. Instead, he attributed such violence to the workings of a nonpathological (or at least semipathological) defensive maneuver. Echoes of this idea...
can be found ever since among adherents of the Frankfurt School of Critical Analysis (Adorno et al., 1950; Althusser, 1971; Marcuse, 1966; Zaretsky, 2015).

Anna Freud’s (1895–1982) theories are relevant to political violence almost inextricably, by virtue of the environment in which they were created, namely, blitzkrieg-torn London in general and in particular the Hampstead War Nursery, which she established together with her life partner Dorothy Burlingham, and where children who were orphaned, internally displaced, or refugees received comprehensive mental and physical treatment. Apart from the general usefulness of her study of defense mechanisms (Freud, 1966), one of her most pertinent contributions to the understanding of political violence is based on her studies of how war trauma might trigger an “identification with the aggressor” defense mechanism, which compels the traumatized individual to externalize or “act out” their anxiety, loss, and distress in aggressive and violent means (Hirsch, 1996).

Other notable early contributors to this framework include Hanna Segal (1918–2011), who—despite being analyzed by Melanie Klein and widely identified with the Object Relations school of thought (see below)—has nonetheless helped popularize the sociopolitical focus of the neo-Freudian thought, especially in her understanding of the oedipal conflict. Segal reformulated the Oedipus complex to denote the continuous and unresolvable unconscious conflict between feelings of insignificance in relation to, and the need for, the other (Quinodoz, 2008; See also Horney, 1994). This interpretation stripped the oedipal conflict from its customary individual and sexual elements and adapted it to describe any unconscious conflict within an entity (or polity) that may experience itself (by virtue of the Reality Principle) as powerless and insignificant and yet nonetheless yearns (by virtue of the Libido) for the recognition of a more powerful (and likely indifferent, denigrating of hostile) entity (or polity). The sociopolitical relevance of these dynamics to the sense of terror that is often experienced by minority groups—racial, ethnic, or mere dissenting—were deliberate aspects of Segal’s work, and she did not hesitate to invoke them to expose any oppressive and terror-inducing political dynamics, whether in international or internal politics (e.g. her attack on the psychological establishment itself; See Segal, 1987). Following a similar logic, she raised concerns—surprisingly pertinent to political violence ever since—over the defensive over-activation of the Death Drive against inhumane political realities (Segal, 1994).

A more recent attempt to elucidate the unconscious dynamics associated with societal discontent (thus facilitating violent radicalization and terrorism) can be found in the writings of Carlo Strenger (1958–2019). In this body of work, most of which has not yet been translated to English, Strenger takes Freud’s antithetical blend of attributing destructive unconscious drives to human societies (Freud, 1930), while offering Enlightenment-bound epistemological principles to uncover and mitigate them, and extends it to the era of post-modernism, political correctness and mass- and social-media (Strenger, 2015a). Strenger identifies Western ‘political correctness’ as a self-handicapping unconscious defense mechanism that prevents liberal democracies from confidently and rationally critiquing, opposing, and (when appropriate) rejecting authoritarian and/or fascist political entities that exploit the ‘respect’ that the democratic process affords them. These entities may be predicated on religious tenets, like the Jihadi movement, or on ethnic-nationalist tenets, like the far-right populist movements. This defense mechanism, which operates on both the societal (Strenger, 2015b) as on the individual (Strenger, 2017) levels, is in turn abetted by a pathological denial of the historical struggle to achieve (and by extension the fragility of) the Enlightenment principles, which leads to the dangerous illusion that they constitute fundamental innate rights and therefore may be taken for granted. This attitude, once entrenched, may mediate the dangerously false sense of invincibility that undergirds the West’s mishandling of populist anti-democratic movements across the ideological gamut.

Hanna Segal’s reformulation of the oedipal conflict as a multilevel unconscious conflict was the harbinger of a larger trend, championed mainly by European philosophers and literary critics along with a few psychoanalysts, to turn the psychoanalytic insights, concerning the centrality, ubiquity, and potency of unconscious conflicts, against the internalized and often unverbalized assumptions, inculcated tacitly in the individuals by the hegemonic elements of a culture. In this view, the individual’s unconscious conflicts are forever intertwined with the normative meanings of the words in the language that they use, as with the internalized epistemological conditions that determine what could be considered an acceptable truth (or reality), and on what grounds. Collectively, proponents of this school of
thought are referred to as Post-Structuralists, or (somewhat too inclusively) Continental or Post-Modern Philosophers.

Early contributors to understanding political violence using post-structuralist principles include the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), whose ambitious reinterpretation of Freud (in 17 volumes—some of which have not been published yet—containing his seminars on the subject from 1953–1970) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a useful example of the Lacanian insights into political violence can be found in his reaction to students who left the university to join the riots on the streets of Paris during the uprising of May 1968. Building on Hegelian principles, Lacan pointed out that the conflict as consciously conceptualized by the students, namely, that of academics against governmental oppression, indicates a denial and displacement of the fact that the students are themselves a product and an embodiment of the same hegemonic structure that undergirds both the regime and the universities it built ("it is structures that walk the streets, not people"). As such, the students are at risk of ending up substituting one oppressive structure for another ("revolutionary aspirations can only end up ... with the Master's discourse ... What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master and you will get one!" Seminar of 17.6.70), without fundamentally reflecting on and challenging from within the myriad ways in which they might unconsciously reproduce, contribute to, and get co-opted by, the hegemonic powers against which they riot. Thus the riot itself is but a hysterical capitulation to the joy ("jouissance") associated with distraction and destruction. Such fundamental reflection, Lacan intimates, can only be afforded by psychoanalysis (Edmondson & Mladek, 2017; Lacan, 1970).

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is an example of a post-structuralist philosopher who nevertheless used psychoanalytic tools to examine the seemingly "natural" (or unconscious) construction of reality by the hegemonic powers through the use of language. In the field of political violence, Foucault is infamous for his naïve support of Ayatollah Khomeini and the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. As misguided as his infatuation with Shiite Islamism might have been, it is nonetheless consistent with Foucault's (and others—see Fanon, 1961; Baudrillard, 2007) otherwise astute critique of the defense mechanisms that the imperial West has been utilizing to keep its members oblivious to the pernicious nature of their own implicit assumptions of superiority and exceptionalism - resulting in centuries of international political violence in the form of colonization, coercion and meddling - with little awareness of, or protest against, it within Wester communities. Against this backdrop, for example, the mass self-flagellations and wallowing practices of Iranian Shiites during the Ashura holiday represented to Foucault (who was not intimately familiar with the Shiite culture) a more authentic and realistic communal acknowledgement of the inevitable unconscious link between love in this case of God and aggression (Afary & Anderson, 2010; Foucault, 1984)—a link that the Judeo-Christian tradition tried to inculcate its disciples to suppress, presumably at the cost of widespread neurosis, as Freud and others have suggested (Breuer & Freud, 1895; Reich, 1927).

Although classical psychoanalytic concepts such as the Oedipus Complex and the Death Drive have generally fallen out of favor in clinical practice, they are still used by continental philosophers, literary critics, and psychoanalytic sociologists to understand the nexus between individual and social conflicts. Among the most influential contributors to understanding terrorism psychoanalytically as a technique for mitigating the post-911 counter-transferential flare-up of cultural and legal hysteria around Islamist radicalization are Julia Kristeva (1941–), a French-Bulgarian psychoanalyst. Like with other post-structuralists, adequate justice to her thought is beyond the scope of this overview. However, a useful example for this line of thinking would be her efforts to understand cur- rent Islamist sentiments among second-generation (largely secular) Muslim adolescents in Europe as a socioclinical confluence of unconscious forces.

Kristeva observes that in Islam, the absolute primacy of Allah lacks the signature undertones of father–son oedi- pal violence invariably found in Judeo-Christian scriptures, which gives rise to the ambivalent love–hate (akin to Lacan’s “hainamoration”) relationship with God that, in turn, forms the unconscious basis of human identity and cohesion (Kristeva, 2015; cf. Freud, 1939). In addition, pervasive national and global stressors, like the postcolonial failures to integrate Muslims or the worldwide endorsement of hypocritical neoliberal values, nonetheless exert their fraying effect on interpersonal relationships on the most intimate levels, casting them into the growing void where the societal contract used to be ("où se délite, en abîme du pacte social, le lien hominien lui-même"—poetic language
is a sine qua non of post-structuralist psychoanalysis). Under these conditions of alienation, adolescents—who are in a stage of their life when they so desperately seek trustworthiness in the world as to qualify as having "ideality sickness" ("maladie d'idéalité," sometimes translated as "Malady of the ideal" possibly after Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel)—may well regress and resort (or cathect) to the Death Drive when this basic need for a dependable world is deemed hopeless (Kristeva, Marder, & Vieira, 2007). This presumably holds even more sway in fragile young adults (and more so still in Muslims, as mentioned above) who feel estranged from both their religious–cultural and their secular–national values, as many would-be jihadists seem to be (Kristeva, 2018).

3 | THE OBJECT RELATIONS PSYCHOANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Object Relations psychoanalytic models, pioneered by the work of Melanie Klein (1882–1960), proposed earlier and greater roles for violent impulses in the child—including the Death Drive and oedipal conflicts—than Freud originally posited (Klein, 1946). This framework concerned more primitive defenses such as regression, splitting, and projection (or projective identification) and their concomitantly more pathological presentations, such as paranoid–schizoid and borderline states. In this line of thinking, the unbearably unpleasant parts of the child’s (or the adult patient, or the group as a whole) experiences or feelings are split-off and projected onto the mother to form the ‘bad mother’ (or the adversary/enemy in the adult or political domains) to maintain an idealized positive view of the self, the ‘good mother’ (or the ingroup in the socio-political domain), and of the world. Due to a lingering sense of intimacy with the aspect of the self that was attributed to the other by projection, this defense is often distinguished from projection ‘proper’ as projective identification (Kernberg, 1995; Klein, 1946).

Alongside her aforementioned influence on post-structuralists, Hanna Segal’s generalization of the parent–child dynamics to the member–group relationship had also influenced (and was influenced by) the clinical contributions of her contemporary, Wilfred Bion (1897–1979), to understanding group unconscious dynamics. Bion (1961) viewed the good mother (or the “work group” in the group context) as a transformer of the unverbalized and potentially unbearable feelings (“beta elements”) that the child (or the group member) projects (or projectively identifies) onto the mother (or the group). The latter, in turn, transform those beta elements into symbolizable (“alpha”) elements that can then be further processed internally (e.g., in fantasy) and communicated or acted upon externally. Relevantly to political violence, Bion raised frequent concerns over the sociopolitical ramifications of the converse, that is, groups that ratify the beta elements of their members (e.g., sense of victimization and of exceptionalism) and often elect as their leader the person who epitomizes the most primitive aspects of their vaguely felt-yet-unprocessed distress and despair—rather than reworking them to become topics for conscious reflection, communication, and control (Bion, 1965; see also Terman, 2010; Volkan, 2004; For similar ideas that predate psychoanalysis See Le Bon, 1897).

In the Object Relations models of political conflicts, mass violence indicates the regression of the group following an actual, perceived, or anticipated attack to a paranoid–schizoid state of mind (“position”). In this paranoid–schizoid position, the group can no longer contain or modulate the overstimulation from their distress and is impelled to invoke splitting-based defenses to sequester their experience into an all-good or all-bad spheres and then use the projective identification defense to attach the all-bad aspects onto an external object (e.g., a scapegoat and a minority group) that must be subsequently annihilated to restore the sense of trust in fellow group members, in the world and in the future. Such dynamics of paranoid regression are often reinforced by malignant, narcissistic, or omnipotent idealization of the leader and/or the group members (Kibel, 2005).

Otto Kernberg (1928–) delineated in two seminal papers how Object Relations psychoanalytic theory may explain sanctioned social violence (Kernberg, 2003a, 2003b). Summarizing those papers is beyond the scope of this review (and the interested reader is urged to read them). However, one of the most pertinent novel ideas therein is Kernberg’s suggestion that the very splitting of experience into all good or all bad already subsumes a reproduction of the cultural values as internalized by the parents. In that sense, Kernberg reintegrates ideas from the neo-Freudian
and the Frankfurt School (Fromm, 1932; Lasswell, 1930; Mitchell, 1975; Reich, 1933a) with the Object Relations nuances of splitting-based defenses and part objects. The incorporation of Object Relations theory to psychopathology, though still half-hearted in the DSM5 (Skodol et al., 2011), has nonetheless proved both flexible enough to account for seeming contradictions in terrorists’ personality (Lijtmaer, 2019; Meloy & Yakeley, 2014) and generative enough to suggest testable hypotheses concerning its etiology (Meloy et al., 2019).

Today, Bion’s original conceptualization of groups as performing the function of the mother in containing and making meaning of the (mostly traumatic or unbearably negative) raw experience of their members is partially supported by empirical neuro-psychoanalytic models concerning the role of the caregiver in promoting the ability of the child to mentalize, namely, to embed both conscious and unconscious life experience in a stable, realistic, and adaptive internal representation of the world that are accessible to conscious (metacognitive) reflection (Fonagy, 2003; Fonagy & Bateman, 2016; see also Fairbairn, 1943). Conversely, some of Anna Freud’s initial observations in regard to the "identification with the aggressor" have now been reconceptualized as the violent manifestations of the increase in impulsivity and emotional dysregulation brought about by the impact of a traumatic political conflict on the mentalization capabilities of the individual or the collective (Fonagy, quoted in Hough, 2004; Luyten, Campbell, & Fonagy, 2019; Varvin, 2003a, 2018). This is consistent with the apparent cyclical nature of terrorist violence, often observed throughout world history, in which a terrorized nation resorts to inflicting terror on their designated enemy, only to suffer further terror attacks by that terrorized enemy in retaliation (Akhtar, 2003; Halperin, 2015; Lundesgaard & Krogh, 2018).

One of the most frequently invoked models within this conceptual frame is Vamik Volkan’s (1932–). In the context of political conflict and violence, Volkan (1981, 1988) emphasizes the defensive quality of communal mourning practices in the wake of political trauma or grievance. Akin to individuals with pathological grief, groups of “perennial mourners” are driven by an unconscious defensive need to designate and enshrine “Linking Objects,” namely, places, actions, or rituals, that harken back to the trauma (for similar resorts to fetishization and/or violence due to thwarted mourning of communal trauma, see Awad, 2003; Butler, 2016; Lifton, 2005; Mitscherlich & Mitscherlich, 1975; for a more general discussion of violence as a commonplace consequence of thwarted development, see Erikson, 1959).

Similarly, Volkan postulates a communal “Chosen Trauma” as a shared mental representation of the group’s historically enshrined grievance or victimization. This collective and largely unconscious defensive implement purports to augment the cohesion and sense of identity of the group (Volkan, 1998) and will grow to pathologically violent magnitude if the group is not allowed to make sense of their humiliation in a reconciliatory fashion (Volkan, 2003). As an unconscious mental representation that is shared on a tacit-yet-widespread level, the chosen trauma permeates the culture from its governing institutions and leaders to individuals and families and is thus unconsciously transmitted transgenerationally to children by their caregivers (Volkan, 2001). This model can be generalized to account for a variety of other communal dynamics that might lead to violence, such as shared mental representations of Arab refugees as the “Chosen Strangers” among right-wing Europeans (Varvin, 2018).

4 | THE PSYCHOANALYTIC EGO PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Psychoanalytic Ego Psychology can be traced back to the neo-Freudian recognition of the ego as a largely independent locus of emotional adaptation and impulse control and as an arbiter of self-awareness and self-evaluation (Freud, 1966; Fenichel, 1945; Hartmann, 1939; see also Victoroff, 2005). However, in specific regard to the etiology of violence, some of the most important advances were made by Heinz Kohut’s (1913–1981) theory of narcissistic injuries and rage. In conceptualizing violence as the enactment of an unconscious rage following insults to narcissistic vulnerabilities, Kohut (1971, 1973) helped bridge the gap between the widespread dehumanization of terrorists and other violent offenders (see also Halperin, 2015; Varvin, 2003b; For similar notions on the etiology of modern terrorism that predate psychoanalysis See Stendhal, 1830 p. 145) and the psychoanalytic emphasis on empathic
understanding of panhuman reactions to pervasive sociopolitical injustice and grievance (see also Gilligan, 1997; Lundesgaard & Krogh, 2018).

Post-Kohutian theories of political violence have attempted to identify specific narcissistic vulnerabilities that might undergird it, such as shame and humiliation that specifically target presumed vulnerabilities over masculinity (Chodorow, 2003), or the flouting of sacred values (Alderdice, 2007, 2009). Notably, Charles Strozier, through his interactive conceptualization of Kohut’s “Group Self” (Kohut, 1985; Strozier, 1983; Strozier, Strug, Pinteris, & Kelley, 2017), creates an important bridge between the Object Relations approach post-Bion (an approach that is already tacitly considered in Kohut’s models of the self: see Kohut & Wolf, 1978) and the more conscious, reflective, and even potentially calculated aspects of communal narcissistic injuries as expounded by ego psychology (see also Terman, 2010).

5 | INTEGRATIVE PSYCHOANALYTIC FRAMEWORKS

5.1 | The In-Person Interview Approach

Several notable contributions to the psychoanalytic study of political violence seem to defy an exclusive allegiance to any of the major conceptual framework that were delineated above. Curiously, most of those integrative psychoanalytic approaches to understanding ideological or political violence were put forth by scholars with direct access to violent offender. This fact may hint at one of the continuing paradoxes of psychoanalysis, whereby despite its longevity, flexibility, and consistency in explaining human behavior, only a handful of psychoanalytically informed clinicians actually conducted in-person interviews with terrorists.

Early integrative contributions of this form include Louis Schlesinger, who combines both psychoanalytic framework of group shared symbolism and rituals and rational choice motives of gain and greed (Schlesinger & Miller, 2003). Another psychoanalytically informed pioneer is Jerrold Post, who borrows from both neo-Freudian ideas on drive-based narcissism, Object Relations concepts of group dynamics, and self-psychological sensitivity to humiliation to conceptualize the terrorism cases that he interviewed (Post, 1986a, 1986b).

An altogether unique approach is exemplified by Jessica Stern, a psychoanalyst with extensive experience in interviewing terrorists. Stern, who seems to be more committed to the psychoanalytic process of listening for associative patterns with equally hovering attention, rather than practicing an a priori commitment to any psychoanalytic content that any of the frameworks above dictate. As such, Stern proposes both ego psychological and group dynamics models of shame, humiliation, and revenge (Stern, 2003a) as motives to terrorist violence along with economic trade-offs that are typical to terrorist tactics (Stern, 2003b), while reflecting on the conceptual limitations due to her own countertransference (Stern, 2013, Stern, 2009). However, as her method often involves in-depth personal interviews, there is a considerable variety in the formulations that she arrives at for each individual.

5.2 | The Linguistic Approach

Attention to language has been fundamental to psychoanalysis, with Bertha Pappenheim dubbing her treatment ‘the talking cure’ and Sigmund Freud referring to free associations as a ‘fundamental technical rule of analysis’ (Freud, 1917). However, the recent proliferation in studies of implicit social cognition in general, and those utilizing computerized text-analysis in particular, has done little to advance psychoanalytic theory. In fact, most of the cognitive-emotional biases or proclivities that these studies have uncovered are couched in models of the neurocognitive, also known as the ‘other’ unconscious (Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Pennebaker, 2017; Sherman et al., 2014) rather than in psychoanalytic formulations (Rozmarin, 2017; Solms, 2018; Westen, 1999). This state of affairs is even more stark in text-analytical studies of political violence. One exception is a series of studies that linked word frequencies and word associations to specific unconscious motivations and sentiments in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. For example, to understand the motivations of Palestinian suicide bombers, with whom clinical interviews are
mostly impossible (but see Merari, 2010), Cohen (2016) compiled a corpus of over 200 personal farewell letters that they wrote to their families and were subsequently published as the canonized last words of martyrs. Using computational word frequency analysis and word association analysis (both of which largely outside the conscious awareness or control of the individual speaker, let alone of the group as an aggregate), Cohen was able to map the relative importance of key concerns for the terrorists and demonstrate, for example, that their preoccupations with not upsetting their mothers (an offense that in Islam nullifies any gains of Jihad) and helping pave the way to a future Palestinian state are far greater than their focus on hatred and desire for taking revenge on Israelis. Similarly, using a sophisticated indices of word collocation, Cohen showed that, contrary to popular conceptions, references to the 72 virgins that the Jihadi martyr is promised in Islam showed weaker associative strength with the construct of ‘paradise’ (as measured by a comprehensive dictionary of related terms) than any other sentiment that is customarily associated with this notion (e.g. being close to Allah and the prophets, being able to intercede on behalf of family members, getting relief for mundane travails, etc - See also Cohen, 2013). The fact that the studies used primary sources in the original Arabic is both consistent with psychoanalytic preference for the experiential language and lends ecological validity to the findings. Similarly, in a corpus of 1373 testimonies of Israeli ex-military against the occupation (‘Breaking the Silence’), Cohen (2015) found evidence for lingering unconscious dehumanization of Palestinian women in the unconscious tendency of the narrators to describe the presentation of these women while in distress in behavioral, rather than emotional, terms.

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