urges. On his view, suicide terrorists are suicidal and therefore not psychologically equivalent to those whose motivation is to sacrifice their lives for a certain cause or entity. He goes on to present interview records with suicide terrorists, including one with Mohammed Atta, the ringleader and one of the pilots of the 9/11 massacre, who (according to Lankford) struggled with severe psychological risk factors for suicide, including personal crisis. Lankford's general claim is that the primary motive for past terrorist attacks was not ideology and/or political or religious commitment, but rather, the suicidal personality that suicide terrorists share with conventional suicidal persons.

This approach to understanding the development of suicide terrorists' behavior and psychology underestimates a key phenomenon of the human mental architecture; that is, self-deception. Trivers (2011) argues that self-deception is a fundamental mechanism of the human mind. It is ultimately designed for the purpose of deceiving others by obfuscating the truth, thus making detection of deception by others more difficult. While deception is cognitively demanding and can therefore be detected, it may be adaptive to suppress information from the conscious and move it into the unconscious. Such a process is typically associated with the rationalization that the lie is true, and it happens with one's conscious awareness (von Hippel & Trivers 2011). One of the consequences is the reduction of the cognitive load of the deceiver, who then expresses overconfidence in a certain belief.

Religion is especially prone to being a vehicle for self-deception, as it is one of the ways to make people believe that they are "greater" than they actually are (Triandis 2009). It helps people to deal with uncertainty and with things they cannot explain. It is easier to adhere to the belief that a higher power is responsible for the happenings, and justifies certain behavior, than to deal with complex facts which would render them absurd. The case of Mohammed Atta is a typical example of self-deception as a major driver of suicidal terrorist behavior. Atta was reportedly after glory, but he did not admit that to himself, so he dressed his motives in religion (Triandis 2009).

The cognitive simplicity in rationalizing the true motive behind Atta's action is obvious, and may even have been rewarding for him. Looking back, an observer may get the impression that self-deception had led Atta into a personal disaster with similar consequences for many (uninvolved) others. So why should the mechanism of self-deception (and hence overconfidence) have caused all this if there was no benefit associated with the consequences? In Atta's case, it was certainly satisfying for him to cherish the illusion that he was doing God's work (rendering him into a martyr), and this in particular distinguishes him markedly from others who commit conventional (or unconventional) suicide without being driven by ideology and/or religion.

Considering the costs and benefits of suicidal missions, the question arises as to why (according to Lankford) suicide terrorists should be much like others who commit conventional suicide, if motives were not markedly affected by the conviction that it were for a great good. Suicide terrorism is typically characterized by violence against an out-group, that is, individuals or groups that do not share the same ideology or commitment ("the unbelievers"). Targeting suicidal terrorist acts toward an out-group, including the strategic planning of it, doesn't make sense if it were not influenced by the overconfidence that such a mission will eventually pay off, not necessarily for the individual but (at least) for the aims of the in-group (though in the case of martyrdom it is both). With reference to Osama bin Laden's post-9/11 argument that the pay-off from suicide terrorists sacrificing their lives was the promise of an indirect "benefit" for the sake of their countrymen, Lankford seems to imply that such an adjuration cannot be the sole reason for a suicidal terrorist mission. However, since Hamilton's (1964) seminal work on inclusive fitness, it is well known that organisms can raise their overall genetic success by altruistic social behavior, thus increasing their genes in the next generation. In other words, on the genetic level, there doesn't have to be an immediate reward for the individual; but the genetic benefit can also be achieved via one's in-group sharing more genes with the individual than with an out-group. Moreover, the definition of who forms the in-group versus who forms the out-group is particularly narrow in fundamentalism, and may thus explain why it is more pronounced in collectivist cultures with relatively simple and tight bounds.

Suicide terrorism is characterized by cognitive simplicity and megalomaniac self-deception, both of which are intertwined and allow people to "rationalize" their actions. While this may be particularly true for people who are estranged from society, it also applies to many of those who believe that we (whoever "we" may be) must win the "war on terrorism" (Triandis 2009). In short, self-deception on what is "best" for the group occurs on both sides of the conflict, and it will continue until we face this fact and evaluate the complexity of terrorism in relationship to cultural diversity.

Weighing dispositional and situational factors in accounting for suicide terrorism

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Abstract: Lankford's book makes the important point that analyses of suicide terrorists often omit the error of overestimating the importance of situational causes of behavior and underestimating dispositional causes, such as underlying pathology. Personality and individual differences are important; suicide terrorists are not ordinary people driven by situational pressures. However, citation of empirical evidence is haphazard; the scholarly argument is not well-developed.

In 1977, the social psychologist Lee Ross coined the term "fundamental attribution error" to describe the putative tendency of people to overestimate the importance of dispositional causes of behavior, such as personality traits and political attitudes, and underestimate the importance of situational causes, such as social pressure or objective circumstances. Over the decades since, the term has firmly rooted itself into the conventional wisdom, to the point where it is sometimes identified as the basic insight of social psychology (Ross & Nisbett 2011). However, the actual research evidence purporting to demonstrate this error is surprisingly weak (see, e.g., Funder 1982; Funder & Fast 2010; Krueger & Funder 2004), and at least one well-documented error (the "false consensus bias" (Ross 1977a) implies that people overestimate the degree to which their behavior is determined by the situation. Moreover, everyday counter-examples are not difficult to formulate. Consider the last time you tried, in an argument, to change someone's attitude. Was it easier, or
harder than you expected? Therapeutic interventions and major social programs intended to correct dispositional problems, such as tendencies towards violence or alcoholism also are generally less successful than anticipated. Work supervisors and even parents, who have a great deal of control over the situations experienced by their employees or children, similarly find it surprisingly difficult to control behaviors as simple as showing up on time or making one’s bed. Many of us can change their minds, that interventions never work, or that employers and parents have no control over employees or children; it is simply that situational influences on behavior are often weaker than expected.

Even so, it would be going too far to claim that the actual “fundamental” error is the reverse, that people overestimate the importance of situational factors and underestimate the importance of dispositions. A more judicious conclusion would be that sometimes people overestimate the importance of dispositional factors, and sometimes they overestimate the importance of situational factors, and the important thing, in a particular case, is to try to get it right. The book under review, The Myth of Martyrdom (Lankford 2013c), aims to present an extended example of an important context in which many authoritative figures get it wrong by making the reverse of the fundamental attribution error (though the book never uses this term). When trying to find the causes of suicide terrorism, too many experts ascribe causality to the political context in which terrorism occurs, or the practical aims that terrorists hope to achieve. Instead, the author argues, most, if not all, suicide terrorists are mentally disturbed, vulnerable, and angry individuals who are not so different from run-of-the-mill suicides, and who are in fact highly similar to “non-terrorist” suicidal killers such as the Columbine or Sandy Hook murderers. Personality and individual differences are important; suicide terrorists are not ordinary people driven by situational forces.

Lankford convincingly argues that misunderstanding suicide terrorists as individuals who are rationally responding to oppression or who are motivated by political or religious goals is dangerous, because it plays into the propaganda aims of terrorist organizations to portray such individuals as brave martyrs rather than weak, vulnerable and exploitable pawns. By spreading the word that suicide terrorists are mentally troubled individuals who wish to kill themselves as much or more than they desire to advance any particular cause, Lankford hopes to lessen the attractiveness of the martyr role to would-be recruits, and also remove any second-hand glory that might otherwise accruve to a terrorist group that manages to recruit suicide-prone operatives to its banner.

Lankford’s overall message is important. However, the book is less than an ideal vehicle for it. The evidence cited consists mostly of a hodge-podge of case studies which show that some suicide terrorists, such as the lead 9/11 hijacker, had mental health issues and suicidal tendencies that long preceded their infamous acts. The book speaks repeatedly of the “unconscious” motives of such individuals, without developing a serious psychological analysis of what unconscious motivation really means or how it can be detected. It rests much of its argument on quotes from writers that Lankford happens to agree with, rather than independent analysis. It never mentions the “fundamental attribution error,” a prominent theme within social psychology that is the book’s major implicit counterpoint, whether Lankford knows this or not. The obvious parallels between suicide terrorists and genuine heroes who are willing to die for a cause is noted, but a whole chapter (Ch. 5) attempting to explain how they are different fails to make a distinction that was clear to this reader. In the end, the book is not a work of serious scholarship. It is written at the level of a popular, “trade” book, in prose that is sometimes distractingly overdramatic and even breathless. Speaking as someone who agrees with Lankford’s basic thesis, I wish it had received the serious analysis and documentation it deserves, as well as being tied to other highly relevant themes in social psychology. Perhaps a future book, more serious but less engaging to the general reader, lies in the future. I hope so.

For, the ideas in this book are important. One attraction of the concept of the “fundamental attribution error,” and the emphasis on situational causation in general, is that it is seen by some as removing limits on human freedom, implying that anybody can accomplish anything regardless of one’s abilities or stable attributes. While these are indeed attractive ideas, they are values and not scientific principles. Moreover, an overemphasis on situational causation removes personal responsibility, one example being the perpetrators of the Nazi Holocaust who claimed they were “only following orders.” A renewed attention on the personal factors that affect behavior not only may help to identify people at risk of committing atrocities, but also restore the notion that, situational factors notwithstanding, a person is in the end responsible for what he or she does.

Winning counterterrorism’s version of Pascal’s wager, but struggling to open the purse
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Abstract: Lankford’s essential empirical argument, which is based on evidence such as psychological autopsies, is that suicide attacks are caused by suicidality. By operationalizing this causal claim in a hypothetical experiment, I show the claim to be provable, and I contend that its truth is supported by Lankford’s data. However, I question his ensuing arguments about beauty and goodness, and thereby the practical value of his work in counterterrorism propaganda.

Lankford (2013c) presents a thorough and often compelling empirical argument that suicide attackers are motivated by a drive to kill themselves, rather than by a drive to martyr themselves. Along with this argument about truth, however, are less explicit arguments about beauty and goodness, and all three must be recognized to understand the theoretical and practical significance of the myth of martyrdom and Lankford’s debunking of it.

Truth. Lankford’s psychological autopsies offer fascinating glimpses into the lives and mental states of suicide attackers, and do paint a picture of troubled individuals at risk for suicide. But it is unclear whether such data show that suicidality is the underlying cause of suicide attackers’ behavior, with ideology affecting merely the form and targets of the attacks. Moreover, it is unclear whether, in a scientific sense, Lankford’s central causal claim is even provable.

A helpful approach to this problem is to operationalize the hypothesized cause-effect relation. If an “anti-suicidality” drug—perhaps soon to be actually available (Duval et al. 2013)—were surreptitiously administered to a random half of communities in a terrorist-prone region, the suicidal-terrorists prediction is that, over time, fewer suicide attackers would come from the treatment communities than from the control communities. Various analyses and control groups can be envisioned to address issues of necessity and multiple causation (see Lankford’s “requirements” and “facilitators,” p. 152), but this rudimentary hypothetical test alone shows that the causal link between suicidality and suicide attacks is provable. Furthermore, we can evaluate Lankford’s core empirical argument by asking a follow-up Bayesian question:
A structured approach to carrying out a suicide risk assessment in an OSCE setting, with an included OSCE checklist. Taking a thorough social history allows identification of social risk factors for suicide. Living situation. Who does the patient live with? Where does the patient live? Does the patient have a good support network? Is the patient able to manage all their activities of daily living independently? If the patient has children you also need to consider if the children are being neglected and if the patient has thoughts of harm towards the children. Request PDF | Weighing dispositional and situational factors in accounting for suicide terrorism | Lankford's book makes the important point that analyses of suicide terrorists often commit the error of overestimating the importance of dispositional factors, and sometimes they overestimate the importance of situational factors, and the important thing, in a particular case, is to try to get it right” (p. 368). Read chapter Risk Factors for Suicide: Thoughts of suicide can be abundant and frequent for some. These thoughts easily disrupt the lives of not only the elderly. Additionally, availability of prescription medications can be a risk factor in elderly populations. Stressful life events can also precipitate suicidal behavior, though an individual’s perception of stress is highly subjective and determines the extent to which the stress increases suicide risk. Attributing to situational or external factors (e.g. Weather). Dispositional attributions. Attributing to personal or internal factors (e.g. Intelligence). Philip Zimbardo â€“ Stanford Prison Experiment (Conformity/SIT). [A]. Prove that situational factors can affect behaviour. [P]. 22 male subjects were selected through personality assessment based on their mental stability, maturity and social ability. Randomly assigned the role of either prisoner or warden. "Prisoners". Signed a consent document that some of their human rights will be suspended for the experiment and that all subjec