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Trends. Self-Esteem and Terrorism

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the role self-esteem plays in terrorist behavior. Analysis includes the application of Jennifer Crocker and Connie T. Wolfe's views as presented in their 2001 *Psychological Review* article "[Contingencies of self-worth.](#)"

If people feel bad about themselves, i.e., about the esteem of their respective selves, are they more or less likely to engage in terrorist behavior? As discussed and critiqued elsewhere in this Issue of IBPP (see Humiliation and terrorism: Final common pathway or lowest common denominator?), one common opinion is that feeling bad, especially when equated with humiliation, is associated with terrorism being more likely. However, some people may feel good through humiliation, so matters can quickly become complicated.

Further complications may arise when feeling good or bad about selves may be associated with and/or depend on various components of pre-planning for terrorist behavior, terrorist behavior, or the consequences of such behavior. For example, even providing people with desired political consequences may not be enough to deter, minimize, or end terrorism, because it may be the illegality of achieving the consequences that is the true reinforcing component, much as a former Taliban member in Afghanistan has opined that hiding the smoking of hashish during the Taliban era was more fun than being able to smoke without fear of punishment.

Yet another complexity, comprising conceptual and semantic elements, comprises hypotheses about whether high self-esteem is more instrumentally useful and evolutionally adaptive than low self-esteem; whether low self-esteem can be high self-esteem and the latter the former; whether it is more useful to think of self-esteem as a unitary, binary, or even an extremely fragmented phenomenon; and whether self-esteem is various components of a state versus trait phenomenon or construct.

In the above context, one of the most useful perspectives on self-esteem and its psychological consequences for affect, motivation, cognition, and behavior has been offered by Crocker & Wolfe (2001). They focus on the contingencies on which self-esteem is based, including the status of not being contingent, how and when self-esteem is implicated in social problems, when stigmatization may not induce low self-esteem, and how self-esteem may develop and change including its many positive and negative contributions to human functioning.

As opposed to positing a simple human psychology to explain and even excuse terrorist behavior, one might tap into the richness of Crocker & Wolfe's analysis and Crocker's other work on self-esteem to prudently conceive an understanding of feeling bad through the self, e.g., humiliation, that might contribute to a moral, ethical, and effective counterterrorism. (See Brooke, J. (September 23, 2002). Cradle of Taliban reverts to cradle of commerce. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Crocker, J. (1999). Social stigma and self-esteem: Situational construction of self-worth. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35, 89-107; Crocker, J. (1993). Memory for information about others: Effects of self-esteem and performance feedback. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 27, 35-48; Crocker, J., Thompson, L. L., McGraw, K. M., & Ingerman, C. (1987). Downward comparison, prejudice, and

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evaluations of others: Effects of self-esteem and threat. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 52, 907-916; Crocker, J., & Wolfe, C.T. (2001). Contingencies of self-worth. *Psychological Review*, 108, 593-623.) (Keywords: Personality, Self-Esteem, Terrorism.)