**GIBBS *BBS* COMMENTARY ON *THE MYTH OF MARTYRDOM***

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**COMMENTARY TITLE**

Winning counterterrorism’s version of Pascal’s wager, but struggling to open the purse: The martyrdom myth falsified, but not proved ugly and evil

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**ABSTRACT**

Lankford’s (2013) 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 the success of his follow-on arguments about beauty and goodness.

**MAIN TEXT**

Lankford (2013) 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 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. Indeed, it is unclear whether, in a scientific sense, Lankford’s central causal claim is provable.

A helpful approach to this problem is to operationalize the hypothesized cause-effect relation. If an “anti-suicidality” drug—perhaps soon available (Duval, Mokrani, & Cocq, 2013)—were surreptitiously administered to a random half of communities in a terrorist-prone region, the suicidality prediction would be that, over time, fewer suicide attackers will come from the treatment group than the control group. Various analyses and control groups could be envisioned to address issues of necessity and multiple causation (see Lankford’s “requirements” and “facilitators,” p. 152), but the rudimentary hypothetical test shows that the causal link between suicidality and suicide attacks is demonstrable. Furthermore, we can evaluate Lankford’s core empirical argument by asking a Bayesian question: Do his data make us expect that the described treatment effect would in fact be observed? I think they do, and by this standard, *The Myth of Martyrdom* succeeds as an argument for suicide attacks being caused by suicidality.

The veridicality of this causal claim has important practical implications. Understanding the psychology of suicide terrorists should enable us to “explain, predict, and prevent their attacks better than ever before” (p. 152), and Lankford offers several excellent suggestions. An additional preventative measure to consider would be to encourage the prescribing of antidepressants in terrorism-prone populations. And, if suicidal terrorists fear life and desperately need “to escape unbearable pain” (p. 7), then even analgesics might help (DeWall et al., 2010; Randles, Heine, & Santos, 2013)—not a possibility likely to be noticed without Lankford’s work.

Lankford suggests using Nock et al.’s (2010) implicit suicidality test to screen for suicide terrorists at airports. However, this approach would be unnecessarily indirect. In the security context, suicidality is only important because it sometimes portends an “attack,” or “killing,” or “terrorism,” and the implicit association procedure can test directly for associations between the self and any of these concepts (see Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Thus, although Nock et al.’s (2010) test would be interesting as a demonstration of the suicidality hypothesis, it would not be the best application of the implicit association test in terms of safeguarding the public.

**Beauty and Goodness**

Where *The Myth of Martyrdom* shifts from arguing that suicide attackers are suicidal, to arguing that they are therefore not heroes, the debate about truth subtly becomes a debate about beauty, and ultimately goodness. The empirical validity of the suicidality hypothesis does not establish the normative validity of Lankford’s judgment that, whereas Secret Service agents are heroic, suicide terrorists are vile. However instinctually compelling we may find it, this judgment is essentially an aesthetic one, and Lankford’s attempt to substantiate its validity has shortcomings.

First, heroes are not subjected to the same thorough psychological autopsies that proved so eye-opening in the case of suicide terrorists. If we can find suicidality beneath terrorist ideology, then perhaps we would find authoritarianism, or megalomania, or some other less-than-noble quality beneath heroic sacrifice.

Second, the trolley-problem data are not good evidence that taking lives cannot be heroic. The fact that moral intuitions about an action saving eight lives depend on whether it is described as “throwing a bomb on a person” or “throwing a person on a bomb” (p. 103) does not show that these intuitions are normatively valid. Rather, it shows that moral intuitions can be myopic (Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007), and non-robust to framing manipulations.

Third, although Lankford’s analysis of sacrifice versus suicide is insightful—the decision-time point alone suggests several research directions—it fails to demonstrate that what appear to be qualitative motivational differences are not in fact differences of circumstance and opportunity. Becoming a Secret Service agent may be a low-probability way of self-orchestrating one’s death, but taking a bullet for the president might be one of the few available *and* meaningful ways to indulge a death wish, given the agent’s situation and culture. Similarly, a suicide attack may be a dubious and indirect way of “saving” one’s comrades, but it might be one of the few available *and* meaningful ways to do so in the situation and culture faced by a suicidal terrorist.

Fourth, the illuminating argument that suicide attackers, unlike heroes, help themselves (to die) but do not really help their cause and comrades much, does not take into account a crucial way in which suicide attackers are able to contribute. Like hunger strikers, self-immolators, and some pacifists, suicide terrorists provide their cause with a *symbolic* advantage, or in the case of “escapist suicides,” protect their cause from a symbolic disadvantage. Specifically, as Lankford laments, killing oneself in the name of a cause seems to give the cause added gravitas in the eyes of the enemy, and terrorists recognize this: “Our words are dead until we give them life with our blood.” (p. 54) Lankford acknowledges the principle that “committing a suicide attack makes the most sense for those who are disabled and can no longer keep up with their comrades” (p. 86)—and this would seem to be especially apt in relation to those who are disabled by suicidality. Consequently, it is arguably wrong to see suicidal terrorists, in contrast to heroes, as profligately throwing their lives away.

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