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Article Summary

Social Cohesion and Self-Sacrificing Behavior

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Summary

This study builds off previous conceptions of social cohesion and loyalty regarding self-sacrificing behavior by examining the relationships between members and leaders of certain organizations (e.g., cults, suicide attacks, etc.). Social cohesion can be described as a group of people (with willing members) who cooperate, support and survive together. The author primarily focuses on the effects that social cohesion may have on people's desire to increase their in-group reputations, suggesting that these factors may boost the odds of committing self-sacrifices among individual members of these organizations.

Extending Wintrobe's Model

Wintrobe's model (2006) shows that people feel a deeper connection with their group when they begin to disregard their own beliefs (and autonomy) and start to conform to the beliefs of their group. This promotes solidarity in the group and reduces autonomy in the individual, making the person more likely to submit to the leader's demands. This form of obedience can eventually lead to members of the group sacrificing themselves on behalf of the group or for the group's interests. The author uses this model, modifying it slightly in three ways: 1) by treating social cohesion as a "club good" (Wintrobe treats it as a private good), as it is created by the reputation between each member and their leader, 2) by assuming that members hold value to their reputations, and that as their reputation increases so does the level of social cohesion, and 3) by assuming that a member's behavior may not be an actual reflection of their true nature, rather a way to boost reputation (i.e., they could act a certain way to impress people, without truly desiring to do it).

Results

The authors found that as a member contributes more to the group, their overall reputation heightens. This means, as more and more members contribute, the need for more advanced or rewarding contributions to the group is created. This is because individuals want to attain the highest merit of reputation amongst the group—to impress the leaders and feel a sense of achievement. The authors also determine that for leaders of the organization to increase solidarity, the leader could: 1) increase their own contributions, 2) place additional effort into indoctrinating members, and 3) raise the obstacles that members face when they contribute.

Implications

We can see that individual members of terrorist organizations are trying to impress their leaders by doing outrageous things (e.g., killing people, destroying buildings, etc.) and we can determine that leaders will use this vulnerability to manipulate the members. Because of this, it is reasonable to discern that members who are trying to achieve the highest form of reputation will perform immensely extreme acts, such as suicide terrorism. Length of group membership also serves as a point of concern, as the more time that is spent in the group, the more time there is to develop this desire to increase reputation. Knowing all of this gives law enforcement, and other counterterrorism officials, leads on who we should be most aware of acting out in a terrorist organization: people who have been long standing members (and the leaders).

Shimizu, H. (2011). Social cohesion and self-sacrificing behavior. *Public Choice, 149*(3-4), 427-440. doi:10.1007/s11127-011-9880-1