Deconstructing 9/11:
A Constructivist Commentary

Robert A. Neimeyer
The University of Memphis

ABSTRACT: Like most tragic losses, the events surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, initiated a quest for meaning, to which the thoughtful essays in this issue of The Humanistic Psychologist are a partial response. In this capstone commentary, I integrate key themes in the articles bearing on experience and explanation, trauma and transcendence, and constructivism as corrective to some of the underlying psychological dynamics contributing to the violent assertion of one group's perspective against another. I also attempt to extend the predominantly individualistic formulations put forth by the authors by underscoring the importance of the social construction of identities, and reflect on the validating function of "positioning" the other in such a way that aggression is morally justified.

Humanistic psychologists have long displayed a penchant for addressing big questions, questions concerned with the experience of being human, the thrust of psychological development, the meaning of life, and the significance of death. Following in this tradition, the contributors to this special series reflect on the profound psychosocial issues raised by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11/2001, and by implication, on the uncountable other acts of ideologically inspired violence and assertion of power of which nearly all nations—and perhaps most individuals—are ultimately guilty. In keeping with their divergent theoretical predilections, each author addresses a different facet of this constellation of issues, ranging from the anatomy of evil to the prospects for transcendence in its aftermath. The very scope of their analyses challenges the commentator to offer a detailed response to them all, and accordingly, I will not attempt to reiterate, reframe, or rebut each of their reflections in the space of this brief paper. I will try, however, to tease out a few of the strands of analysis implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the foregoing articles, and attempt to weave them into a more coherent
commentary on the 9/11 atrocities and their aftermath. In doing so, I will underscore my basic sympathy with the positions each author develops, but also will attempt to critique or elaborate these responses when the complexity of the issues seems to call for an extended analysis. To organize my remarks, I will address three basic motifs evident in the series of articles: the attempt to explain the inhuman violence entailed in the attacks, the prospects for human growth even in the wake of devastation, and the corrective role of constructivism in addressing the social conditions that give rise to international (and interpersonal) aggression.

**Experience and Explanation**

Perhaps the most basic question posed by terrorism on the scale of 9/11 is why and how such events can occur as a function of human design, against the backdrop of the ideological and political conflicts that engendered them. Significantly, each of the authors feels compelled to at least allude to this more sociological level of analysis, implicitly acknowledging that psychology as a discipline is in itself insufficient to explain such a multifactorial phenomenon as global terrorism and warfare. Thus, Schneider laments the "growing split between soulless capitalism and the rabid fundamentalism that is its logical consequence," just as Wall and Louchakova draw attention to the "independent, alienated, and empty consciousness" of western culture, with its attendant rationality and mechanism, to which the terrorism is in part a response. Bohart and Raskin, for their part, gesture more tentatively in a sociological direction in remarking, respectively, on the tendency of ideological opponents to enlist ethics in constructing a moral justification for their positions, and on the extent to which every position necessarily embeds its proponents within certain parameters of values and ethics, whether or not these are acknowledged explicitly. Although these observations are certainly cogent, it is perhaps appropriate to acknowledge that these sociological asides are simply placeholders for a more thorough analysis at ideological, economic, and political levels. But in fairness, the focal concerns of these authors are psychological, or at most psychosocial, and accordingly, it is at this more individualistic or interpersonal level that their analyses should be appraised.1

A useful template for considering the analyses propounded in the four position statements is provided by the Italian constructivist, Vittorio Guidano (1991, 1995). In an argument reminiscent of both Mead and Rogers, Guidano asserts that human functioning is characterized by a dialectical interplay between experience and explanation, between our tacit sense of self in the world (the I) and our ongoing attempt to distil an explicit identity (the me). Significantly, the two remain always in some tension, as the active and experiencing I always outstrips the reflective and explaining me, providing the "leading edge" of awareness that perturbs our articulated self-concept and prompting further, if not always comfortable, self-development. Various concepts put forward by the contributors to this series can be read as relevant to the emergence of violent self-assertion on each of these levels.

Bohart and Schneider address themselves primarily to the more basic, experiential wellsprings of evil. For Bohart, our "boundless capacity for imposing our will on others, in ways that restrict their freedom, and hurt them in various ways" is anchored in the phenomenological "feeling of reality" of our adopted point of view. Moreover, he holds that this sense of compellnness of our perspective is more basic than thinking or feeling, undergirding them both with a kind of apodictic certainty, that, "deep down," lets us "know that we are really right." Proceeding from this sense of bedrock certainty that I am right and you are wrong, I can legitimize any action necessary to subordinate your perspective to my own. Thus, Bohart places violence on a continuum with other oppressive social acts, viewing them as a kind of tragic empathic failure to attribute a reality to the perspective of another that is on par with my own. At the level of explanation in Guidano’s terms, Bohart cautions that the indubitable "realness" of our own perspectives can be further reinforced by all manner of derivative ethical and moral justifications, although these presumably are secondary to the primary experiential reality they are recruited to support.

If Bohart’s analysis makes power assertion understandable, Schneider’s is even more disquieting in arguing that wanton aggression is positively exhilarating. Tacking back and forth between an interpretation of classic horror tales and the horrific events of contemporary terrorism, Schneider contends that the very extremity of atrocity is experienced by the transgressor as "an unrestrained and unmanageable outcropping of what we call joy, release, liberation." Ironically, then, the destruction of thousands of human lives is viewed as a form of "enlargement of consciousness" which "blindly and compulsively overshoots its aim." Just as
Bohart's analysis implicitly refers to the classic humanistic concept of empathy—at least in the form of its absence—Schneider's seems to relate terrorism to another traditional concept, as a form of self-actualization or personal growth that has in a sense run amok. "The further we extend and enlarge ourselves," he argues, "the more our experience appears bizarre, unassimilable, and in many cases perverse and violent." At the level of explanation, Schneider ventures a hypothesis about the psychological conditions that predispose to this perverse outcome, in referring to the "inner fragility" with which the presumed mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks must contend as a result of childhood belittlement. But this is if anything the more distal cause of the violence, with the exhilarating transgression of boundaries apparently playing the more proximal role.

What are we to make of these two attempts to dissect the anatomy of evil? For my part, I find each to be a useful, if partial, account of the psychology of terrorism. Schneider's account unquestionably addresses the passion with which violence is sometimes perpetrated, although whether the emotional state of those men who stormed the cockpits of commercial airliners on 9/11 could be characterized as "joy, release, or liberation" remains a dubious proposition. It seems rather more likely that this exhilaration was reserved for those who planned the attack—and survived it—raising the question of whether the "lure of excess" preceded and motivated the terrorism, or simply reinforced it after the mass murders were completed. In other words, the sort of highly premeditated act represented by the September 11 tragedies seems to call for a rather different psychology than that which explains our titillation by horror movies, although it is not inconceivable that a form of lurid exhilaration might account for our fascination with the images of crumbling structures and people falling from 100th story windows. It is precisely this more coolly calculating psychology that is addressed by Bohart's "feeling of realness," the deeply anchored conviction in the rightness of our own position, and perhaps even in its divine inspiration, that allows us to coldly plot the death of thousands who we take to exemplify the contrast pole to our own ideological constructions.

But Bohart's account deals only suggestively with a number of related questions germane to the explanation of evil, among which is the very definition of evil itself. As his allusion to the empirically supported treatment debate suggests, horrific assaults on human life share with ordinary convictions an element of power assertion based on an unquestioned allegiance to one's beliefs, but proponents of the EST position in psychotherapy can hardly be described as evil in the diabolic terms suggested by global terrorism. Thus, what seems required is a clearer explication of the distinction between "commitment" and "hostility," something considered in personal construct terms by Pfenninger and Klon (1996). Ultimately, however, they too blur the dividing line—if there is one—between the two, implying that the decision to "stick by one's guns" (metaphorically or literally) in the face of clear challenges to one's perspective can represent madness or martyrdom, depending on the perspective of the observer. But considered in conjunction with Bohart's analysis, their discussion of hostility does suggest a useful elaboration of the dynamics of destructive interactions, a point to which I will now turn.

Although Bohart briefly hints at the way in which a "feeling of realness combined with the need to have our realities validated" and our propensity toward "moral righteousness" allows us to impose our will violently on others, more could be said about this critically important process. While the apparent reality of our perspective may be phenomenologically given, it does not follow that it is phenomenologically maintained. Indeed, it seems likely that the constant confrontation with divergent opinions, subjectivities, and ideologies could (and perhaps typically does) erode our ironclad conviction regarding our own, in the absence of conscious or unconscious efforts to secure ongoing validation for them. As a long line of constructivist research on personal relationships demonstrates, this continual effort to recruit support for our core constructions of identity and value typically takes the form of selective affiliation with those who consensually validate our commitments by holding similar views (Duck, 1973; Neimeyer, Brooks, & Baker, 1996). But an equally powerful, if perverse way of affirming our core commitments is through validation by contrast, in which we explicitly or implicitly lend credibility, morality, or weight to our own constructions by presenting them as the antithesis of views held by hated others (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1985). Thus, maintaining the felt "realness" and indisputability of our own constructions can draw equally on processes of contempt as well as consensus, in an ongoing cycle of personal (or collective) validation at the expense of the "other." Viewing the dynamics of social validation in these terms, the "realness" of our point of view might
not simply be the prerequisite of its imposition on others; but rather its imposition through the "recruitment" of demonized others may be a critical condition for maintaining the phenomenological validity of our position.

As uncomfortable as such a conclusion may be to those of us with humanistic leanings, its plausibility is reinforced by scholars steeped in discourse analysis (Burr, 1995; Foucault, 1970). Analyzing acts of power assertion and legitimized violence in discursive terms reveals a disconcertingly common rhetoric of righteousness, in which opponents are "positioned" as savage, malevolent, vengeful or diabolical, while those on "our side" are identified as civilized, benevolent, acting in self defense, or even godly. Revealing these rhetorical moves in political and ideological discourse requires us to supplement the predominantly individualistic analyses offered by Schneider and Bohart with a more molar analysis attuned to the social construction of "subject positions" in language. Significantly, a good deal of such positioning typically precedes overt acts of violence and retribution both within and across cultures, suggesting that a closer critical attention to the rhetorical justification of warlike action could play a role in predicting, and perhaps forestalling, the latter.2

**Trauma and Transcendence**

In their transpersonal treatment of the effects of 9/11, Wall and Louchakova address a quite different topic from Bohart and Schneider, in focusing on the psychology of survivors and witnesses of the terrorist attacks, rather than that of its perpetrators. Drawing on the cosmologies of Ibn-Arabi, Gebson, and Sri Aurobindo, they outline a model of the emergent evolution of consciousness from baser "natural" states, through "mental" levels characterized by rationality and mechanistic explanation, toward higher "spiritual" states of consciousness that integrate and transcend those that precede them. Significantly, suffering plays a facilitative role in this emergence, being viewed as "pain or aspiration for greater intimacy with God." Viewing the deaths of thousands of people on the streets of New York or Washington, or even through the mediated imagery brought into our homes through television coverage, is therefore seen as shattering old structures of consciousness, individual and collective, and providing opportunities for either healing new structures or pathological reactions.

Wall and Louchakova's optimistic assessment of the impact of 9/11 is undoubtedly buttressed by media reports and surveys showing an upsurge in volunteerism, charitable donations, and church attendance among Americans in the closing months of 2001. Furthermore, it is also consonant in some respects with a large and growing literature on the positive effects of adversity for a substantial minority of people contending with grave illness, injury, or personal trauma, many of whom report "post-traumatic growth" in addition to, or instead of "post-traumatic stress" (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). For instance, both qualitative and quantitative research on bereavement has demonstrated that significant numbers of people who have lost loved ones, often tragically, report a deepened sense of purpose, a revitalization of close relationships, a revision of life priorities, and sometimes a reawakened spirituality (Frantz, Farrell, & Trolley, 2001; Neimeyer, 2001a). Such findings accord with a view that loss frequently prompts a reconstruction of meaning, as people attempt to find significance in their suffering and seek new coherence in the life narrative it has disrupted (Neimeyer, 2001b; Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001). In general terms, then, Wall and Louchakova seem justified in their conclusion that "embracing the concept of the spiritual evolution of consciousness helps one to see tragedy as a means to awaken and develop a wider, deeper picture [of life], to be imaginative in response, and to avoid the trap of revenge."

But as inviting as this appraisal is, I believe that there is ample reason to accept it only conditionally. For one thing, as Wall and Louchakova acknowledge, "there has [also] been an upsurge of war, violence, and helplessness since 9/11," which arguably has been more sustained than the evanescent emergence of altruism on the part of large segments of the population. As the ongoing cycle of retribution in the Middle East illustrates, there is the very real possibility that western action against those presumed to have planned or abetted the terrorism will simply contribute to ratcheting up the violence to higher levels of intensity on both sides of the ideological divide, and fuel global cynicism about the legitimacy of this response. Moreover, the troubling possibility raised by Schneider, that "liberation" from conventional morality can as easily be violent as benign cautions against the assumption that all forms of "enlargement of consciousness" inevitably move toward higher levels of spiritual development. Indeed, a dispassionate historical survey of the last few millennia suggests that any evolution of
human consciousness in the direction of growth and goodness has typically been both local and time-limited, and marked by as many reversals as advances. But perhaps most basically, even if one accredits the progressive shift toward altruism highlighted by Wall and Louchakova, it does not necessarily follow that such developments signal the sort of emergent spiritual evolution that these authors outline. For example, secular attempts in the "transformative justice" field also use wrongdoing and suffering as an opportunity to restore a greater sense of community, empathy, and joint purpose among parties to conflict, without assuming the cosmological shift in collective conscious advocated by these authors (Neimeyer & Tschudi, 2002). Thus, as Wall and Louchakova recognize, "multiple meanings can be attributed to the events" of 9/11, of which the mass transformation of human consciousness is but one hopeful possibility.

**Constructivism as Corrective**

Finally, the contributors to this series each attempt to formulate some prescriptions, at least by implication, that would erect safeguards against further ideological violence. As with their more general analyses, these prescriptions range from the social to the individual. At the most general level, Schneider advocates greater cultural cultivation of a spirit of "Carnival," a celebration of the flesh, to allow people to feel that they are "coming alive" in presumably less destructive ways than those offered by exuberant aggression. Perhaps in counterpoint to this, Wall and Louchakova envision a broad cultural transformation toward greater spirituality, offering people a transcendence of difference through a sense of connection, compassion, discernment, and peace. At a more interpersonal level, these same authors stress the importance of dialogue as a means of dispute resolution and as a bridge toward empathy. And at the most individualistic level, Bohart stresses the importance of "stepping up a level" through viewing the relationship between one's own constructions and those of an opponent as in dynamic interplay with one another, and suggests that striving to identify and articulate our own complex "felt sense" of conflict situations could help shift one's "sense of realness" in new and more inclusive directions.

But it is Raskin's analysis of the role of constructivism as a possible corrective to discourses of demonization that I would like to underscore and extend in these concluding paragraphs. Raskin's main object is to defend constructivism from the gratuitous and opportunistic charge that it and other postmodern perspectives are indirectly to blame for the terrorism because their relativistic philosophy offers no grounds for condemnation of it. But in the course of doing so he also builds a strong case that constructivism represents a bulwark against extremism and the violent assertion of one group's ideology over another's. In contrast to "death and furniture" arguments, which hold that suffering and immutable ethical realities exist independently of any given human perspective, Raskin's constructivism acknowledges that both are products of human meaning making. As he notes, "the world of things does not tell people how to treat each other;" the ethical realm arises in human affairs precisely because each construction of meaning, whether individual or collective, carries with it an implicit value dimension. All claims are in this sense moral claims, and constructivism enjoins us to "step into" each of them in order grasp their internal logic and affordances, although we are under no ultimate obligation to adopt them.

This encouragement to "indwell" the particulars of another's way of knowing (Polanyi, 1958) is itself an ethical principle, which, while not precluding other forms of action (including defense against another's aggression), holds promise of transforming belligerent discourses and averting the violent promulgation of a single viewpoint. How might Arab/American discourses of conflict be transformed, for example, if leaders on each side took pains to deeply grasp and articulate the perspective of the other as a precondition to negotiating their differences? Although it would be na"ive to expect that transformative dialogue that honored the integrity of both points of view could be constructed overnight, recent history offers examples of its feasibility, as the role of Mandela and De Klerk in transforming South African discourses of race illustrates. An "ethic of tolerance" configured along these lines would also be buttressed by ongoing efforts to articulate our own foundational assumptions, while at the same time recognizing their provisional, "as if" quality (Neimeyer, 2002). By explicitly underscoring the fallibility of all constructions, constructivism provides a crucial corrective to the "feeling of realness" to which Bohart attributes the hostile imposition of one's perspective on another.
Conclusion

Like all tragedies, the horrendous devastation wrought by the 9/11 terrorism initiated a quest for meaning, a quest joined by the contributors to this special series. In contending with the import of the atrocity for human beings, each author offered a novel, and generally humanistic framing of the causes and consequences of attacks, at levels ranging from the individual and carnal, to the social and spiritual. In this brief commentary I have tried to suggest the complementarity of many of these perspectives, as well as some of their limitations, and to underscore the importance of extending our appreciation of the discursive and dialogic processes by which violent action can be either constructed or deconstructed. Like each of the contributors, I hope that these remarks and the overall series in which they are embedded prompt psychologists toward a useful engagement with the problems of contemporary life, extending the critical capacity of humanistic psychology in relevant directions.

Endnotes

1 This is not to say that a more global or sociopolitical analysis of terrorism is not called for—indeed, it is critical. For example, an adequate account of the origins of the 9/11 terrorism would need to unpack historical tensions between west and east, Islamic justifications for the jihad, America’s self-interested intervention in Middle Eastern affairs, domestic interests in both regions that are served by demonizing the other, and much else besides. But here I am acknowledging the legitimacy of a psychosocial level of analysis as a complement to these more collective considerations. Interestingly, individualizing the analysis as these authors do might also move it in the direction of recognizing some near-universal dimensions of human functioning at work in the violent assertion of power, and in response to it.

2 Of course, even my expanded social constructionist/discursive analysis still trades in psychosocial concepts, and in this sense, still frames the tensions undergirding the events of 9/11 in predominantly western terms. In doing so, I must acknowledge the risk of perpetuating the imposition of western perspectives on the “other,” in this case on Islamic fundamentalists presumably involved in the terrorism. Indeed, despite my attempts

References

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**Robert A. Neimeyer, Ph.D.,** holds a Dunavant University Professorship in the Department of Psychology, University of Memphis, in Memphis, Tennessee, where he also maintains an active private practice. Since completing his doctoral training in clinical psychology at the University of Nebraska in 1982, Neimeyer has published 18 books, including *Constructivism in Psychotherapy* and *Constructions of Disorder* (both with the American Psychological Association). The author of over 200 articles and book chapters, he is currently most interested in developing a narrative and constructivist framework for psychotherapy, with special relevance to the experience of loss. Editor of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, Neimeyer has been granted the Distinguished Research Award (1990), the Distinguished Teaching Award (1999), and the Eminent Faculty Award by University of Memphis, and has been elected a Fellow of Division 12 (Clinical Psychology) of the American Psychological Association (1997). Correspondence may be addressed to: Robert A. Neimeyer, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152-6400 or by email at: neimeyer@memphis.edu.