

Suicidality and Suicide Bombing Revisited: A Rejoinder to Merari

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Ariel Merari purports to demonstrate a tendency on the part of suicide bombers to be motivated by depression and suicidal tendencies. However, he misconstrues the present authors' critique of his work and misinterprets their research. By clarifying both issues, this article seeks to substantiate three claims: (1) Merari's sampling procedure precludes generalization; (2) interviewer and contextual effects probably bias his findings; (3) evidence challenges his inferences.

Focus on Method

We first want to apologize to Professor Merari for giving him the impression that our critique of his book consisted of jabs at his “scientific integrity.”¹ We sought to focus exclusively on methodological issues that compromise the validity of his findings. We deliberately did not personalize our disagreement by using the emotive language that he employs in his response. In this rejoinder, we continue focusing on methodological concerns rather than expressing outrage or engaging in personal assault.

Merari devotes ten pages to his critique, the first three of which assert that we constructed a “straw man” insofar as we claimed he identified depression and suicidality as the “main factors” motivating suicide bombers.² Actually, we were at pains to note that “Merari’s argument is neither monocausal nor exclusively psychological. He acknowledges that a host of social and political factors influence the propensity of individuals to engage in suicide attacks.”³ Thus, we do not hold the “false idea” that Merari “explained terrorist suicide by the assailants’ depression” and we did not “chose to ignore” his multivariate analysis.⁴ We merely selected one set of factors for special scrutiny because, to us, it lacks credibility and supporting evidence.

Our criticisms of Merari’s book were threefold. First, we argued that the nature of his sample precludes generalization. Second, we asserted that interviewer and contextual effects

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probably biased his findings. Third, we presented evidence challenging his inferences. Apparently, Merari failed to understand all three points, inadvertently changing our intended meaning to fit his misunderstandings.

Sampling

On one fact we agree: Merari's sample is tiny and unrepresentative. Can one therefore draw meaningful inferences from it? Merari's response is clear: yes and no. On the one hand, and to his credit, he cautions the reader not to be overly bold in generalizing his findings. On the other hand, because his book's original contribution is its psychological profiling of suicide bombers (the rest is based on secondary sources), Merari trumpets as its chief selling point the significance of his "direct psychological examination" that "enables a first-hand assessment of the personality characteristics and motivation of suicide bombers."⁵ He repeatedly heralds the "unprecedented" originality of the psychological component of his research.⁶ He devotes considerably more space to discussing the psychological factors that supposedly explain suicide bombing than to social, political, and economic factors. The very title of his book (*Driven to Death*; emphasis added) stresses the significance of his finding a disproportionate prevalence of psychopathology among respondents. Thus, although Merari nowhere claims that depression and suicidality are the *main* factors underlying suicide bombing, he does assert that they are *significant* factors, and it is the latter inference that concerns us because the nature of his sample does not allow it. An alternative approach to dealing with a tiny and unrepresentative sample involves taking a page from any first-year undergraduate statistics textbook and stating that no confirmatory inferences at all can be drawn from a sample such as Merari's.⁷ It is, we think, the appropriately modest and responsible approach.

Merari also mentions our supposed "complaint that a random sample was not used" in his research.⁸ We made no such complaint. We did write, "even if one accepts that all 15 of Merari's respondents were suicide bombers [which they were not—R.B. and B.A.], it is unclear that they are representative of *completed* suicide bombers [emphasis added—R.B. and B.A.]."⁹ Our point was about the inadmissibility of generalizations based on his sample. It was not a recommendation for improving his research design. We understand even without Merari's clarification that one cannot interview dead people.

Bias

We identified five potential sources of bias in Merari's inferences, all of which he dismisses.

1. *Merari may have been inclined to overdiagnose depression and suicidality.* In his reply to our critique, Merari denies the existence of a longstanding inclination on his part to suspect that psychopathology drives suicide bombers. Yet he writes, "In an early article (Merari, 1990, p. 206), I suggested that suicide terrorism is undertaken by people who 'wish to die for personal reasons.' . . . My suggestion was clearly speculative."¹⁰ We checked, and found that he reports his 1990 article accurately. We conclude that Merari developed a pet theory about the relationship between depression/suicidality and suicide bombing more than two decades ago, long before he had any supporting evidence.

We discovered trace evidence of Merari's apparent inclination to overdiagnosis depression and suicidality in his idiosyncratic interpretation of card 3BM of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)¹¹ (which he fails to defend) and in his review of Nasra Hassan's research. She found three main personality types among the suicide

bombers whose families she interviewed. However, when Merari offered extended examples in his book of personality types drawn from her sample, they were *all* introverted and possibly depressed types, suggesting that Merari emphasized data confirming his pet theory over those that did not. (In his reply to our critique of his book, Merari asserts that Hassan “did not try to assess the suicides’ personalities” in her interviews. However, that is precisely what she did. She characterized some suicides as sociable extroverts, some as leaders, and others as introverts. Merari, too, assessed the suicides’ personalities using Hassan’s data although he now denies it. Specifically, he devoted all of chapter 4 of his book to “extract[ing] from [Hassan’s] interviews information on factors that might influence readiness to carry out a suicide attack . . . [including] psychopathology.”¹²)

2. *The fact that Merari’s respondents were political prisoners serving life sentences in Israeli jails may have led them to exhibit more depression and suicidality than one would find outside the prison system.* As we noted, psychiatrists investigating political prisoners in Germany detected just such a tendency. Merari claims that by “controlling for the effect of incarceration” he eliminated this possibility.¹³ However, his control was faulty. Members of his experimental group received life sentences for attempted suicide bombing. Members of his control group were incarcerated for “a variety of security-related offences,”¹⁴ including relatively minor offenses that would have involved lighter sentences. “Incarceration” is therefore not an adequate control variable. Severity of sentence is; we suppose that, on average, prisoners’ psychological reaction to, say, a five-year sentence differs from their reaction to a life sentence. Merari in fact acknowledges that, as far as his experimental group is concerned, “incarceration may affect their responses in psychological interviews and tests. Furthermore, their responses may be skewed by their desire to impress the interviewers favorably.”¹⁵ Yet he proceeds to take his interviews and tests at face value.
3. *At least six of Merari’s fifteen would-be suicide bombers lacked the resolve to complete their suicide mission.* Merari acknowledges this fact but fails to understand its implication: Depression in as many as 40 percent of his respondents may have been due to their disappointing their organizational sponsor, the Palestinian public, and themselves, not to a preexisting psychological condition, as Merari asserts. It is an elementary statistical principle that correlation is not causality.¹⁶ When other plausible explanatory factors are correlated with the original variables and intervene between them, the original correlation (in this case, between a psychological condition and engaging in a suicide attack) may be spurious.
4. *Merari’s interviews and tests were conducted by authority figures who respondents likely viewed as part of the coercive apparatus of an Israeli penal institution, perhaps leading them to respond less than candidly.* The tendency of research subjects to react to the presence and characteristics of researchers and research instruments independently of an experimental stimulus or a questionnaire item in a survey is not exactly news. Acknowledged and explicitly dealt with in various ways in all of the social sciences since at least 1958,¹⁷ the problem of “reactivity” is standard fare in sociology, industrial psychology, and organizational behavior textbooks.¹⁸

We found evidence of reactivity in the research that Merari reported. In particular, he had to scrap the results of the California Psychological Inventory (CPI) he administered because 36 percent of his respondents gave clearly invalid answers. Despite such a clear warning that reactivity contaminated his findings, he proceeded to base his psychological assessment on projective tests (Rorschach and TAT) that many psychologists regard as unreliable and invalid instruments that were never intended for formal diagnosis. By highlighting the “importance of the projective techniques

- used by the study's authors,"¹⁹ Merari admits that he relied on highly problematic research instruments that maximize researchers' interpretive leeway. Merari does not defend himself against such damaging criticism because, we suspect, he cannot.
5. *Insofar as at least some of the interviewers were affiliated with the Israeli defense establishment, they may have had an unconscious political interest in coming up with findings that depoliticize and delegitimize the Palestinian national movement.* Merari becomes petulant at our suggesting this possibility:

Throughout the present author's academic career he has never let political positions influence his scientific integrity. This insinuation is particularly preposterous because Araj himself, a Palestinian, reports in this same article on a study in which he assessed the existence of depression among Palestinian suicide bombers, without using any objective psychological tests. It seems that in his view his scientific objectivity is beyond doubt, but Israeli psychologists must always be treated with suspicion. And what about Brym? Does he not have political opinions that might affect his research?²⁰

We wish to allay Merari's suspicion that we are victimizing him and his research team because of their citizenship. *All* social scientists are victims of their political and other values, a problem Max Weber first wrote about in 1904:

There is no absolutely "objective" scientific analysis of . . . "social phenomena" independent of special and "one-sided" viewpoints according to which—expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously—they are selected, analyzed and organized for expository purposes.²¹

The question is, what do we do about this uncomfortable reality?

One possibility, apparently favored by Merari, is to deny it and hide behind shibboleths insisting on the "scientific" and "objective" character of largely unreflective research conducted by people with appropriate certification that supposedly gives them privileged access to the truth. Another possibility, which we favor, is to acknowledge Weber's dilemma, try our best to eliminate bias, publicize our data and analyses, leave ourselves open to the sometimes biting scrutiny of the community of social scientists, and live with the intersubjective (never "objective") consensus that emerges from the ensuing debate.²² We strongly believe that only the latter approach—not appeals to authority, which are the very antithesis of the scientific mindset²³—entitles researchers to call their work scientific.

Our Research

Merari criticizes the study that we conducted, which was based on a 25 percent random sample of immediate family members and close friends of Second Intifada suicide bombers.

As we emphasized and as Merari repeats, we are not accredited clinical psychologists and did not use a battery of standard psychological tests to assess our respondents formally. However, we never claimed to be making a formal psychological assessment of our respondents. We merely asked respondents

a series of questions about the suicide bomber's personality, whether s/he suffered any social, emotional or financial crisis, and so on . . . to analyze the

degree to which psychological stressors affected each bomber's state of mind in the year preceding his or her attack.²⁴

Specifically, we wanted to know if the bombers

manifested, in the year before their attack, (1) . . . chronic feelings of sadness, repeated tearfulness, and diminished pleasure in normal activities or personal crisis that *could* have led to depression (including a deep-seated desire for revenge, inability to achieve highly valued goals, and wrenching goal conflict); or (2) no outward sign . . . or personal crisis that *could* have led to depression.²⁵

Contrary to what Merari writes,²⁶ our interviews did not total 90 minutes per suicide bomber family. We interviewed two to four family members and close friends of each suicide bomber in our sample. Thus, total interview time per suicide bomber was about 180 to 360 minutes.²⁷ Despite these in-depth, semi-structured, independent interviews, we were careful not to diagnose depression at all—just behavior that *could* have led to depression. Since we are accredited sociologists, we hope Merari can allow that we are entitled to conduct a survey of this sort, which resembles the survey from which Hassan and Merari felt perfectly comfortable drawing inferences similar to ours.

Merari also scores us for not having a control group that would allow us to compare (1) the percentage of respondents who manifested signs indicating they might be depressed with (2) the percentage of people in the corresponding population who might be depressed. Again true. However, what we did have were the results of a sample survey conducted by Israeli medical researchers giving us a measure of the prevalence of depression in Israel's Palestinian population: 24.9 percent, compared to 24 percent of the suicide bombers in our sample who could have been depressed. Merari found that 53 percent of would-be suicide bombers in his sample were depressed, but we have no confidence in his finding because of the sampling and bias issues raised earlier.

Finally, Merari complains that we took three quotations out of context when we wrote the following about the Hassan/Merari study:

Nasra Hassan's interviews with family members of nearly all Palestinian suicide bombers before the Second Intifada discovered that "the portrait of the suicide bomber . . . may not be all that exceptional in the context of Palestinian society at the time," "all suicides came from typical Palestinian families," and "no single personality type emerged" from her analysis.²⁸

Merari writes that our quotations "implied that the families were ordinary and normal in all respects."²⁹ However, "in all respects" is entirely his invention. In fact, we ourselves showed that the suicide bombers in our study "*differed* from the Palestinian population in terms of their gender, age structure, and marital and employment status" but not in terms of economic status, occupational distribution for non-students, and geographical distribution.³⁰ Hassan and Merari showed that the suicide bombers in their study were similar to the Palestinian population in terms of the proportion who had thrown stones at Israeli forces and settlers in the occupied territories, delivered supplies to organizational activists, were shot at by Israelis, suffered physical assault by Israelis, and came from large families. Merari also writes that "in quoting the five words 'no single personality type emerged' Brym and Araj try to create the impression that the [Hassan/Merari] families' study found that the suicides had no distinctive personality characteristics."³¹ We marvel at Merari's claim to know what

impression we were trying to create; actually, all we meant by “no single personality type emerged” is, well, that no single personality type emerged. Specifically, as Merari wrote, “fifteen . . . were described by their families as introverted, loners, quiet, non-gregarious, and inhibited, nine . . . were depicted as leader types, and three . . . as sociable extroverts.”³² By our count, this amounts to three personality types.

We acknowledge two errors in our critique. In citing the members of Merari’s research team, we misspelled Giora Zakin’s first name “Gora” and Jonathan Figchel’s surname “Fiugel.” We are grateful to Merari for bringing these typos to our attention (in personal correspondence) and apologize for them.

How Can We Advance the Study of Suicide Bombers’ Motivations?

Our debate with Merari centers on the question of which imperfect methodology can provide a more accurate understanding of suicide bombers’ motivations. Merari recommends interviewing a tiny, unrepresentative, convenience sample of would-be bombers using tests of questionable value in a prison setting that is likely to compromise the validity of respondents’ statements. We recommend in-home, in-depth, semi-structured, independent interviews of clusters of people who were intimately acquainted with the bombers and represent a larger, random sample of them, acknowledging that such respondents may wish to present the bombers in a positive light and be unaware of the bombers’ inner turmoil.

In our opinion, Merari’s characterization of his approach as “objective” and ours as “subjective” is completely misleading. The degree to which knowledge approaches an “objective” standard (or as we prefer to put it, an intersubjective consensus) depends less on the researchers’ methods and biases than on the scrutiny of the research community. The important issue is which method produces results that offer the best opportunities for checks on reliability and validity. The scientific community will in due course reject knowledge produced by accredited professionals using standardized procedures if they find that the research rests on shaky foundations. It will accept knowledge produced idiosyncratically by biased researchers if reliability and validity checks pan out.³³ American novelist Kurt Vonnegut put the latter case in the right perspective when he wrote in one of his essays that the most beautiful marigold he ever saw was growing in a bucket of cat manure.

We regard Merari’s method as relatively impervious to checks on reliability and validity because all that seems to matter to him are the interpretations of like-minded psychologists, even if (perhaps especially if) they are willing to ignore problems with sampling procedures, the quality of measurement instruments, and reactivity. In contrast, we sought to validate our data by conducting multiple, independent interviews concerning each suicide bomber and, when necessary, checking interviews against external documentary sources, both published and unpublished. Merari notes we could have gone farther and invited an outside, trained researcher to code our data independently. He is right. Therefore, in the interest of advancing knowledge about the motivations of suicide bombers, we invite him and his research associates to discuss with us the possibility of independently coding our digitally recorded interviews. They can then see if they reach similar conclusions about our data and submit the results for publication in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

Notes

1. Ariel Merari, “Studying Suicide Bombers: A Response to Brym and Araj’s Critique,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35(6) (2012), p. 446.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

3. Robert J. Brym and Bader Araj, “Are Suicide Bombers Suicidal?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35(6) (2012), p. 433.

4. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," p. 451.
5. Ariel Merari, *Driven to Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), front cover flap.
6. For example, *ibid.*, p. 7.
7. For example, David S. Moore, *The Basic Practice of Statistics* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1995), pp. 178 ff.
8. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," p. 448.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 447.
11. Brym and Araj, "Are Suicide Bombers Suicidal?" fn. 18, p. 440.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 85. Merari may mean that neither Hassan nor he attempted a *formal* psychological diagnosis based on Hassan's data, but it was never our contention that they did.
13. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," p. 449.
14. Merari, *Driven to Death*, p. 107.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
16. For example, Moore, *The Basic Practice of Statistics*; *ibid.*
17. Henry A. Landsberger, *Hawthorne Revisited. Management and the Worker: Its Critics, and Developments in Human Relations Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958).
18. For example, Robert J. Brym and John Lie, *Sociology: Pop Culture to Social Structure*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013), p. 21.
19. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," pp. 449–450.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 450.
21. Max Weber, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," in *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, trans. (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949 [1904]), p. 72. Available at <http://archive.org/stream/maxweberonmethod00webe#page/n3/mode/2up> (accessed 10 June 2012).
22. Weber concurs: "Evaluative ideas" inform all research, so "the 'objectivity' of the social sciences depends . . . on the fact that empirical data are always related to these evaluative ideas. . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 111.
23. "What do you say of the leading philosophers here to whom I have offered a thousand times of my own accord to show my studies, but who . . . have never consented to look at the planets, or moon, or telescope?" wrote Galileo to Kepler in 1610. "How you would laugh if you heard what things the first philosopher of the faculty at Pisa brought against me in the presence of the Grand Duke. He tried hard with logical arguments, as if with magical incantations, to tear down and argue the new planets out of heaven!" Quoted in Lewis S. Feuer, *The Scientific Intellectual: The Psychological and Sociological Origins of Modern Science* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 162.
24. Brym and Araj, "Are Suicide Bombers Suicidal?" p. 436.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 437, emphasis added.
26. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," p. 451.
27. For methodological details, see Bader Araj, "The Motivations of Palestinian Suicide Bombers in the Second Intifada (2000–05)," *Canadian Review of Sociology* 49(3) (2012), 211–232.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
29. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," p. 453.
30. Brym and Araj, "Are Suicide Bombers Suicidal?" p. 438, emphasis added.
31. Merari, "Studying Suicide Bombers," p. 453.
32. Merari, *Driven to Death*, p. 95.
33. For example, in the 1940s, pioneering American sexologist Alfred Kinsey violated a slew of basic sampling, questionnaire-design, interviewing, and statistical principles in single-mindedly developing the idea that the sexual behavior of Americans is highly diverse. Yet more than 750 subsequent surveys of Americans' sexual behavior conducted by the end of the twentieth century confirmed the accuracy of his basic findings, which the scientific community now considers valid. Julia Ericksen, "With Enough Cases, Why Do You Need Statistics? Revisiting Kinsey's Methodology," *Journal of Sex Research* 35(2) (1998), pp. 132–140.