# That suicide bomber was the boy next door

The uncomfortable truth is that bombers and war criminals might not be so different from the rest of us – we are all vulnerable to peer pressure and groupthink.

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Many people believe in monsters. It is reassuring to imagine that only a monster would blow himself up on a crowded bus, or send millions to their death in Nazi death camps, or wave goodbye to his family each morning before a nine-to-five shift of torturing prisoners of conscience. And yet, the uncomfortable truth is that suicide bombers and war criminals might not be so different from the rest of us.

*The Power of Others*, a new book by the journalist Michael Bond, suggests that human sociability might hold the answer to why ordinary people do extraordinary things – whether these are acts of heroism or atrocities. We are all, he believes, much more vulnerable to peer pressure and groupthink than we imagine.

“People will often adopt the view of the majority, even when it is patently wrong,” he writes. An experiment conducted in the 1950s at the University of California asked students to sit a test in which they had to agree or disagree with a number of improbable statements such as: “Male babies have an average life expectancy of 25 years.” While the students answered sensibly under normal conditions, when other students told them they’d sat the exam earlier and answered in a certain way they could be tricked into agreeing with nonsensical statements.

So what does this have to do with those who commit atrocities? Perhaps our moral judgement is also easily influenced by others. This is the conclusion drawn from the notorious Stanford prison experiment. In 1971 the Stanford University psychologist Philip Zimbardo recruited 24 male students for a two-week role play in which half would be guards and the rest prisoners in a makeshift jail. The experiment was called off after six days as the “guards” grew ever more tyrannical, devising cruel ways to torture and humiliate their detainees.

“I think you can turn almost anybody into a terrorist, if the conditions are right,” Amali, a Sri Lankan psychologist who studies Tamil Tiger suicide bombers, tells Bond. It’s a depressing thought but research into the backgrounds of 34 Palestinian suicide bombers conducted by the psychologist Ariel Merari could support this view. Basing his study on interviews with their friends and relatives, Merari found that none of the 34 men showed signs of psychological disorder, had suffered a recent trauma or had a history of criminal behaviour. They came from a range of social and educational backgrounds and not all were religiously devout.

In a later study, he found that the personality of suicide bombers made them especially open to outside influence: they were either social misfits seeking acceptance, or impulsive and emotionally unstable. Manipulative recruiters know how to take advantage of the vulnerable and their job is easier in militant societies such as Gaza – Bond adds – where “martyrs” are publicly venerated.

There are problems with Merari’s research: a sample size of just 34 people is hardly ideal, nor is relying on friends of terrorists to provide accurate information on their mental state or personality. Yet his focus on how social pressures can turn “ordinary” people into murderers offers an interesting perspective. It suggests that we should be wary of the glorification of martyrdom in the Arab spring states of Libya, Egypt and Syria. And perhaps we need to try harder to understand why some people are instinctive misfits,while others are all too willing to follow the crowd.