

Terrorism's Fear: Perceived Personal and National Threats

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Abstract—Terrorism represents an unexpected and unwanted change which challenges one's social identity. We carried out a study to explore the demographic variables' role on the perception of personal and national threat, and to investigate the effects of perceived terrorist threat on people's ways of life, moods, opinions and hopes. 313 residents of Palermo (Italy) were interviewed. The results pointed out that the fear of terrorism affects three areas: the cognitive, the emotional and the behavioural one.

Keywords—Disaster, national threat, personal threat, terrorism.

I. INTRODUCTION

TERRORISM, however defined, has always challenged the stability of societies and the people's peace of mind. In the modern era the impact of terrorism – that is its ability to terrorize – is not limited to the specific locales or regions where the terrorists strike. In the age of television, the Internet, satellite communications, and global news coverage, graphic images of terrorist incidents are broadcast instantaneously into the homes of hundreds of millions of people. Terrorist groups understand the power of these images and they manipulate them to their advantage as much as they can [1].

Terrorism is one of the major topics of disaster psychology. When a social system hasn't been able to meet the needs of its members, a disaster can occur [2]. When a person has to face a disaster they have to deal with a feeling of helplessness caused by its unmanageable nature. However, the insecurity such event creates is likely to foster the sense of community and social cohesion. As with other disasters, terrorism represents an unexpected and unwanted change which challenges one's social identity because some certainties (material, affective, symbolic) come under threat.

Terrorism is a form of politically motivated violence. Terrorists operate in an illegal and secretive way; their aim is to frighten and bewilder people. The main difference between

terrorism and other forms of political violence, such as war and assassination, is its symbolic meaning [3].

Although in 1933 useful articles on terrorism appeared in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, it is in the 1960s that academics have been interested on the subject, when terrorist activity increased in frequency and took “novel dimensions”, creating a new “mode of conflict” [4]. After the September 11, 2001 the focus of researches' attention has turned into non-state terrorism. Despite the origin of the term terrorism in reference to state terror, and despite the pre-eminence of state terror in relation to non-state terror, terrorism today is usually understood to mean non-state terrorism, which includes the idea of violence against non-combatants, especially women and children [5]. Initially the research on terrorism has focused more on the terrorist's personality and the motivations to make attacks, then it has concerned the perception of terrorist threat [6]. New terrorism doesn't target a specific enemy; it is a demonstrative act, intended to terrorize people with the threat of violence and to lead them to distrust institutions. In present-day society, which is characterized by the globalisation of risks and fear [7] [8], terrorism could be considered a “media event” [9]. The new terrorism retains the main characteristic: having an emotional impact on people. Mass media amplifies its effects, producing distrust in one's personal relationships and a pervasive anxiety in people's every day life.

Our study concerns the Sicilian context, in which traditionally the fear for one's own life was linked to the threats of attacks from local criminal organisation, such as “Cosa Nostra”.

On the basis of the reviewed literature, the aims of this study were to investigate the perception of personal and national threats within different demographic groups, and to examine the effects of perceived terrorist threat on people's ways of life, moods, opinions and hopes.

II. HYPOTHESES

We use the data of this study to test the following hypotheses:

1. as Sicily has never been hit by terrorist attacks, we expect that the perceived national threat is bigger than the personal one;

Manuscript received March 25, 2008.

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2. on the basis of past findings [10], we expect that women feel more personally threatened by terrorism than men;

3. as a result of media bombardment [11], we assume that perceived terrorist threat causes changes on people's lifestyle and behaviour.

III. METHOD

A. Participants

313 participants were randomly selected from people, aged 18 or over, who live in three sicilian cities (Palermo, Catania, Enna). The sample included 159 men and 154 women. The mean age was 39.5 years old with SD of 15.01.

The participants were met in public places, such as public offices, and in the street.

B. Measures

We used the interview questionnaire developed by Huddy, Feldman, Capelos and Provost [10] at the Department of Political Sciences of New York University. It has been translated and adapted for the social and cultural conditions in which it was administered. The questionnaire consists of 31 closed-ended items. It includes yes-no and multiple-choice questions (*Yes, No, I don't know*) and some items rated on a three-point scale (*Better, Worse, The same*). These items allowed us to assess a perceived personal and national threat both in individual (behavioural, cognitive and emotional changes) and demographic terms (i.e. according to age, gender, educational background, occupation, marital status), religion and political orientation.

C. Data Analysis

From the data, we have been able to identify two factors. The first measured a personal threat, the second a national threat. An explorative factor analysis was carried out to uncover the underlying structure, using oblique rotation. It confirmed that the two factors are different but correlated; the correlation value between national and personal threat was high ($r = .71$).

The Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the questionnaire's reliability. Internal consistency reliability for this questionnaire was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .67). All the variables have been defined as dummies, ranging from 0 to 1.

A linear regression analysis was carried out using SPSS system, with minimum alphas of .05.

IV. RESULTS

According to hypothesis 1, from data analysis came out that the majority of respondents (73,49%) believe a terrorist attack against Italy (national threat) is probable in the near future. 34,82% of participants believe they are likely to be victims themselves or their relatives will be victims of a terrorist attack (personal threat). In contrast to the findings about a threat's impact, which revealed that people perceive a high risk of terrorist attacks at both an individual and a national

level, only 2,56% of respondents stated they use airmail less because of the fear of anthrax. 15,34% of the sample reported having changed some habits and 18,85% cancelled a journey.

The consequences of a perceived threat's had considerable effect on people's mood: 30,99% of respondents have felt worried or apprehensive at work due to a terrorist attack. A perceived threat has a significant effect on an emotional and

TABLE I
 PREDICTORS OF NATIONAL AND PERSONAL THREAT

	National threat	Personal threat
Gender	-.16* (.00)	-.14** (.01)
Age	-.02 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Educational background	.04* (.02)	.03 (.01)
Marital status	.02 (.01)	.01* (.02)
Children	.03 (.01)	.01* (.02)
Occupation – Employed	.09* (.02)	.07** (.02)
Occupation – Retired	.08** (.02)	.07* (.03)
Occupation – Unemployed	.01 (.00)	.03 (.01)
Religion	-.00 (.02)	.05* (.02)
Political orientation	.07 (.03)	-.02* (.04)
R ²	.12	.08

Notes:

Standard errors are showed near the regression coefficients.

Each variable has been codified on a scale 0-1: as regard the variables "national threat" and "personal threat" 0 stand for small threat, 1 stand for great threat; "gender" is a dummy variable (0 stand for female, 1 stand for male); as regards the variable "age" we have been considered ranges of ten years; "political orientation" is a dummy variable (0 stand for middle-right, 1 stand for middle-left); "educational background" is a dummy variable (1 stand for certificate or degree, 0 stand for other); "marital status" is a dummy variable (1 stand for married, 0 stand for other); "children" is a dummy variable (1 stand for at least one child, 0 stand for no child); "occupation" is a dummy variable (1 stand for employed, 0 stand for no); religion is a dummy variable (1 stand for yes, 0 stand for no).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

cognitive level, not on a behavioural one.

We have explored the relationship between the demographic variables and the dependent variables: "personal threat" and "national threat".

Table I shows the results of a linear regression analyses in which the measures have been regressed against the two predictors (personal threat and national threat).

The findings indicated that a perceived threat has been distributed across our sample in different degrees, so it has been possible to identify some "risk categories".

As other researchers pointed out, women feel more threatened at both an individual and a national level by a terrorist attack (hypothesis 2). Educational background has shown to have a significant effect on the perception of a national threat: the higher level of an individual's education, the greater the worry about a terrorist attack on Italy. This result is consistent with the Information Theories [11] which assume that a large amount of data produces a loss of information in a communicating system. Therefore, media

bombardment seems to have an effect on the perception of a threat.

Considering “personal threat” and “national threat” as independent variables, we investigated their impact on the assessment of economic conditions at an individual and national level. We have also examined the influence of demographic variables’ on the assessment of economic conditions. Data analysis has indicated that a perceived national threat influences the assessment of future personal and national economic conditions. Individuals who report greater feelings of threat, do not expect any improvement in financial conditions for themselves nor for Italy, not only in the near future, but also in the next five years.

We have also found that those who are concerned about national threat have changed some habits and feel confused and anxious in their everyday life. In contrast, those who worry about a personal threat are more likely to have avoided some journey and have reported an emotional impact on their mood and concentration whilst studying or working. This finding is different from that which Huddy *et al.* [10] found out, when administering their questionnaire in the USA. These researchers have confirmed their assumption that the personal threat influences individual behaviour while the national one affects people’s lives mostly on an emotional and cognitive level. Data emerging from our research seems to indicate that a perceived national threat has become so influential over an individual’s lifestyle and behaviour as a result of media bombardment (according to hypothesis 3).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The sense of insecurity is associated with low self-esteem and leads to the breakdown of social relationships and withdrawal. Furthermore, the sense of insecurity fosters hostility and increases the chance of a dogmatic mind-set. Consequently, change becomes difficult and fear of strangers increases. It’s comfortable to have faith in absolute beliefs: it provides an illusion of certainty about how to behave.

Terrorism is a threat to all who identify with the group targeted. The initial result of an attack is always increased identification – increased cohesion – in the group attacked [5].

As a result of globalization, space-time compression has created a sense of a continuous present, where each moment is compressed, and it’s possible to traverse any distance immediately. Baudrillard [12] has called this experience «hyperreality» to signify that it has become difficult to differentiate between existing reality and virtual reality.

The findings of our research lead us to a more accurate assessment of risk factors, in which the concept of risk means that a situation could eventually become problematic. The fear of terrorist attacks makes people disheartened about the economic situation; a climate of terror increases negative attitudes and reduces expectations of the future. The idea of an economic situation’s decline and imminent unemployment spreads. Furthermore, the fear of terrorism affects individual’s behaviour, limiting people’s everyday life as they give up a

journey or reduce the use of airmail. The perception of the risk of war or a terrorist attack also affects mood and people’s efficiency at work, and lastly quality of life [5].

Future implications should lead us to reduce the harmful effects of unfounded fears and heightened states of alarm, highlighting a community’s psychosocial resilience. So the focus of the research and intervention should be on the promotion of health.

TABLE II
 PREDICTORS OF NATIONAL ECONOMIC CONDITION’S ASSESSMENT

	Prediction for next year	Prediction for next 5 years
Personal threat	.01 (.05)	.08 (.04)
National threat	.31** (.04)	.19* (.05)
Gender	.06 (.02)	.10 (.03)
Age	-.03 (.02)	.02 (.01)
Educational background	.06 (.04)	.02 (.02)
Marital status	.04* (.02)	.02 (.01)
Children	.05 (.02)	.03** (.04)
Occupation – Employed	.07 (.03)	.05* (.01)
Occupation – Retired	.02 (.01)	.02 (.02)
Occupation – Unemployed	.07** (.03)	.04 (.02)
Religion	.04 (.01)	.08** (.04)
Political orientation	.05* (.02)	.01 (.02)
R ²	.07	.07

Notes:

Standard error are showed near the regression coefficients.

Each variable has been codified on a scale 0-1: as regard the variables “prediction for next year” and “prediction for next 5 years”, 0 stand for better conditions, 1 stand for worse conditions; as regard the variables “national threat” and “personal threat” 0 stand for small threat 1 stand for great threat; “gender” is a dummy variable (0 stand for female, 1 stand for male); as regards the variable “age” we have been considered ranges of ten years; “political orientation” is a dummy variable (0 stand for middle-right, 1 stand for middle-left); “educational background” is a dummy variable (1 stand for certificate or degree, 0 stand for other); “marital status” is a dummy variable (1 stand for married, 0 stand for other); “children” is a dummy variable (1 stand for at least one child, 0 stand for no child); “occupation” is a dummy variable (1 stand for employed, 0 stand for no); religion is a dummy variable (1 stand for yes, 0 stand for no).

*p<.05, **p<.01

Improving cognitive control becomes possible by understanding the perception of a real threat and adopting an appropriate method of communication. In order to correct existing distortions and encourage more realistic perceptions of risk, it is necessary to make a community conscious of the genuine risks and its own available resources, rather than providing more information [13]. A terrorist attack is perceived as more unmanageable and out of control than other events. As regards to these events, people develop a learned powerlessness that increases their sense of insecurity and intensifies their perception of the threat. From this point of view, empowering individuals is necessary to develop a sense of control over situations and events in which they feel overwhelmed. Empowerment strategies aim to maximize the communities’ available resources and to improve the

individuals' skills, increasing their self-esteem and enabling them to manage better their own lives. It's important that people recognize in themselves the ability to take control of their own lives, taking – or getting back – an active role in the community.

As with the sense of insecurity, the fear of terrorist attack leads to withdrawal and distrust towards others, as well as enhancing individuals' abilities it's necessary to strengthen social networks and the different forms of social support. Social support plays a defensive role, and regardless of stressful events, has a positive effect on an individual's well-being. Furthermore, during a crisis, social support works as a buffer, limiting stress. Psychologists should promote the primary social network, operating as invisible supporters of informal networks [14].

To allow more effective social participation and to improve the efficacy of carrying out changes, they should also enable cooperation by integrating all the community's resources (human, social, political and economic).

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