Policy Preference in Response to Terrorism

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CHAPTER 7

Policy Preference in Response to Terrorism: The Role of Emotions, Attributions, and Appraisals

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In the wake of terrorist attacks, such as those of September 11, 2001, people experience diverse reactions that influence subsequent behaviors and preferences for policies intended to thwart future terrorism. Perhaps not surprisingly, much literature is devoted to understanding the detrimental consequences terrorism has on mental health, particularly among people directly impacted by the attacks. Increased rates of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder have been well documented following acts of terrorism in the United States, including those of 9/11 (e.g., Galea et al., 2002; Schlenger et al., 2002) and the Oklahoma City bombing (North, 2010). Many U.S. citizens reported feeling strong emotions following acts of terrorism (Saad, 2001 as cited in Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). People expressed anger toward those who were responsible for the attacks, fear that more attacks could occur, uncertainty concerning America's ability to manage this new terrorist threat, and sadness for the enormous loss of life to family members, friends, and fellow Americans.

The personal impact felt by the U.S. populace translated into attitudinal and behavioral changes in the aftermath of 9/11. Americans became more unified, and experienced increased national pride (Smith, Rasinski, & Toce, 2001). Time spent volunteering (Traugott et al., 2002), blood donations (Linden, Davey, & Burch, 2002), and American flag displays (Skitka, 2005) all increased. There is evidence that political attitudes became more conservative (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Nail & McGregor, 2009). For example, soon after 9/11, terrorism-related distress—defined as being upset by reminders of the attacks, having disturbing memories, and feelings of ongoing threat—was associated with a desire for revenge towards terrorists (i.e., aggressive antiterrorism policy preferences; Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004).

The purpose of the current chapter is to provide a social-psychological examination of the cognitive and emotional processes affecting political decision-making in response to terrorism, particularly endorsements of disparate antiterrorism policies. This chapter focuses on how attributions elicit specific emotions (i.e., what/whom one believes caused an event to occur) and appraisals (i.e., the perceived ability to cope with an event) following terrorist actions. Subsequently, the consequences of experiencing these specific negative emotions on policy preferences is discussed, specifically, the link between anger, fear, and sadness on support for either aggressive (e.g., war) or preventative (e.g., increasing airport security) antiterrorism policies is detailed.

AFFECT AS UNDIFFERENTIATED EMOTION

Early conceptualizations of emotion focused on global feelings, or affect, stratified by valence (i.e., positive vs. negative feelings; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). The valence of an affective state can influence how people interpret a situation (e.g., as risky or threatening) and how they decide to handle it, a process known as an "affective heuristic" (Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Wyer & Carlston, 1979). For example, participants in a bad mood report lower life satisfaction than those in a good mood (Schwarz & Clore, 1983). More germane to the current purposes, negative affect increases the tendency to perceive risks in the environment, while positive affective decreases it (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; Johnson & Tversky, 1983).

Accordingly, negative affect arising from terrorist threats leads people to overestimate the risk of future attacks, and increases overly cautious reactions to terrorism, such as recommending people regularly check their mail for anthrax (Sunstein, 2003). Negative affect also appears to be associated with support for hawkish foreign policy. For example, negative affect in response to terrorist attacks relates to increased support for military retaliation to terrorism, sending troops but not aid to the Sudan, and increased military spending in Iraq (Gadarian, 2010).

Although this research demonstrates a relationship between affect and preference for specific antiterror policies, it does not account for cognitive evaluations of the threat associated with terrorism, nor does it examine the effects of specific emotions on policy preferences in response to terrorist acts. Specific emotions, as opposed to general affect, are associated with specific responses (called "action tendencies;" discussed below) that influence how people react to emotion provoking situations (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Thus, in order to predict support for aggressive versus preventative antiterrorism policies, it is important to differentiate the specific negative emotions people experience.

ATTRIBUTIONS AND APPRAISALS PROMPT EMOTIONS

Emotions are elicited from a combination of external stimuli, internal understanding, and evaluation of the environment. Emotions enhance survival by regulating assessments of risk or gain, preparing physically for fight or flight, and conveying internal states to friends or foes. Emotions are composed of bodily sensations, arousal, affect, and outward expression (Schwarz & Clore, 1996, as cited in Higgins & Kruglanski, 1996). Emotions also accompany judgments about the cause of events, called "attributions" (Weiner, 1985), and perceived implications of environmental circumstances for the individual, called "appraisals" (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Two prominent theories, attribution theory (e.g., Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988) and appraisal theory (e.g., Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Lerner & Keltner, 2000;), describe the manner in which attributions and appraisals relate to particular emotions, and beget specific "action tendencies," or tendencies to either approach and aggress, or to avoid and flee (Frijda, 1986).

Attributions

People desire a sense of control over their environment, which leads them to search for the causes of circumstances (White, 1959). This is more likely to occur when a situation seems threatening or uncertain (Brader, 2006; Marcus, Neuman, & Mackuen, 2000; Schwarz, 1990). Attribution theorists explore three dimensions of judgment of the cause of behavior: internal vs. external attributions, controllable vs. uncontrollable attributions, and stable vs. unstable attributions. *Internal* attributions are beliefs that an action is self-motivated by the actor, while external attributions are beliefs that the cause of behavior is driven by the environment or situation in which the actor finds himself/herself. *Controllable* attributions refer to attributions concerning whether or not a person (be it the self or another) is in control of their actions. Attributions of *stability* suggest that a person's actions are based on unchangeable traits, while attributions of instability suggest that a person's behavior may change, or be changed over time. When people make internal attributions for the harmful behavior of others, they tend to experience anger and punish transgressors, whereas situational attributions for other's behavior are related to sympathy and a desire to help victims of circumstance (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987; Weiner, 1993).

Attribution theory has implications for terrorism policy preference. People harbor "hedonic biases," the tendency to make situational attributions for harmful in-group behavior (i.e., external, uncontrollable attributions), and dispositional attributions for harmful out-group behavior (i.e. internal, controllable attributions; Harvey & Weary, 1981; Kunda, 1990; Ross, 1977; Weiner, 1985). For example, political conservatism was associated with fewer attributions that the policies and actions of the United States provoked the attacks of September 11 (Sahar, 2008),

and more forgiving attributions for United States Marines accused of killing Iraqi civilians (Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010). Overall, attribution theory demonstrates that people attempt to assess the underlying causes of behavior and process information in ways that fit their expectations or motives.

Appraisals

While attributions concern a person's beliefs about the cause of an event, appraisals are a person's beliefs about their ability to cope with the event. Appraisals are important predictors of emotional reactions, and may mediate the relationship between attributions and emotional reactions (Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993). The appraisal-tendency theory of emotion suggests emotions are composed of six dimensions (e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Smith & Lazarus, 1990): *certainty* refers to how sure one is about a particular situation, *pleasantness* refers simply to whether the emotion is positive or negative (a dimension akin to affective states), *attentional activity* refers to the level of attention associated with an emotional state, *anticipated effort* refers to the amount of effort a person needs to devote to a situation, *control* refers to the extent to which a person feels they have control over a situation, and *responsibility* refers to the extent to which a person feels responsible for a situation. These dimensions can apply to the self or to others, although appraisal-tendency theorists tend to focus on the ability of the self to cope with circumstances (e.g., Smith et al., 1993). Of note is the fact that two of the six appraisal dimensions, control and responsibility, are complementary to the causal ascriptions that predominate attribution theory.

In addition to functioning at the individual level, it is important to note that appraisals can function at the group level. People desire social group membership (Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Hogg, 2000), especially with cohesive groups (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). Social identity theorists argue that cohesiveness leads people to feel like "prototypical group members" who integrate group membership into their sense of self, quelling uncertainty in response to threat (Hogg et al., 2007; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010; Hogg & Turner, 1987). Group identification has implications for the study of emotions because people may base appraisals on how well their group can deal with a dangerous or stressful situation (Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Given that indicators of group identification such as feelings of national pride (Smith et al., 2001) increased in response to the 9/11 attacks, it may be that the appraisals of the U.S. citizenry outside of the areas directly impacted by the attacks (e.g., New York, Washington D.C.) were made with respect to the group's ability to cope rather than with respect to the individual's ability to cope. In sum, when circumstances are unexpected and/or important, people search for their cause, attach attributional significance to the actions of others (Gans, 1979; Weiner, 1985; Wong & Weiner, 1981), and experience a resulting emotional reaction which may then influence support for particular antiterrorism policies.

EMOTIONAL PRECURSORS TO ANTITERRORISM POLICY SUPPORT

Research on emotional reactions to terrorism often distinguishes the emotions of anger, fear, and sadness (e.g., Sadler, Lineberger, Correll, & Park, 2005). These emotions arise from different attributions and appraisals of terrorism, and have disparate implications for antiterrorism policy preferences. Broadly, attributions and appraisals associated with anger vary from those of fear and sadness. The following sections present evidence that anger is associated with support for aggressive strategies to combat terrorism while fear and sadness are related to support for more defensive strategies.

Anger

Anger was a common emotional response to the attacks on 9/11. Anger is elicited when a person or group's negative or harmful actions are seen as controllable, unstable, and emanating from internal traits (Weiner, 1985). Similarly, work based on appraisal tendency theory suggests that anger is related to perceptions that negative events are predictable, under human control, and caused by others (Scherer, 1999). Moreover, appraisal theorists have found that anger is associated with low risk perception and increased certainty for the perceiver (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; 2001). Emotions related to certainty, such as anger, are related to decreased information processing and search (Tiedens & Linton, 2001).

Both attribution and appraisal theorists find that anger relates to increased support for retaliatory policies in response to terrorism. For example, when Israeli Palestinians and Jews attributed responsibility for negative acts to one another, each side showed less support for peace and more support for violence, suggesting a responsibility–anger link (Kimhi, Canetti-Nisim, & Hirschberger, 2009; for an alternative perspective, see Tagar, Federico, & Halperin, 2011). Sadler et al. (2005) found that participants who felt anger in response to images of the September 11 attacks were more likely to support aggressive foreign policy (e.g., assassination of terrorist leaders in foreign countries, war against countries who harbor terrorists), and less likely to support humanitarian aid in countries known to harbor terrorist organizations (e.g., Afghanistan). Similarly, anger in response to the September 11 attacks was related to increased support for confrontational as opposed to preventative policies (Skitka, Bauman, Amarovich, & Morgan, 2006), increased moral outrage, and outgroup derogation toward Arab Americans, Palestinians, and people living in the Middle East (Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2004).

Work based in Intergroup Emotion theory (see Smith, 1993) demonstrates collective emotional orientations may exacerbate conflict and terrorism when they are based in anger. For example, feelings of anger on the part of Israelis towards Palestinians before the Gaza War became worse over time, and were increased by perceptions of unfairness (Halperin & Gross 2011). Feelings of efficacy, the

belief that the United States was capable of winning in wartime, were positively and directly related to anger, support for war and killing in both Afghanistan and Iraq in response to the September 11 attacks (Cheung-Blunden & Blunden, 2008). These results lend further support to the idea that anger is related to beliefs that one (or one's group) can handle present circumstances, as well as increased support for retaliatory measures.

Fear

As opposed to anger, fear is related to the perception that negative events are unpredictable and influenced by situational circumstances (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). The belief that one is unable to effectively navigate potentially harmful circumstances undergirds fear, and, leads people to seek out information about the environment in an attempt to find a way to reduce the danger (Litz & Keane, 1989).

In general, people who respond to terrorist acts with fear tend to avoid policies that promote direct aggression, instead favoring policies that propose internal solutions. Experiencing anxiety is predictive of decreased support for the war in Afghanistan, involvement in world affairs, and presidential candidates who favor aggressive policies (Huddy, Feldman, Lahav, & Taber, 2005). Amongst participants high on Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), fear predicts support for deporting Middle Eastern immigrants, whereas anger predicts support for expanding the war on terror beyond Afghanistan (Skitka et al., 2006). Research also suggests that fear after September 11 was related to decreased support for civil liberties in the name of security (Davis & Silver, 2004)—a defensive, rather than aggressive policy. Over the year following September 11, the perceived threat of terrorism predicted increased support for government surveillance and restriction of civil liberties (Cohrs, Moschner, Maes, & Kielmann, 2005), in support of the idea fear leads to preference for internal solutions. Thus, fear in response to terrorism is generally associated with opposition to aggressive antiterrorism policy and support for defensive policy (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003).

Fear can also be influenced by the perception that one's group is at risk, independent of risk to oneself. For example, leading Dutch people to see themselves as Westerners, as opposed to simply Europeans (vs. Americans), led them to feel greater fear in response to 9/11, to search for information about the attacks, and to favor extending help and support to victims (Strelan & Lawani, 2010). These results demonstrate that inclusion in a group under terrorist threat increases fear, as well as a desire to support those in need. In its totality, research suggests that fear in response to terrorism relates to decreased confidence in one's ability to handle terrorist threat, decreased retaliatory aggression, and increased support for policies designed to prevent terrorism indirectly.

Sadness

Sadness and fear lead to similar, but not identical, outcomes concerning terrorism policy. Sadness relates to the perception that no one in particular is responsible for negative circumstances, and that outcomes are not understandable or predictable (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). Sadness is also associated with increased perceptions of risk, decreased support for hawkish foreign policy, and increased support for protective, nonaggressive measures. For example, sadness in response to terrorism reduces support for strong military responses and a desire to engage in the 'War on Terror', but increases situational attributions for terrorist attacks and feelings of inability to cope (Sadler et al., 2005).

THE INTERPLAY OF COGNITION AND EMOTION IN RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

In an attempt to integrate research on attributions, emotions, and policy preferences, Sadler et al. (2005) examined how anger, fear, and sadness relate to support for hawkish versus dovish policy in response to the September 11 attacks. To encourage reconstruction of initial emotional responses to the attacks, participants viewed videos with coverage of the events as they unfolded that day. The first video included clips that depicted planes striking the World Trade Center's North Tower, South Tower, and the Pentagon and crashing into a field in Pennsylvania, followed by a montage of images of the human impact of the attacks. Participants next wrote about their emotional reactions and completed measures of anger, fear, and sadness. Based on the assumption people would endorse a combination of negative emotions, the authors developed measures of the extent that each participant felt an emotion relatively more than the others. Thus, the emotion measures represented how much people's emotional reaction was predominated by anger, for example, relative to fear or sadness.

In addition to emotional responses, participants were asked how much they endorsed various causal attributions for the attacks. Possibilities included internal attributions such as blaming the terrorists themselves, and external attributions to security lapses at U.S. airports and the impoverished situation of the terrorists' home countries. Finally, participants were asked how much they endorsed whether or not the U.S. government should respond to the attacks with war (e.g., moderate and/or strong military responses), increased security at airports and border crossings, or humanitarian aid to foreign countries.

Results showed that the more participants blamed the terrorists for the September 11 attacks (as opposed to their situation, such as the life circumstances of the attackers), the more anger they reported, and the more support they showed for hawkish foreign policy, such as a strong military response. The more external attributions participants made (e.g., the attacks were the result of impoverished

circumstances in other countries), the more sadness they reported concerning 9/11, and the less likely they were to support hawkish foreign policy. Interestingly, participants who were fearful did not evidence a strong pattern of attributions, yet they too were not likely to support hawkish policy. The lack of association among attributions and fear in these samples is not altogether surprising when one takes into account the fact that people who are fearful are least certain about what has transpired in a situation, or will transpire in the future, compared with people who are angry or sad (Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984; Tiedens & Linton, 2001).

The researchers also tested the causal relationships among attributions, emotions, and policy endorsement. Results supported a causal chain in which attributions lead to emotional reactions that lead to policy endorsement, in the case of anger and sadness. Specifically, assigning blame to the terrorists for causing the attacks led people to be angry, which in turn led them to support military responses but deny humanitarian aid. In contrast, making external attributions for the attacks (i.e., impoverished life circumstances in foreign countries were to blame) led people to feel more sadness, which in turn led to endorsement of providing humanitarian aid to foreign countries. It is noteworthy that demonstrated causal relationships held for people with both conservative and liberal political ideologies. Moreover, the reverse causal path—attributions mediating the relationship between emotions and policy preference—was tested but not supported. Overall, the results of this work suggest that anger, rather than fear, may be the emotional state most indicative of postterrorism aggression (c.f., Gadarian, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The emotions preceding terrorism policy preferences are founded on people's causal ascriptions for terrorism and how they appraise their ability to cope. If one believes others are responsible for terrorism and that one can handle the attacks, anger and support for offensive reactions to terrorism are likely to result. On the other hand, if one believes that situational factors are responsible for terrorism and that one is not capable of coping with terrorism, fear and/or sadness are most likely to emerge, as well as support for defensive/nonaggressive policy responses. These processes are suggested to occur both among people directly (e.g., people in New York City during 9/11) and indirectly (e.g., the U.S. populace at large) affected by terrorism. That is, emotions may emerge from attributions and appraisals made with regard to the safety of the self or on behalf of the safety of the country's citizenry, a group with which one shares a social identity.

The research summarized here shows that subtle differences in assessments of the causes of terrorism, and the ability to cope, lead to different emotional reactions and conclusions about what types of policies should be used to combat terrorism. This point becomes relevant when one considers the media coverage that followed 9/11 and preceded the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Looking back, critics have blamed the

media for dictating public discourse, and creating an atmosphere that made war with Iraq seem inevitable without considering more diplomatic alternatives. This media-created atmosphere has often been labeled as "fear-mongering" (Brzezinski, 2007); however, the research presented in this chapter suggests that this label may not be accurate. In general, because fear and sadness are associated with decreased support for aggressive foreign policy, and greater support for protective measures, while anger is associated with endorsement of aggressive foreign policy, we suggest that a new label, "anger-mongering," may more accurately capture the media firestorm that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Understanding the interplay between attributions, appraisals, emotions and policy support has direct implications for institutions capable of influencing public discourse concerning terrorism, and thus, influencing people's beliefs about how to properly respond to terrorist acts. Framing terrorism as a function of the disturbed actions of a few deranged individuals, or as a function of the environment in which those individuals live, may sway public opinion towards war or peace, depending on the attributions and appraisals the public makes based on this information. Perhaps if policymakers and the media have a more complete understanding of how terrorism policy preferences are shaped by cognitive and emotional reactions, they will be more cognizant of the way they portray acts of terrorism. Future research should address if comprehensive media coverage of internal and external attributions for the cause of an attack, as well as multipronged strategies that include both offensive and defensive tactics to cope with an attack, reduce the tendency for a people's policy preference to default to war, and to reduce civil liberties in trade for a sense of increased security in response to terrorism.

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