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Political Tolerance and Coming to Psychological Closure Following the September 11, 2001

Terrorist Attacks:

An Integrative Approach

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Abstract

This study tested hypotheses generated from an integrative model of political tolerance that derived hypotheses from a number of different social psychological theories (e.g., appraisal tendency theory, intergroup emotion theory, and value protection models) to explain political tolerance following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. A national field study ($N = 550$) found that immediate post-attack anger and fear had different implications for political tolerance four months later. The effects of anger on political tolerance were mediated through moral outrage and out-group derogation, whereas the effects of fear on political tolerance were mediated through personal threat, in-group enhancement, and value affirmation. Value affirmation led to increased, whereas moral outrage, out-group derogation, in-group enhancement, and personal threat led to decreased, political tolerance. Value affirmation, moral outrage, and out-group derogation also facilitated post-9/11 psychological closure, and increased psychological closure led to greater political tolerance.

Political Tolerance and Coming to Closure Following the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks:
An Integrative Approach

One of several reactions Americans had to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 was an increased willingness to sacrifice some of the civil liberties that traditionally define a liberal democracy. Despite the Justice Department's detention of several hundred individuals without clear charges and a host of potential threats to freedom posed by the hastily passed USA-PATRIOT Act, two-thirds of Americans reported that they were willing to sacrifice some civil liberties to fight terrorism, and one in four thought that the Bush Administration had not gone far enough to restrict civil liberties in the months immediately following the attacks (Etzioni, 2002; Huddy, Khatid, & Capelos, 2002).

Although the tendency of people to become more politically intolerant under conditions of threat is well documented (see Etzioni, 2002; Gibson, 1992; Gibson & Bingham, 1982; Kuzma, 2000; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995 for reviews) researchers only recently have noted the specific link between terrorist attacks and political intolerance. For example, Huddy et al. (2002) analyzed cross sections of national opinion polls and found that more people were willing to sacrifice civil liberties to fight terrorism in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (49%) and following the 2001 terrorist attacks (68%), than in 1997 (29%), when perceived threat of a terrorist attack was comparatively low. Although political tolerance does appear to recover over time, terrorist attacks erode support for broad civil liberties for significant periods of time (e.g., a year or more, Huddy et al., 2002), and therefore are particularly effective weapons against democratic functioning.

The goals of this study were to explore different social psychological explanations for the links between terrorist attacks and political intolerance, with a focus on the role of discrete

emotion. We explored the notion that fear and perceived threat lead people to become more intolerant of those whose beliefs differ from their own. Moreover, we explored whether anger, in addition to fear, plays an important role in the link between terrorism and subsequent political intolerance. Finally, we also investigated a number of possible mediators of the links between anger and fear and subsequent political intolerance.

Fear

A number of researchers have explored the idea that fear leads people to become more politically intolerant. Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Wood (1995), for example, argue that under normal conditions people easily access their standing commitment to democratic values. However, when something happens to make people anxious and afraid (e.g., a terrorist attack), their attention becomes overwhelmingly focused on their contemporary environment and subsequent feelings of threat, leaving them with little remaining attention to devote to accessing values like their standing commitment to civil liberty. Consequently, people's judgments become driven by affectively primed heuristics and appraisals of continued threat rather than by more rationally developed beliefs about and commitments to civil liberty. Consistent with this idea, fear and perceived threat lead people to express higher degrees of ethnocentrism, to respond more punitively toward out-groups, and to become less politically tolerant (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Marcus et al., 1995). Other research suggests that once people develop the belief that civil liberties should be sacrificed to fight terrorism, that these beliefs may well become resistant to subsequent revision (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). Taken together, this research suggests that when terrorist attacks induce high levels of fear, people subsequently perceive out-groups to be more threatening, and therefore express greater levels of political intolerance, reactions that may become resistant to revision.

Anger

Anger, in addition to fear, may also underlie why people become more politically intolerant following a terrorist attack. Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET, E. R. Smith, 1993, 1999), for example, predicts that people's appraisals of intergroup conflict lead to discrete reactions of anger and fear, that in turn shapes perceivers' behavioral intentions toward out-groups. More specifically, appraisals of in-group strength lead people to respond to intergroup conflict with anger and confrontation, whereas appraisals of in-group weakness lead people to respond to intergroup conflict with fear and avoidance (E. R. Smith, 1993, 1999). These predictions were supported in laboratory studies that explicitly tested whether people chose to confront or avoid an insulting out-group member as a function of aroused anger and fear (Mackie, Devos, & E. R. Smith, 2000).

Although traditional work on emotional appraisal, like research based on IET, is centered on how people's cognitive appraisals influence their emotions (e.g., C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), more recent research taking an Appraisal Tendency Theory (ATT) approach finds that discrete emotions can be both a cause and consequence of cognitive appraisal (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003; Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001). For example, anger is associated with more optimistic subsequent appraisals of risk, whereas fear is associated with more pessimistic appraisals of subsequent risk (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lerner et al., 2003). A now large body of research supports the ATT prediction that discrete emotions color people's subsequent judgment and behavior across a wide range of contexts (e.g., Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994; DeSteno, Petty, Wegener, & Rucker, 2000; Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lerner et al., 2003).

In sum, regardless of which comes first—cognitive appraisal or affect—both IET and ATT predict that anger, in addition to fear, is likely to be implicated in why people become more intolerant after a terrorist attack. Given increasing evidence that anger and fear are discrete emotions, the effects of anger and fear on political tolerance are also likely to be a consequence of different social psychological processes.

Social Psychological Processes

In addition to having possible direct effects on political tolerance, anger and fear may lead to a host of other reactions that in turn may shape people's relative degree of political tolerance following a terrorist attack. Specifically, anger and fear may differentially relate to perceptions of threat of a future terrorist attack, the tendency to engage in heightened group differentiation (i.e., in-group enhancement and out-group derogation), attempts to alleviate distress through expressions of moral outrage, engaging in value affirmation, or combinations of these responses, each that in turn may influence political tolerance.

Threat

Higher levels of fear lead people to perceive out-groups as more violent and potentially threatening, reactions that in turn are associated with increased ethnocentrism, punitiveness, and political intolerance (Marcus et al., 1995). Therefore, some or all of the effects of terrorism-induced fear on political tolerance could be the result of an increased perception of threat of a future attack. In contrast, little research is consistent with the notion that anger, like fear, leads to higher levels of perceived threat. Anger is associated with a perception of in-group strength (E. R. Smith, 1993, 1999) and more optimistic appraisals of future risk (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Lerner et al., 2003), both of which would seem to contraindicate an increased sense of threat. Therefore, we hypothesize that immediate post-attack fear, but not anger, will have a negative

effect on subsequent political tolerance through its effects on perceived threat or worry of a future terrorist attack.

Group Differentiation

Anger and fear also lead people to make sharper distinctions between in- and out-group members (Baron, Inman, Kao, & Logan, 1992; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Group differentiation is associated with in-group favoritism and out-group neglect or discrimination (e.g., Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Therefore, the effects of anger and fear on political tolerance may be a by-product of anger and fear-induced group differentiation.

Anger should negatively affect political tolerance through its effects on out-group derogation. Anger tends to be an other-focused emotion that is directed out rather than toward the self or one's group (Lazarus, 1991), and therefore seems likely to lead to out-group rather than in-group focused attention. Consistent with this idea, Mackie et al. (2002) found that anger (but not fear) makes people want to confront and argue with an insulting out-group member. In the absence of an opportunity to directly confront out-group members, angry people may avail themselves of symbolic forms of attack or confrontation in the form of belittling and derogating out-groups. Therefore, we hypothesize that anger will lead to out-group derogation and by extension decreased political tolerance, especially when direct confrontation of an out-group is a blocked option.

It is more difficult to derive clear-cut hypotheses for how the effects of fear might be mediated through either in-group enhancement or out-group derogation. Fear leads to avoidance of face-to-face interaction or confrontation of out-groups (Mackie et al., 2002). It is less clear, however, if fear will lead people to avoid or embrace an opportunity to engage in indirect or symbolic out-group condemnation.

Fear could also lead people to focus less on the out-group and more on bolstering and strengthening in-group ties and boundaries. If fear-induced avoidance of the out-group is associated with an increased tendency to focus on the in-group instead, we may observe that fear is more strongly related than anger to in-group enhancement.

In sum, it seems likely that the effects of anger and fear on political tolerance may be partially or fully mediated through their respective effects on different forms of group differentiation. However, previous theorizing and research provide little guidance for making specific hypotheses about the discrete effects of anger and fear on political tolerance through either in-group enhancement or out-group derogation, so these predictions are largely exploratory.

Motivated Arousal

The anger and fear that people experience following a terrorist attack may be forms of motivated arousal. If terrorist attacks are interpreted as threats to people's sense of moral equilibrium (Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Tetlock, Kirstel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000) or to their cultural worldviews (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997), the subsequent distress will motivate people to engage in one or more attempts to restore a sense of psychic balance.

Value protection theorists argue that people are intuitive prosecutors who respond to moral transgressions with a strong sense of motivated arousal and distress (Tetlock, 2002; Tetlock et al., 2000). This motivated arousal leads people to respond with both moral outrage (a reaction that includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, including negative attributions and vilification of the transgressor, rage, and punitive behavior) and value affirmation (attempts to morally cleanse by reaffirming one's commitment to important cultural and moral values or by doing good deeds to reassure oneself of one's own comparative moral commitment and worth). Moral outrage and value affirmation therefore involve interpersonal and intrapsychic

mechanisms for coping with threats to people's sense of moral order. Moreover, recent research indicates that responses of moral outrage and value affirmation facilitate a restored sense of moral equilibrium following a wide variety of different moral challenges (e.g., consideration of taboo trade-offs between money and sacred values; dealing with heretical counterfactuals such as asking Christians to imagine that Jesus Christ is not the son of God; Tetlock et al., 2000).

If people viewed the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as a moral breach that violated, for example, their perception of what constitutes the tenants of just war (Walzer, 2000), the value protection model (VPM) predicts that they will respond with aversive arousal (e.g., anger and fear), that in turn prompts moral outrage, reaffirmation of commitments to core moral values, or both. Which strategy people use following terrorist attacks seems likely to have important implications for their subsequent degree of political tolerance. Specifically, higher levels of moral outrage should be associated with less political tolerance of groups seen as similar to the transgressors. However, given that civil liberties, like freedom of speech, represent important American values, value affirmation should be associated with increased, not decreased, political tolerance. Therefore, even though the direct effect of moral outrage on political tolerance should be negative, the direct effect of value affirmation on political tolerance should be positive.

One could work from different premises and generate similar predictions. For example, terror management theory (TMT, e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 1997) posits that events like the terrorist attacks have profound psychological effects because they prime people's worst fear, that of their own death. The central tenant of TMT is that conflict between humans' instinctual need for self-preservation and their awareness of the inevitability of their own demise can lead to immobilizing terror if they do not employ strategies to keep awareness of death at bay. The primary strategy people use to cope with existential terror is to

adhere to cultural worldviews that provide standards and value criteria that if lived up to, lead to the perception of literal or symbolic immortality.

According to TMT, symbolic defenses against existential terror are especially likely to be activated when mortality salience is high, or when people perceive a threat to the anxiety buffer that their cultural worldview represents. People respond to either situation by bolstering their cultural worldview by derogating or aggressing against those who do not share it (e.g., expressing higher levels of prejudice and ethnocentrism, effectively the VPM's moral outrage), as well as increasing efforts to meet or support cultural standards of value (e.g., to be more patriotic, celebrate heroes, or give to charity; in other words, value affirmation).

Although the design of the present study does not allow us to tease apart whether the ultimate origin of anger and fear in response to terrorist attacks is more a consequence of a reaction to a moral breach or mortality salience, it does allow us to test the prediction that the effects of immediate post-attack distress (anger and fear) on political tolerance may be mediated through moral outrage and attempts to affirm cultural values. Moreover, the design of this study allows us to examine whether there are discrete effects of anger and fear, or whether reactions to terrorist attacks are better characterized as a generalized sense of aversive arousal.

In addition, an implicit assumption of the VPM and TMT is that expressing moral outrage or engaging in value affirmation should alleviate the distress created by the eliciting event. In other words, moral outrage and value affirmation should facilitate psychological closure after a terrorist attack. Closure is a psychological concept that is frequently mentioned as a desired end-state following any variety of psychological traumas, and refers to a state of psychological resolution that is achieved when people feel that they can effectively move beyond the trauma and attend to other problems and concerns (e.g., Beike, 2002; Gold & Faust, 2002).

If the anger and fear people experience in response to terrorist attacks are forms of motivated arousal, then post-attack moral outrage and value affirmation might have indirect positive effects on political tolerance through their positive effects on psychological closure. If expressing moral outrage or value affirmation restores a sense of equilibrium or closure, people should regain the ability to access their long-standing commitments to democratic values, rather than continue to rely on affect-driven heuristics when asked to think about political tolerance (cf. Marcus et al., 1995). The hypothesis that closure facilitates political tolerance is consistent with the observation that support for civil liberties do tend to recover over time (Huddy et al., 2002), and provides one account for what leads to this recovery.

In sum, the present study was designed to test an integrated model that attempted to account for why terrorist attacks lead to decreased political tolerance. Although previous research has explored the connections between fear and political tolerance, the present study also explored the potential role of anger in explaining the links between terrorism and subsequent intolerance. Predictions about possible mediating processes were gleaned from a number of different social psychological theories. Specifically, perceived concern about future attacks, increased group differentiation, expressions of moral outrage, engaging in value affirmation, and psychological closure are each hypothesized to play potentially important mediating roles between anger and fear on the one hand, and political tolerance on the other. These hypotheses were tested using a national random sample of adults who responded to surveys at two points in time: Immediately after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and then again approximately four months later.

Method

Participants

The study sample was drawn from a panel of respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks (KN). KN recruits panel members using random-digit-dialing telephone selection methods, and the characteristics of the panel closely match those of the U. S. Census (see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/> for comparisons of the panel with current Census figures). Once a panel member agrees to participate, they are given a free interactive device to access the World Wide Web (e.g., a Web TV), and free Internet access in exchange for participation in regular surveys. About 50% of the panelists had no prior access to the web before becoming KN members, so the KN panel is the only web-enabled household panel that is truly representative of the American public.

A random sample of panel members received a password-protected e-mail to alert them that they had a survey to complete during each fielding period, with a "clickable" link in the e-mail that allowed them to initiate the survey. Participants could access each survey only once, and the surveys were protected from non-panel member access.

The First Survey

For the purposes of a different study on memory (Conway, Skitka, Hemmerich, & Kershaw, 2003), a random sample of 685 adult KN panel members (reflecting an 86% within panel cooperation rate) responded to a survey between September 14 and October 2, 2001, with over 80% of completions within the first week of data collection. There were no significant differences in demographic profile (in age, gender, education, income, political orientation, region, or urban/rural settings) of those who did versus did not respond to the first survey.

