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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.