

Effects of terrorism on attitudes and ideological orientation

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Abstract

A quasi-experimental study on the effects of terrorism on racial prejudice and ideological orientation is presented. Two independent samples were contacted before and after the Islamic terrorist attacks against railways in Madrid (11 March 2004). Anti-Arab and anti-Semite prejudices, authoritarianism and ideological orientations (liberal against conservative) were evaluated. Results showed that those terrorist attacks provoked changes in a reactionary and conservative direction: stronger prejudices not only against the target group (Arabs), but against another uninvolved group (Jewish); an increase in authoritarianism; stronger attachment to traditional conservative values, and a reduction in the attachment to liberal values. The results are interpreted in terms of the System-Justification Theory, the Motivated Social Cognition model of Conservatism and the Right-Wing Authoritarianism. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

It is difficult to study the effects of terrorist attacks on the general population values, attitudes and ideology. The experimental manipulations aimed to increase the mortality salience and fear (reading a piece of news, remembering recent attacks, etc.) lack the emotional overtones of a real experience. Unexpectedly, we found the opportunity to study these effects through a quasi-experimental design. Interested in the anti-Arab prejudice raised after the Twin-Towers attacks, we collected data in order to validate a new anti-Arab prejudice scale during the latter days of February 2004. The Islamic terrorist attacks took place on 11 March 2004. We decided to continue with the data collection just before this day, being careful to ensure that the two samples were equivalent in terms of age, gender and social status.

The System Justification Theory (SJT) (Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Jost, Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004; Kay & Jost, 2003) provides a theoretical framework to anticipate the effects of terrorism on attitudes and ideology. Based on the Dissonance Theory, the SJT proposes the existence of a motivation to perceive the social arrangements as fair, legitimate and justified. In other words, people are motivated to perceive the status quo as stable and legitimate (System Justification motive). Furthermore, the System-Justifying ideologies fulfil a 'palliative function' (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, p. 113) since they are tools to cope with existential

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anxiety. Perhaps, the most ‘provocative aspect’ of the theory is the statement that ‘members of disadvantaged groups’ would themselves engage in system justification processes (at least, under some circumstances), even at the expense of their ‘immediate personal or collective interests’ (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, p. 113). More central for our aims, the SJT predicts that social threats and mortality salience (such as those caused by a massive and blind terrorist attack) should increase conservatism and system justification motives among the majority of people (Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004).

In the same line, Jost, Kruglanski, Glaser, and Sulloway (2003) have proposed a ‘motivated social cognition’ model of conservatism. They defined conservatism as being characterised by two core dimensions (resistance to change and acceptance of inequality) and some peripheral issues (for example, attitudes towards ecology, homosexual weddings, etc.). The model assumes that there are a certain number of reasons related to the expression of conservatism: epistemic (need for order and closure, cognitive complexity, etc.), existential (fear, terror management, anger, self-esteem, etc.) and ideological (system justification, group dominance, social dominance, etc.). These motives are interrelated.

Finally, the expression of conservatism depends on both personal and situational factors. Thus, fear or salience of mortality (such as activated by terrorism) might enhance the adherence to conservative ideologies. However, Greenberg and Jonas (2003) contest this prediction. They assume that the three motives driven by anxiety and fear could be served by both right-wing and left-wing ideologies. Thus, fear and mortality salience will polarize previous ideologies (interaction hypothesis).

The relation between threat and authoritarianism was directly tested by Doty, Peterson, and Winter (1991) in the USA. They compared data collected from two periods: 1978–1982 (period of high-threat) and 1983–1987 (period of low-threat). They found that perceived social threats increased the level of authoritarianism. Furthermore, Altemeyer (1996, p. 82) found that authoritarianism is related to both racial prejudices and a conservative economic orientation (support to policies in favour of privatization, reduction in social expenditure, balanced budgets, lower taxes for businesses and the rich, and less involvement of the government in the economy). Crenshaw (1985) states that terrorism acts could appear to people as anonymous, sudden and random, arousing fear and anxiety. Under these circumstances, people can accept restrictions on democratic procedures. Moreover, terrorism can induce broad and vague changes in the direction of decreased openness and trust.

Taking into account these models, two alternative predictions were formulated: The first predicted an increase of conservatism independently of subjects’ previous ideological positions (stronger authoritarianism, conservatism and racial prejudices in all the ideological groups). The second hypothesis predicted an interaction between the attacks and political positioning, the left-wing participants reinforcing their liberal values while the right-wing participants increasing their conservatism, authoritarianism and racial prejudices.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and six subjects took part in this study. The average age was 34.79 years ($SD = 14.78$). There were 101 (49%) men and 105 (51%) women. The class composition of the sample was as follows: 12 (5.8%) low-class, 42 (20.4%) low-middle class, 87 (42.2%) middle class, 57 (27.2%) middle-high class, and 8 (3.9%) high class. The after and before-attacks sub-samples did not differ in their gender (Chi-Square = 2.07, $df = 2$, $p = 0.354$), age ($F(1,204) = 0.004$, $p = 0.949$), and social class composition (Chi-Square = 0.83, $df = 4$, $p = 0.934$).

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire designed for the study of Basque people's attitudes towards a number of social topics. The first questionnaire was a 42-item anti-Arab attitudes' scale designed by Echebarria and Fernandez (2004). Participants also fulfilled the Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (1996) and a reduced version (15 items) of the Adorno et al's (1950/82) anti-Semitism scale. Only the original items that were meaningful today were retained. Eleven items (2,4,7,8,11,13,15,17,20, 22, and 26) correspond with the 'total anti-Semitism scale, Public opinion questionnaire A' (pp. 68–69, Table 6, III). The other four items (13,19,20, and 26) were taken from the 'total anti-Semitism scale, Public opinion questionnaire S' (p. 70). The format of the three scales was the same: from 1 = complete disagreement to 7 = complete agreement. Furthermore, two formats were used to measure general ideological orientation: The first one was the classical positioning in the conservative-liberal (1–7) continuum. An 'apolitical' additional option was included for those who refused to place themselves in this continuum. The second format was a content-based measure proposed by two political sciences academics (Lewis-Beck & Chlarson, 2002). Participants were asked to evaluate several domains: equality, social reforms, competition, trade unions, nationalisation and/or privatisation of enterprises, privatisation of Health and Education services, authority, interclass solidarity, Catholicism and homosexual marriages (format from 1 = very positive to 5 = very negative). Finally, the social status was measured using the Hollingshead's ISP (Index of Social Position) (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). This index results from a combination of occupation and education.

RESULTS

The scales were submitted to factor analysis to analyse their structures. The items of the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (eigenvalue = 11.30, explained variance = 37.66, $\alpha = 0.94$) were grouped into a single factor. This was repeated for the anti-Arab (eigenvalue = 16.59, explained variance = 39.51, $\alpha = 0.96$) and the anti-Semitism (eigenvalue = 6.30, explained variance = 40.91, $\alpha = 0.89$). Three scales were computed adding participants' scores in each item (after reversing items with negative loads) and dividing the total by the number of items. In that way the three scales ranged from 1 to 7. By contrast, the Social Issues Index items were grouped into two factors. The first factor (liberal orientation) (eigenvalue = 2.67, explained variance = 24.25%, $\alpha = 0.76$) grouped equality, social reforms, trade unions and interclass solidarity. The second factor (conservative orientation) (eigenvalue = 2.28, explained variance = 20.70%, $\alpha = 0.71$) was positively defined by competition, authority, private health and education services, privatisation of enterprises and Catholicism; and negatively by homosexual weddings, trade unions and nationalization of enterprises. Thus, two scales were computed following the same logic used with the three previous scales.

Relations Between Prejudices, Authoritarianism, Ideological Orientation, and Socio-Demographic Factors (Class, Age, and Gender)

Correlations among the five scales and age, gender, social class and the political positioning in the classical right-left (from 1 to 7) continuum were computed to analyse the relationships between those constructs (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between Anti-Arab, Anti-Jew prejudices, authoritarianism, liberal and conservative values, ideological self-positioning (ISP), and socio- demographic (age, gender, and social class) variables

Political positioning	Gender	Age	Anti-Arab attitudes	Authoritarianism	Anti-Semitism	Liberal orient.	Conservat. orient.	ISP
Political positioning	0.04	-0.17*	-0.40**	-0.60**	-0.27**	0.38**	-0.55**	-0.17*
Gender	—	-0.07	0.11	0.04	-0.01	0.07	-0.01	0.02
Age	—	—	0.12	0.34**	0.20**	-0.17*	0.21**	-0.30**
Anti-Arab attitudes			—	0.53**	0.64**	-0.25**	0.31**	-0.17*
Authoritarianism				—	0.50**	-0.32**	0.58**	-0.07
Anti-Semitism					—	-0.18**	0.25**	-0.18*
Liberal orientation						—	0.00	-0.04
Conservative orientation							—	0.07
ISP (social class)								—

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

The classical political positioning index (from 1 = right to 7 = left) had significant and strong correlations with the content-based measure of ideology (Social Issues). Here, the correlation included 153 subjects that positioned themselves in the traditional continuum. The rest of the respondents chose the 'apolitical' option.

The right-left continuum correlated positively with the liberal orientation and negatively with the conservative orientation. This provides evidence of the convergent validity of the Social Issues measure of ideological orientations. Moreover, the liberal orientation correlated negatively and significantly with age, authoritarianism, anti-Semite and anti-Arab attitudes. By contrast, the conservative orientation correlated significantly and positively with age, anti-Arab and anti-Semite attitudes, and authoritarianism. The social status (ISP) had negative correlations with the social positioning (higher classes placed in the right-pole of the continuum), age, anti-Arab and anti-Semite attitudes. By contrast, it was not related to authoritarianism.

Finally, correlations between anti-Arab prejudices, authoritarianism, anti-Semitism and conservative orientation were high, positive and significant. The liberal orientation correlated negatively with anti-Arab attitudes.

Effect of Terrorist Attacks on Prejudice, Authoritarianism, and Ideological Orientation

A MANOVA was performed in order to analyse the impact of terrorist attacks on the five scales. Participants were categorised into four ideological groups according to their self-placement in the far-right-far-left continuum: the apolitical group ($n = 53$), the left-wing group ($n = 63$), the centre-left group ($n = 52$) and the right-wing group ($n = 38$). The rationality of this grouping is related to the political culture prevalent in the Basque Country. Franco's dictatorship was associated with conservatism and right-wing positions. As a result, there is reluctance to self-identify as right-wing or conservative. A displacement towards the centre was observed in all political parties. Thus, the Nationalist Basque Party (Christian Democratic) defined itself as a centre-left party. The Popular Party (the ruling party in Spain when the Madrid attacks befell, that grouped the traditional groups that agreed and collaborated with the dictatorship plus the anti-Franquist conservative groups) self-defines as a centre party.

Table 2. MANOVA. Attacks main effects. Comparing before- and after-attack samples. Means, standard deviations, and univariate F values

Scale	Before-attack		After-attack		$F(1, 204)$	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD		
Anti-Arab attitudes	3.63	0.68	3.91	0.85	5.73**	0.03
Authoritarianism	2.68	0.82	2.95	0.77	4.80**	0.02
Anti-Semitism	3.35	0.65	3.65	0.75	5.77***	0.03
Conservative values	2.77	0.62	2.97	0.54	2.92*	0.01
Liberal values	3.84	0.68	3.61	0.71	4.91**	0.02

Note: * $p \leq 0.10$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.01$.

The ideological self-definition had a strong multivariate effect (Hotelling's $F = 6.15$, $p = 0.001$). However, the effects reproduced those commented in the previous section (correlations). Thus, they are not described to avoid redundancies and repetitions.

With regard to the attack multivariate main effect, it was significant (Hotelling's $F = 3.38$, $p = 0.01$). It affected all the scales. The means, standard deviations, univariate F s, and η^2 values are printed in Table 2.

Anti-Arab and anti-semitism prejudices as well as the Authoritarianism and, marginally, the adherence to conservative values also increased after the attacks. By contrast the adherence to liberal values was lower after them.

As far as the political positioning by the attacks multivariate interaction effect, it did not reach significance (Hotelling's $F = 1.57$, $p = 0.170$). Furthermore, any univariate F -value reached significance (Anti-Arab, $F(2, 200) = 0.79$, $p = 0.503$; Anti-Semitism, $F(2, 200) = 0.75$, $p = 0.523$; Authoritarianism, $F(2, 200) = 1.38$, $p = 0.249$; Conservative values, $F(2, 200) = 2.41$, $p = 0.302$; Liberal values, $F(2, 200) = 0.78$, $p = 0.502$).

CONCLUSION

A quasi-experimental study on the effects of terrorist attack on racial prejudices, authoritarianism and conservatism is presented. Data about authoritarianism, anti-Semite and anti-Arab attitudes, and political orientation (liberal and conservative) were collected before and after the attacks against railways in Madrid (11 March 2004). According to the System Justification Theory (Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, Sheldom, & Sullivan, 2003; Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Kay & Jost 2003), the motivated social cognition model of conservatism (Jost, Kruglanski, Glaser, & Sulloway, 2003) and the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996; Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991), we predicted that the terrorist acts of Madrid will induce higher levels of authoritarianism, political conservatism and racial prejudice (directed not only against the outgroup directly involved in the attack, Arabs, but also against another outgroup not directly involved (Jews). This hypothesis received strong support. After the attacks participants showed an increasing Anti-Arab and Anti-Jew prejudice, authoritarianism, and adherence to conservative values. By contrast, they reduced their adherence to liberal values.

By contrast, the interactive effects between the attacks and ideological positioning (stronger adherence of left-wing placed subjects to liberal values and of right-wing placed subjects to conservative values), predicted by Greenberg and Jonas (2003), were not confirmed. It could be

alleged that this lack of effect could be explained assuming that the political alignment itself could have changed as an effect of the attack. However, this hypothesis does not explained why participants that defined themselves as left-wing, right-centre wing or apolitical after the attacks adhered strongly to traditional conservative values and weakly to liberal values. Why, for example, do people who conceive themselves as leftist support more strongly conservative values after the attack? The change is not in their placement in the classical right–left continuum but in the values they hold. People who defined themselves as leftist before the attack were more conservative than people who defined themselves as leftist after the attack. The same happened with people who placed themselves in the right-centre position. This effect is difficult to explain as a mere displacement in the continuum because we compared values of participants that placed themselves in the same position.

These results seem to be in accordance with the effects of the 11 September terrorist acts (USA) on the presidential re-election of Bush. In this case, terrorism induced a wave of conservatism that contributed to the re-election of President Bush. The Spanish case was different. The terrorist acts took place four days before the general election (14 March). The Conservative Party, which governed at that time, lost the elections. The expected results according with the opinion polls collected before the 11 March were reversed. How to reconcile this reality with our data? Our results showed that the loss of the re-election by the conservative party was not the result of a liberal change in the ideological orientation of the population. These data suggest that their loss had more to do with their cynical use of the bombing to deal with the Basque issue. The government misinterpreted the effects of the Islamic attacks on public opinion. The government thought that people would connect the attacks with the Spanish participation in the Iraq war in spite of the massive opposition of the population (more than 80% of Spanish people did not support the country's participation). In order to avoid this connection, the government thought that it was convenient to hide the Islamic authorship until the day after the election, but people detected the government strategy.

Our data convey implications for the Political and Social Psychological in general and the domain of authoritarianism in particular. Two prevalent traditions have dominated the study of the latter. The first one is represented by Adorno et al. (1950/82). According to this tradition Authoritarianism is conceived as a personality structure with some stability across the life span. If the authoritarianism is regarded as a structure of personality it should be assumed a certain resistance to change and a relative insensitiveness to the external changes. These assumptions do not fit well with the evidence of the periodic changes in the support of important sectors of the population to authoritarian and conservative positions. This concept also does not seem to fit well with our data.

The second tradition, represented by both the System-Justification (Haines & Jost, 2000; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Jost, Pelham, Sheldom, & Sullivan, 2003; Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Kay & Jost, 2003) and the Terror-Management (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) theories, regards authoritarianism and conservatism as ideological resources that serve both collective (to rend the view of social arrangements as stable, fair and predictable) and personal (to cope with existential anxiety) motives. Thus, authoritarianism and conservatism are conceived as systems of social beliefs. People would adhere weakly or strongly to these systems of beliefs depending on personal and collective circumstances. This perspective fits better with the present data.

Finally, although the quasi-experimental nature of the study provides the realism that is sometimes lacking in some experiments, this methodology has the general problems of the non-experimental methods. For instance, it is difficult to know what was the underlying mechanism that provoked the observed changes. Blind, massive and random terrorist acts—such as occurred in the United States or Madrid—could simultaneously produce several numbers of effects: they can increase the mortality consciousness, feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, etc. Only the experimental manipulation would permit to separate those states, analysing their differentiated effects.

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