

Media, 9/11 and Fear: a national survey of Australian community responses to images of terror

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Abstract:

The history, politics and psychology of fear have had extensive press after the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York by Al-Qaeda terrorists. Fear of any kind, as Robin (2002) points out, has the potential to reinforce unequal power relations. Identifying and exposing fear and its consequences, empirically as well as politically, is essential to the democratic state just as exposing bullies is essential to a safe schooling environment. Interestingly, however, there have been few measures of fear, for policy purposes, and explorations into exactly how afraid communities might have become after 9/11. In this paper the authors report on a national survey of fear in Australia and how communities have reacted to terrorism messages.

Developing a metric of fear

"The trauma that Americans experienced in response to the 9/11 terrorist attack was similar in some ways (but different in others) to the cultural trauma that many indigenous peoples experienced in response to colonization by European and American countries over the last few centuries." Tom Pyszczynski

It is difficult to believe that the trauma of slaves from brutal physical treatment (say in the United States before emancipation) can be compared with the trauma of a US television viewing public of the 9/11 terrorist attack. The idea that the US was 'culturally traumatised' is, even so, an interesting one. Salzman and Halloran (2004) argue that breakdowns in the emotional security and functioning of large groups of people is due to intentional (through war) and unintentional (by disease and starvation) genocide of native people by colonizing powers in tandem with replacement of their culture. Pyszczynski extends this thesis to 9/11:

My central proposition is that, despite the obvious differences in power and the content of their belief systems, people on all sides of the current conflict have much in common: in short, the conflict between the West and parts of the Islamic world entails an ongoing series of traumatic challenges to the psychological security that is normally provided by embedding oneself within one's cultural worldview. The belligerent behavior of parties from both cultures can be viewed as responses to these threats, and the differences in the nature of the responses of the two sides of the conflict may reflect the differences in power, resources, and ideology that characterize these groups (cited in Prewitt et al, 2004, 62).

But what is the empirical evidence for Pyszynski's proposition or explanation? Could not anger and revenge act as a more direct explanation for the American psyche and US actions after 9/11? Or, if not that, then might a psychology of pure war explain the American fear or trauma? Virilio and Lotringer called pure war the psychological state that happens when people know that they live in a world where the potential for sudden and absolute destruction exists. It is not the capacity for destruction, like number of weapons, that creates this psychology but belief in a continual threat of sudden destruction. Psychological survival under such a threat requires a way to escape destruction. This results in a paradox because there is no escape. Once people believe in an external continual threat of apocalyptic destruction then those people who cannot deal with the experience make that experience an internal condition ("a perpetual state of preparation for absolute destruction and for personal, social, and cultural death"). Terrorism as a construct, therefore, may be one element in a state of pure war.

Explanations for fear or for trauma are important, especially if we are to plan policy responses to them or, indeed, if we are to fight against policy induced fear. Robin criticizes contemporary theorists who appear to miss the wood for the trees, who focus on loss of community when the real power game is in repressive fear. It is worthwhile quoting Robin (2000) at length:

What Putnam's and the other communitarian accounts of declining union membership share is a near-total silence about the campaigns employers--sometimes in violation of the law, often with the approval of the law--to discourage people from joining unions. They do not discuss how corporations and conservatives have steadily weakened labor law since the late 1940s, making it more and more difficult for workers to join unions. They do not focus on the management lawyers who help employers wage these campaigns. They do not analyze the role of the courts, which often tie unions up for years in litigation ... Instead of confronting this virtually Hobbesian nexus of corporate power, elite authority, and state sanction, which makes many workers afraid to join unions, communitarian theorists worry about the growing inability of men and women to make social connections. Locked in worlds of private despair, we don't join unions because we lack the psychological character and cultural capacity to turn off our TVs and to act with civic spirit. We are not afraid of retaliation and repression. We are just too privatized by the mass media and modern liberalism to look beyond ourselves to the common good. If we are afraid, it is not because we are embedded within structures of power and authority that constrain our abilities to act upon our convictions and pursue our interests. ... Looking at the world through Tocqueville's lens, communitarians and theorists of civil society see neither politically induced nor politically sustained fear. Instead, they see the anxiety of the lonely crowd. As a result, their solution is neither to rectify imbalances of power nor to enable men and women to act against the constraints of institutional authority. Instead, they seek to reinscribe men and women within the constraints of power--whether church, family, or state--for it is only the ties that bind that enable us to live without anomic anxiety and to act as purposive agents. This is Tocqueville's legacy for our times. It is a legacy we could do without.

Robin's criticism of the 'Tocqueville lens' might also apply to the 'Virilio lens' – more direct explanations about the nature of fear and trauma are possible. Pure war as a psychological state may exist, but the manifestations of fear or trauma may be more localized and less

globally transcendental than supposed. Interestingly, though, there are few empirical measures of fear that can be used for policy purposes or to test Virilio's or any other thesis on fear. The authors, therefore, developed a metrics of fear in order to understand Australian personal and community reactions to events such as 9/11 and terror messages in the media.

Several scales have been developed that attempt to measure the fear of rape and the fear of crime (Liska, 1988; Senn, 1996; Warr, 1990). For the most part, investigations into the fear of crime have focused on describing and explaining variations in fear among different genders, ages and social groups (Warr, 1990). In order to understand fear as a social force that impacts on behaviour, two general patterns have emerged. One concerns preventative or restrictive behaviours in which individuals will take measures to avoid places and situations perceived as dangerous. The other concerns protective or assertive behaviours in which individuals will undertake protective measures in places and situations perceived as dangerous.

In surveying the range of scales the authors found that there were no scales that measured both patterns of behavioural responses to fear. There are also no existing scales that measure personal perceptions of risk as well as community perceptions of risk. The Fear of Rape Scale (FOR) developed by Gordon & Riger (1979) and its extensions, however, provides a good basis for developing a metrics of fear in the Australian community because the FOR is the only scale that attempts to look at restrictive and assertive behaviours. The authors chose this scale as key starting point in constructing a metrics of fear that covered personal, community and societal aspects of fear in the same survey.

Modifications to the FOR scale by the authors included the omission of some questions specific to context of rape and the inclusion of questions designed to measure the constructs that evolved from analysis of qualitative interviews with Muslim and other groups in Western Australia. It is not within the compass of this paper to cover here those interviews. The questions that emerged for a Fear Scale related to changes in behavioural patterns, strategic points in the construction of fear such as the receipt of the "Be alert, not alarmed" package, personal and community risk perceptions and to personal experiences of terrorism.

Respondents were also asked to rate their feelings of safety before and after the September 11 attacks as the preliminary qualitative research revealed that people were more likely to articulate their feelings in terms of safety as opposed to fear and anxiety. Respondents were asked to rate their answers along a five point Lickert scale in response to the following items:

- How safe did you feel before 11 September 2001
- How safe did you feel after 11 September 2001
- I think twice before going to a crowded shopping centre
- If I have to take the train, tram or bus I feel anxious
- How safe do you feel taking public transport?
- How safe do you feel travelling by airline?

Respondents were asked to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the following questions designed to test behavioural changes, responses to strategic points, experiences of terrorist attacks and community risk perceptions:

- If you saw an unattended bag at a bus or train stop or in any other public place, would you report it?
- If you saw an unattended bag at work, would you report it?
- Have you over the last 2 years traveled to any of these countries- US, England, Bali, Spain, Italy, Singapore, Indonesia/ Bali, Thailand, Malaysia?
- Do you intend to travel to any of these countries in the next year?
- Did you receive the 'Be alert' package?
- Did you keep your 'Be alert' package?
- Did you read it?
- Did you, or do you know anyone who was killed or harmed in a terrorist attack?
- What was your relationship with that person?
- Do you know anyone who had a close friend who was killed or harmed in a terrorist attack?
- Do you feel that you belong to a community that is viewed negatively by others?

- Do you feel that the media portrays you or the community you belong to negatively?

The final survey incorporated some questions from the Fear of Rape scale on restrictive and protective behaviours that were used to gain a sense of how safe or unsafe people felt within their own neighbourhoods or communities, such as:

- I avoid going out alone
- I ask friend to walk me to my car in public car parks
- I feel confident walking alone in my neighbourhood
- If I heard that someone had been assaulted in my neighbourhood, I wouldn't leave the house unless I really had to.

A number of questions that tested general levels of suspicion and wariness of others were also retained:

- I am wary of people generally
- In general, I am suspicious of people
- In general, I am afraid of people
- When I am choosing a seat on the bus or train, I am conscious of who is sitting nearby

Sample

The survey, including the summative Likert scale, was administered nationally by telephone to 750 households. A probability (stratified random) sample was drawn from urban, regional and rural areas. Current ABS geo-demographic data were used to locate the top 10 and bottom 10 postcodes by income that were most representative of the national population by gender, religion, education and income. A national sample of 105 Moslems was included. The national population of Moslems is approximately 1.5 per cent. The disproportionate sampling was necessary to gain a statistically useful sample. NESB demographics were also taken into account with specialist interviewers available.

Findings

The results of the survey confirm a dramatic change in the feelings of safety before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks. 710 respondents (over 90%) reported feeling either very safe or fairly safe before the terrorist attacks. In contrast only 487 (65%) stated that they felt either very safe or fairly safe after the terrorist attacks. Results also showed a negligible response to feeling 'very unsafe' prior to the terrorist attacks (11 responses) increasing to 92 (8.1%) after the attacks.

Consistent with patterns reflected in fear of crime surveys, gender, income and levels of education impacted on feelings of fear and safety in relation to the terrorist risk. Table 1 illustrates that, 204 men and 224 women respondents reported feeling very safe before the 9/11 attacks. These numbers declined to 125 and 82 respectively after the attacks. In addition, the number of women who reported that they felt very unsafe after the attacks increased from 3 to 69 compared to an increase from 8 to 23 for men.

Feelings of safety before and after the terrorist attacks varied between the top 10 and bottom 10 income households surveyed as shown in Table 2. Those in the bottom 10 income households surveyed were more likely to feel either 'a bit safe' or 'very unsafe' after the September 11 attacks. However, both categories reported a decrease in feeling 'very safe' after the attacks with only a slight variation between the top and bottom 10 income households surveyed. Both categories also showed an increase in reported feelings of 'fairly safe' and 'a bit safe', however this was matched by decreases in reported feelings of 'very safe' and increases in feelings of 'very unsafe'.

Table 3 indicates that respondents with lower levels of education (Year 12 or equivalent and below) felt less safe than respondents with a tertiary qualification. 376 respondents with year 12 or below schooling reported feeling either 'very safe' or 'fairly safe' before the terrorist attacks compared with 340 respondents with a tertiary qualification. Feelings of safety decreased for both groups after the attacks with a more significant decrease of -143 for respondents with lower levels of education compared to -103 for tertiary qualified

respondents. Respondents with lower levels of education were also more likely to report feeling ‘very unsafe’ after the terrorist attacks at almost double the rate of respondents with tertiary qualifications. While both categories reported a decrease in feelings of ‘very safe’ after the terrorist attacks, the shift in responses were more heavily skewed towards the lesser feelings of safety (‘a bit safe’ and ‘very unsafe’) for respondents with lower levels of education than for respondents with tertiary qualifications.

Table 1: Feelings of Safety Before and After 9/11 (represented in brackets), by sex

| | Very safe | Fairly safe | A bit safe | Very unsafe | Don't know |
|--------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Male | 204 (125) | 108 (122) | 10 (60) | 8 (23) | 1 (1) |
| Female | 224 (82) | 174 (158) | 15 (109) | 3 (69) | 3 (1) |

$p < 0.001$

Table 2: Feelings of Safety Before and After 9/11 (represented in brackets), by Top 10 and Bottom 10 Income Households

| | Very safe | Fairly safe | A bit safe | Very unsafe | Dont know |
|-----------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| Top 10 | 167 (74) | 97 (113) | 13 (64) | 4 (30) | 1 (1) |
| Bottom 10 | 170 (94) | 111 (114) | 5 (54) | 2 (8) | 3 (1) |
| Special sample* | 91 (39) | 74 (53) | 7 (51) | 5 (34) | 0 (0) |

* Special sample is Moslem respondents

$p < 0.001$

Table 3: Feelings of Safety Before and after 9/11, by Education

Year 12 or equivalent and below:

| | Very safe | Fairly safe | A bit safe | Very unsafe | Don't know |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| | 218 (108) | 158 (116) | 20 (96) | 4 (60) | 2 (1) |

Tertiary qualified Bachelor degree or above, Advanced diploma, Diploma or trade

certificate:

| | Very safe | Fairly safe | A bit safe | Very unsafe | Don't know |
|--|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| | 210 (99) | 130 (138) | 5 (73) | 7 (32) | 2 (1) |

$p < 0.001$

The results of the survey show a correlation between community perceptions and feelings of safety. Table 4 shows that respondents who considered themselves members of communities that were perceived negatively by the media felt less safe after the terrorist attacks. This correlation is supported by current literature on the impact of a perceived negative media image Australian Muslims. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, confirms that, "The biggest impact of prejudice on Arab and Muslim Australians is the substantial increase in fear" (HREOC, 2004, 77). The Australian Arabic Council reported a major rise in reports of discrimination and vilification of Arab Australians in the month after the terrorist attacks (2004, 43). The perceived media bias against Muslims and Arabs is perhaps the most salient issue of concern for Australian Muslims and has been the subject of debate and discussion at numerous forums.

Table 4: Feelings of Safety Before and After 9/11, by Perceived Negative Media Portrayal of the Community in Which Respondent Belongs

| | Very safe | Fairly safe | A bit safe | Very unsafe | Dont know |
|-------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| Yes | 117 (51) | 95 (79) | 12 (63) | 4 (35) | 0 (0) |
| No | 311 (156) | 187 (201) | 13 (106) | 7 (57) | 4 (2) |
| Total | 207 | 280 | 169 | 92 | 4 (2) |

$p < 0.026$

The authors' national survey of fear confirmed that over 70% of respondents would adopt this form of protective behaviour in response to the terrorist threat.

Table 5: "If you saw an unattended bag at a bus or train stop or in any other public place,

would you report it?"

| | | |
|------------------|-----|------|
| Yes | 555 | 74.0 |
| No | 133 | 17.7 |
| Dont know/Unsure | 62 | 8.3 |

The Metric of Fear

The authors' Fear Scale is a summative, Likert, scale made up of 22 items with a 0-4 rating. The maximum score for all items is 88 indicating a person who is extremely fearful at home, in their neighbourhood and in their community. A minimum score of 0 indicates a person who feels extremely safe. Figure 1 provides an overview of the summed scores from each respondent. The vertical axis represents number of respondents and the horizontal axis the aggregate scores from the Fear Scale.

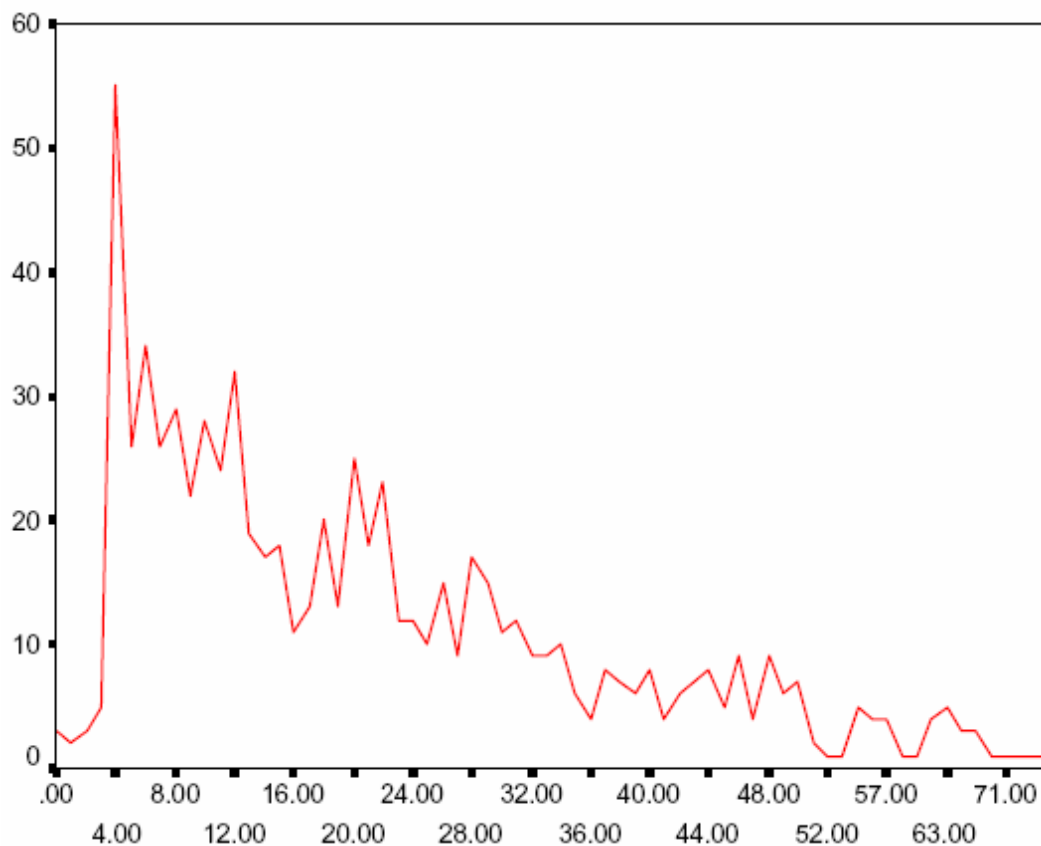


Figure 1: Scores on the Metric of Fear by Frequency, among 750 Respondents

The mean score from the Fear Scale results was 21. A break down of the data from the survey indicates that those above the average score and where there are statistically significant differences tended to be women, those in poorer demographics (the bottom 10 postcodes by income), those less educated and Australian Muslims.

While the Fear Scale confirms that many respondents regardless of differences in gender, age, education, social status or religion feel less safe after the September 11 terrorist attacks, specific demographic groups have a heightened sense of fear at home, in their neighbourhood and within the general community.

Conclusion

Obvious questions arise about when a government might intervene in order to assist people or communities who are in an extreme state of fear and at which point in the scale policy makers might think urgent action is required. There could be little doubt, though, that those with a score of 70 or above have restrictive or assertive behaviours that are in the extreme and that they are at risk of isolation.

The Fear Scale is useful as a quick and tested measure of fear, covering restrictive and assertive behaviours. That scale, however, needs to be complemented with appropriate questions that contextualise the scale itself. For instance, in this study the authors were interested in the effect of 9/11 and other variables such as negative media portrayal of particular communities. These variables yielded interesting data, showing a significant drop in feelings of safety after 9/11 across the full range of demographics, with very significant restrictive and assertive behaviours among selected demographics, such as Moslems, those of lower education, lower income and women.

Theories of fear in the media, cultural studies and political science domains require empirical instantiation. Fear of Rape (FOR) scales for example are not simply abstract scales that serve no purpose. They are, in fact, employed by policy makers at local and national levels to get a

reasonable sense of what is happening among women and whether actions can be taken in support. The Fear Scale proposed and tested in the authors' study is, like the FOR, an attempt to provide empirical evidence on what is happening with feelings of safety and fear among Australians.

The authors are not suggesting that the results from the Fear Scale are anything other than indicative. Without any evidence on how safe or fearful people are, however, there is no real way to gauge the extent of community feelings on safety and fear (community consultations notwithstanding). The authors are also aware that sensitive data about people's feelings of safety and fear may be abused by governments. A government might find that a particular group is fearful and instead of alleviating that fear decide to make it worse, for political purpose. Brian Massumi's (2005) ideas on affective modulation of fear and Foucault's panopticon fit in here very well (see also Aly and Balnaves 2005). Equally, if as Robin suggests we "look beyond ourselves to the common good", then we would find that good empirical evidence on safety and fear can inform not only governments but citizens and communities themselves. In this, empirical evidence on safety and fear should be publicly available in order to hold governments accountable for how they act in response.

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