

Behavioural responses to the terrorism threat: Applications of the Metric of Fear

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Abstract

In Australia, terrorism is defined by the Australian Defence Force as the “use or threatened use of violence for political ends or for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear” (Martyn 2002). Among the various definitions of terrorism that exist is the universal notion that terrorism uses violence, targets non-combatants, is intended to intimidate and creates a state of terror. Importantly, all definitions agree that fear is the ultimate aim of terrorism. Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001, Australian polls indicated heightened levels of fear and anxiety about a possible terrorist attack in Australia, despite the fact that risk assessment studies underline that the actual risk of a terrorist attack is marginal in comparison to many other mortality risks such as smoking and car accidents (Mueller 2004; Viscusi, 2003).

*This paper reports on a national project at Edith Cowan University funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (Safeguarding Australia). This project examines the nature and extent of the fear of terrorism operating within the Australian community since the September 11 terrorist attacks. The project incorporates a qualitative study for the development of a ‘fear’ scale. As the first of its kind, the **Metric of Fear** measures the extent to which Australians are restricting their behaviours and adopting protective behaviours in response to the fear of terrorism.*

Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, Australians have witnessed the introduction of counter-terrorism measures on an unprecedented scale including border surveillance strategies, legislative amendments, communication strategies, the introduction of a citizenship test and a range of approaches aimed at addressing radicalization and promoting social inclusion, all of which suggest that the threat of terrorism continues to rate highly as a matter of political and public concern. Concern over the threat of an imminent terrorist attack is captured in the National Security Information Campaign, *Let’s Look Out For Australia*, first launched in December 2002. In September 2004, a new phase of the campaign entitled *Help Protect Australia from Terrorism* was launched. The campaign includes television, press, transit and outdoor advertising urging Australians to report “possible signs of terrorism to the National Security Hotline”. The use of both visual and print media ensures that the campaign is highly visible to Australians and communicates a message that Australians need to be consistently vigilant about the threat of terrorism (Aly and Balnaves 2007).

This paper reports on Australia's first study on eliciting empirical data on fear of terrorism. The research project at Edith Cowan University, *Australian responses to the images and discourses of terrorism and the other: establishing a metric of fear*, is a national, cross-methodological, investigation of public opinion formation, interpersonal communication and media messages. Funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (Safeguarding Australia), the project interrogates the key media events and messages, as remembered and circulated by specific audiences, and analyses different constructions of terrorism and fear responses in Australian society.

Research Methodology

The first level of inquiry involved qualitative research, conducted by the project's PhD researcher Anne Aly. The purpose of this research was to examine how Australian audiences construct the media and political discourses on terrorism and how this impacts on community fears of terrorism, comparing responses from members of Western Australia's Muslim communities with those of the broader community. Ten focus groups were conducted with 85 participants from various ethnic backgrounds, religious and age groups. Of the ten focus groups, four were held exclusively with Australian Muslim participants in gender specific groups. The focus groups discussed issues relating to the media discourse on terrorism and perceptions of the terrorist threat to Australia, the dominant messages in the media discourse on terrorism, and how information and opinions about terrorism are circulated. Initial analysis of the focus groups provided themes for further investigation through a series of 60 in-depth individual interviews with equal numbers of Muslim respondents and respondents from the broader Australian community. Prompts were used to explore respondents' constructions of media messages and the influence of the media on their opinions and perceptions.

Thematic analysis techniques were used to analyse the focus group transcripts with the aid of the NVivo data analysis tool. The broad theoretical approach was phenomenological. Asensio (2000) describes the outcome of phenomenological research as "a set of categories of description which describe the variation in experiences of phenomena" in ways that allow researchers to deepen their understanding of the phenomena. The constructs derived from the focus group analysis were used to inform the adaptation of rape and vulnerability inventories to create a fear of terrorism survey. The survey was administered by telephone to 750 households nationally. In order to obtain a statistically useful sample of Australian Muslims, the survey was administered to 105 Muslim households, an over-representative number in comparison to the demographic data, which places Muslim Australians at just 1.5% of the total Australian population¹. Based on the findings from the focus groups, the Fear Survey included questions to test behavioural responses to the fear of terrorism and self reported feelings of safety before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks as well as questions on individual and community identity.

¹ ABS Data from the 2001 Census. Available from www.omi.wa.gov.au

Developing the Fear Scale

The focus group discussions provided an insight into how people talk about terrorism, their perceptions of the terrorist threat and their fears in relation to terrorism. This kind of information was useful for constructing questions likely to produce responses that would most accurately reflect the level and nature of the fear of terrorism prevalent in Australian communities. The focus group discussions revealed that people were most likely to articulate feelings of fear in terms of safety and behaviour modifications in response to the perceived threat of a terrorist attack. Behaviour modifications expressed by the participants included avoiding situations which resonated with media images of global terrorist attacks such as public transport and crowded public places. They also included cognitive responses such as heightened awareness of surroundings and suspicion of strangers, particularly of young Arab or Muslim men whose physical appearance mirrored the media-perpetuated image of a terrorist.

The survey sought comparative feelings of safety before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11. These self-report data are useful as they are indicative of current perceptions of safety compared to the past. However, like all self-report data, especially involving lengthy amounts of time, they should be viewed with some caution.

Several scales have been developed that attempt to measure the fear of rape and the fear of crime (Liska 1988; Warr 1990; Senn 1996). 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 terms of examining fear phenomenologically, 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 survey tools that could be modified to include the constructs extracted from the first stage of the project, the researchers 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.

Of the existing scales, the Fear of Rape Scale developed by Gordon & Riger (1979), provided a sound basis for developing the Fear Scale. Modifications to this scale included the omission of some questions specific to the context of rape and the inclusion of questions derived from the constructs that evolved from the phenomenological analysis of the focus group findings. The Fear Scale consists of three (indiscriminate) sections. One section was designed to collect demographic data. Another section tested self reported feelings of safety before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States at both the personal and community level, and perceptions of the terrorist risk. A third section tested restrictive and protective behavioural responses to fear to gain

a sense of how safe or unsafe people felt within their own neighbourhoods or in situations that resonated with images of terrorism.

Findings

A statistical analysis of the results of the Fear Scale revealed certain characteristics about the prevalence and nature of the fear of terrorism in the Australian community.² Notably, the findings confirm heightened levels of fear after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and behavioural modifications in response to feelings of fear. These findings are substantiated by empirical evidence observed in the qualitative analysis of the focus groups and individual interviews.

Table 1 presents reported feelings of safety prior to and after the September 11 terrorist attacks. On a four point scale ranging from very safe (a score of 1) to very unsafe (a score of 4) the mean for both the Muslim communities and the broader communities is substantially higher for after the September 11 attacks. The higher means for Muslim respondents (both before and after 9/11) are supported by qualitative data in which Muslim participants expressed high levels of fear of the possible repercussions of a terrorist attack and the impact on themselves, their families and the Muslim communities in Australia.

Table 1. Feelings of safety before and after 9/11 on a four- point scale (higher mean scores indicate lower levels of felt safety)

| | Class | N | Mean |
|------------------|-------------------|-----|------|
| Safe before 9/11 | Broader Community | 569 | 1.46 |
| | Muslims | 177 | 1.58 |
| Safe after 9/11 | Broader Community | 571 | 2.12 |
| | Muslims | 177 | 2.45 |

The elevated levels of fear in the Muslim population in comparison to the broader community may, in part, be due to perceptions among the Muslim communities that they are viewed negatively and portrayed negatively in the popular media. In response to the question ‘Do you feel that you belong to a community that is viewed negatively by others?’ 59% of Muslims responded in the positive compared to only 17% of respondents from the broader community. In response to the question ‘Do you feel that the media portrays you or the community you belong to negatively?’ 67% of the Muslims surveyed responded in the positive compared to only 19% of the broader community. The Chi-Square test for these associations is significant ($p < .001$), and can be generalised to the rest of the population.

² Of the sample observed ($n = 750$), 44% were male and 66% were female; 24% were Muslim and 76% were not; 54% had a school education, 18% had a technical education and 28% had a tertiary education.

Fear Scale

The focus groups revealed that those who expressed fear of terrorism were likely to express their fear in terms of changes in behavioural patterns. Some participants in the focus groups had adopted preventative behaviours such as avoiding public transport. Others were unaware of their own anxieties until they were placed in situations in which their fear motivated them to take on assertive or precautionary behaviours, such as increased awareness of their surroundings. The fear scale incorporated these findings into 23 questions designed to test if respondents had adopted a range of behavioural modifications in response to a perceived terrorist threat.

The sub-scales that emerged from the analysis of the responses to the 23 questions relating to fear: fear of being alone, wariness of others, fear in immediate proximity and fear in public places, represent dimensions associated with the two main constructs of interest in this study³, namely restrictive and protective behaviours. Cronbach alphas for fear of being alone ($\alpha = .79$), wariness of others ($\alpha = .79$) and fear in immediate proximity ($\alpha = .74$) all meet Nunnally's (1978) minimum requirement of 0.7. While fear in public places ($\alpha = .63$) does not meet this requirement, Hair et al (1998) suggest that a Cronbach alpha can be as low as 0.6 if the research is exploratory in nature.

Table 2. Fear sub-scales

| | FEAR Sub-Scales | | | |
|---|------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Component | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| <u>Factor 1 - Fear of Being Alone ($\alpha = .79$)</u> | | | | |
| B4. I ask friends to walk me to my car in public car parks. | 0.80 | | | |
| B14. If I had to walk to my car, I would make sure I was accompanied by someone I trusted | 0.75 | | | |
| B7. When I am walking alone I think about where I would run to if in trouble. | 0.64 | | | |
| B10. If I was waiting for an elevator and it arrived with one person alone inside, I would wait for the next one. | 0.57 | | | |
| B3. I avoid going out alone. | 0.57 | | | |
| <u>Factor 2 - Wariness of Others ($\alpha = .79$)</u> | | | | |
| B13. In general, I am suspicious of people. | | 0.80 | | |
| B11. I am wary of people generally. | | 0.76 | | |
| B17. In general, I am afraid of people. | | 0.62 | | |
| B12. If I have to walk outside I take precautions. | | 0.60 | | |
| B9. I am especially careful of wearing clothes that do not draw attention to me. | | 0.49 | | |
| <u>Factor 3 - Fear in Immediate Proximity ($\alpha = .74$)</u> | | | | |
| B21. How safe do you feel being out alone in your neighbourhood? | | | 0.76 | |
| B16. How safe do you feel in your own house when you are by yourself? | | | 0.72 | |
| B6. In general how safe do you feel? | | | 0.69 | |

³ Of the original scale five questions were deleted as they either had poor factor loadings or loaded onto more than one factor.

| | | | |
|---|--|--|------|
| B8. I feel confident walking alone in my neighbourhood | | | 0.58 |
| Factor 4 - Fear in Public Places ($\alpha = .63$) | | | |
| B1. I think twice before going to a crowded shopping centre. | | | 0.77 |
| B2. If I have to take the train, tram or bus I feel anxious. | | | 0.74 |
| B22. How safe do you feel travelling by airline? | | | 0.56 |

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis; Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

While it is, of course, unlikely that a 20-30 minute interview will yield detailed insights into a person's psychology, the fear scale does provide an indicative measure of fear at both the individual and community level. The scale ranges from 1 to 5, where a mean score of 2.0 or over indicates the level of community fear is significant enough to warrant behavioural modifications that are either restrictive or assertive. A mean score of 4.0-5.0 is indicative of extreme levels of community fear. The kinds of behaviours that may be expected with this level of fear include social and economic isolation induced by the fear of being the victim of a terrorist attack. It is to be expected that such extreme restrictive and protective behaviours would have a significantly adverse impact on the social and economic health and well-being of the community.

Consistent with patterns reflected in fear of crime surveys, there were statistically significant differences in the feelings of fear and safety against demographic variables such as gender, income and education level. The sample of Muslim respondents to the fear survey also demonstrated significantly higher levels of fear in comparison to respondents from the broader community, as indicated in Table 3. Responses from the Muslim population showed higher means across all four fear sub-scales, indicating responses across the spectrum of protective and restrictive behaviours. The qualitative exploration suggests that, unlike the broader community, members of Australia's Muslim communities, are adopting such behaviours in response to the perceived *impact* (both personal and community) of a terrorist attack as opposed to the perceived *risk* of a terrorist attack occurring.

Table 3. Fear Scale Means- Broader Community and Muslims

| | Class | N | Mean |
|---------------------|-------------------|-----|--------|
| Alone | Broader Community | 505 | 1.6966 |
| | Muslims | 155 | 2.0929 |
| Others | Broader Community | 551 | 1.6163 |
| | Muslims | 171 | 2.1205 |
| Immediate Proximity | Broader Community | 564 | 1.5554 |
| | Muslims | 173 | 2.0332 |
| Public Places | Broader Community | 456 | 1.7617 |
| | Muslims | 157 | 2.1571 |

Conclusion: Applications of the Metric of Fear

Researchers have for some time used fear of crime and rape scales in order to gauge perceived safety among individuals and communities, and inform appropriate policy responses. The present study has revealed the presence of heightened levels of fear, particularly among Australian Muslim communities. These trends require regular monitoring as increased levels of community fear can impact adversely on health and wellbeing and by extension involve substantial social and economic cost to Australia. The Metric of Fear can be used to inform communication strategies around the threat of terrorism and the impact of strategies such as the National Security Information Campaign. At another level, the Metric may have some useful applications to risk assessment and contingency planning by offering researchers a tool for predicting behavioural modifications in response to heightened perceptions of threat.

Fear has a legitimate role in nature and in human societies. Anxiety over terrorism has a legitimate basis and should play a significant role in shaping policy responses in countering terrorism.

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