



## Relationships between perceived risk of terrorism, fear, and avoidance behaviors among Pakistani university students: A multigroup study

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationships between perceived risk of terrorism, fear of terrorism, and avoidance behaviors among high and low terrorism exposure groups. The two groups consisted of undergraduate business students enrolled in public sector universities in two Pakistani cities, Peshawar and Islamabad. The participants from Peshawar ( $N = 277$ ) comprised the high exposure group whereas the participants from Islamabad ( $N = 259$ ) comprised the low exposure group, based on the level of terrorist activity in the regions. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and analyzed using covariance-based structural equation modeling. The multigroup analysis indicated that the magnitude of the relationship between fear of terrorism and avoidance behaviors is stronger in the high exposure group than in the low exposure group. However, the findings did not support differences between the effects of perceived risk of terrorism on fear of terrorism and avoidance behaviors. Thus, the assumption that exposure to continuous terrorism is sensitizing was partially supported. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that fear of terrorism can have more detrimental effects on various life activities of individuals who are more vulnerable to terrorism than those who are less vulnerable. A number of practical implications are also discussed.

### 1. Introduction

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, terrorism has been regarded as a global threat to which people all over the world are exposed (Malik, Abdullah, & Uli, 2014). The recognition that future terrorist attacks are a concrete reality negatively influences people's psychological functioning and daily life routines, and it also undermines their quality of life (De Clercq, Haq, & Azeem, 2017). While previous studies have documented the associations between perceived risk of terrorism, fear of terrorism, and avoidance behaviors (e.g., Nellis, 2009a; Somer, Ruvio, Soref, & Sever, 2005), suggesting that perceived risk predicts fear, which in turn predicts avoidance behaviors, we are aware of no study that has determined whether the magnitude of these relationships varies according to the level of one's exposure to terrorism. In this multigroup study, we investigated these relations among respondents from two Pakistani cities – Peshawar and Islamabad – that have been characterized by substantially different levels of terrorist activity. Pakistan has been a victim of terrorism since 2001 and has paid a staggering human and financial cost in the fight against this menace. The residents of Peshawar and

surrounding areas have endured nearly sixteen years (2001 to 2017) of continuous and ongoing exposure to terrorism. Islamabad, on the other hand, has only witnessed discrete acts of terrorism during this time period.

Consensus exists in the literature that exposure to an acute, unexpected, single act of terrorism is likely to produce a strong fear reaction (Ronen, Rahav, & Appel, 2003). However, the literature depicts two schools of thought regarding individuals' responses to exposure to continuous terrorism. One view posits that individuals exposed to continuous terrorism become accustomed to it and learn to expect it; that is, continuous terrorism leads to desensitization and to habituation to the terror (Brandon & Silke, 2007; Matthews, Scheier, Bunson, & Carducci, 1989). Habituation here refers to “a decreasing reaction to a traumatic event that occurs repeatedly across time in an otherwise stable context” (Reade & Lee, 2012, p. 87). Thus, some research has suggested that exposure to continuous terrorism activates a process of inoculation characterized by a gradual decline in the number and intensity of symptoms over time (e.g., Miller, 1996; Punamäki, 1996). These studies have maintained that only a small fraction of those exposed will develop long-term symptoms, and that most individuals will

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become accustomed to living with the risk of terror and danger (Ronen et al., 2003). On the other hand, another body of research has argued that exposure to continuous terrorism is sensitizing; that is, it may lead to the development of stronger and more serious responses as time passes (Baker & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996). Sensitization here refers to “an invigorated response when the organism is in a heightened state of anxiety, fear, or vigilance” (Reade & Lee, 2012, p. 87). These researchers have suggested that continuous terrorism may cause a permanent change in the way one views the world, particularly the assumption that the world is a safe place (Macksoud & Aber, 1996; Ronen et al., 2003), which, in turn, has implications for individual mental health.

The current study follows the research that clearly distinguishes fear from perceived risk (Ferraro, 1995; Nellis, 2009a). In her review of the fear of crime literature, Hale (1996), states that fear of crime is commonly defined as the “negative emotion” that results from crime or its associated symbols, and that it is conceptually distinct from judgments or risks. By contrast, risk is a cognitive response, or calculated likelihood, of victimization (Ferraro, 1995). Several studies have found that perceived risk is a strong predictor of fear (e.g., LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Mueller & Tschan, 2011). Empirical research identifies a number of consequences associated with fear of crime, particularly its impact on quality of life (Lorenc et al., 2012). Warr (1994) suggest that consequences of fear can be divided into two broad categories: avoidance behaviors and precautionary/protective behaviors. Avoidance behaviors are those actions “taken to decrease exposure to crime by removing oneself from or increasing the distance from situations in which the risk of criminal victimization is believed to be high” (DuBow, McCabe, & Kaplan, 1979, p. 31). The situations which are being avoided may be characterized in terms of location, time, or people, or some combination thereof. Reducing exposure to risk through avoidance behaviors, however, is not always possible. Where avoidance is not an option, individuals may engage in precautionary behaviors, that is, strategies designed to reduce the marginal risk of victimization, such as altering their mode of transportation or seeking companions for the journey (Warr, 1994). Survey research indicates that avoidance behaviors are the most common responses to fear of crime (Nellis, 2009b).

Fig. 1 depicts the conceptual framework of this study. It shows that perceived risk of terrorism predicts fear of terrorism, which in turn predicts avoidance behaviors. Furthermore, we expect that the magnitude of the relationships between the three constructs will be stronger for individuals in the high exposure group than individuals in the low exposure group.

### 1.1. Hypotheses

Based on the model previously proposed by LeBlanc and Kelloway (2002), we expect that:

1. Perceived risk of terrorism positively influences fear of terrorism.
2. Fear of terrorism positively influences avoidance behaviors.
3. Perceived risk of terrorism positively influences avoidance behaviors.
4. Based on the position that exposure to continuous terrorism is

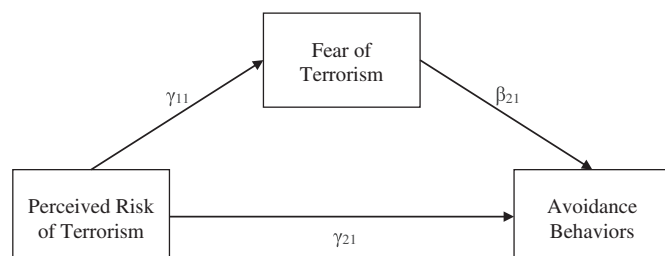


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

sensitizing (Baker & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999), we anticipate that the magnitude of the relationships among perceived risk of terrorism, fear of terrorism, and avoidance behaviors is stronger in the high exposure group compared to the low exposure group.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample was composed of two groups. One group included 277 [213 (77%) male and 64 (23%) female] business undergraduates in different years of study and course major from three randomly selected public sector universities in Peshawar, with a mean age of 20.12 years ( $SD = 1.08$ ). Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, despite great efforts has not succeeded in combating terrorism and due to peculiar security situations its residents are exposed to terrorism on a continuous basis. The other group comprised 259 [163 (63%) male and 96 (37%) female] business undergraduates in different years of study and course major from three randomly selected public sector universities in Islamabad, with a mean age of 20.19 years ( $SD = 1.03$ ). Islamabad, the federal capital of Pakistan, has not witnessed any major terrorist attack in the last few years due to stern security measures. As a result, the residents of Islamabad have become less vulnerable to terrorist attacks. No significant differences between the two groups were found in demographic characteristics. However, a two-sample z-test for proportions revealed significant differences between the two groups in level of physical ( $z = 8.938, p < 0.05$ ) as well as psychological exposure to terrorism ( $z = 5.213, p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the existence of two separate groups was also confirmed statistically. Accordingly, we termed the Peshawar sample as the high exposure group and the Islamabad sample as the low exposure group.

### 2.2. Procedure

In this cross-sectional study, data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire during June and July 2017. The questionnaire was administered in English, which is the medium of instruction for university education in Pakistan. Students responded to the instrument during regular classes. Instructors who were willing to provide class time allowed one of the researchers to ask students if they would be willing to participate in the survey. Researchers provided information to participants related to the purpose of the survey, that participation was voluntary, and that participants' anonymity would be protected. To ensure that all participants in the high exposure group had been exposed to continuous terrorism, we included (for both groups) only students who had lived in the geographical area for the last 5 years. The response rate was 55.4% and 51.8% for the high and low exposure groups, respectively.

### 2.3. Measures

The survey instrument for this study comprised three parts. The first part contained questions about participant demographic information (e.g., age, gender, and education). In part two the respondents were asked to respond “yes” or “no” to two statements about their exposure to terrorism, one assessing physical exposure “In the past two years, have you been at the location of a terrorist attack immediately before or after the attack?”, the second assessing psychological exposure “Do you know anyone who was hurt in one of the terrorist acts over the past two years?” Similar questions were asked in previous research to measure physical and psychological exposure to terrorism (e.g., Schiff et al., 2006).

Part three comprised questions measuring the three study variables. Perceived risk of terrorism was measured with five items developed by Nellis (2009a). A sample item is “I could be the victim in a suicide bombing.” Scale anchors ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (extremely

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