



Negative emotion and trait emotional intelligence in reaction to terrorist attacks



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Emotional intelligence
Terrorism
Emotions
Risk perception

ABSTRACT

Deadly terrorist attacks shook Europe and generated significant emotional turmoil well beyond people directly harmed. At the same time, large waves of immigrants are seeking help in many European countries. In this climate, we investigated how negative emotion elicited by terrorist attacks shapes estimates of future attacks, the perception of immigrants, and opinions toward immigration among respondents living in a small town in Northern Italy. We found that stronger negative emotion corresponded with the belief that future attacks would be more likely to occur in respondents' hometowns than in farther locations, with a greater tendency to see immigrants as threatening, and lower willingness to accept them. Importantly, we found that this pattern was more pronounced for individuals with low (vs. high) trait emotional intelligence.

Brutal terrorist attacks have hit various European cities in recent years, generating emotional reactions such as anger, fear, worry, vulnerability, and threat (Burns & Slovic, 2007; Lerner et al., 2003) well beyond the people who were directly harmed. Such a boundless effect – which sets terrorism aside from other hazards – raises the challenge of understanding how negative emotion influences people who are not directly touched by attacks. To tackle this question, we conducted a survey among the general population in Padova, a town in Northern Italy. Specifically, we investigated how negative emotion elicited by attacks affects people's 1) estimates of the likelihood of future attacks, 2) perceptions of immigrants, and 3) opinions about immigration. We also examined whether the impact of emotion on these variables depends on how successfully people recognize and utilize emotional information, namely their trait emotional intelligence (henceforth, trait EI; Petrides & Furnham, 2003).

1. Emotions and terrorism

Abundant evidence shows that terrorist attacks trigger fear, anxiety, vulnerability, and a sense of threat (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003). Importantly, emotions also affect how people perceive and evaluate risks. One theoretical model that explains why this happens is the affect heuristic (Slovic, 2004), which suggests that people judge risk based on how they feel about a specific situation or hazard. Put simply, people will

perceive a certain activity as being riskier when they experience negative (vs. positive) feelings about it.

Research on the affect heuristic has mainly focused on integral affect—that is, the emotional state elicited by the “mental representation of objects” (Västfjäll, Peters, & Slovic, 2008, p. 64). Not only are mental representations of attacks particularly vivid in people's minds, but they also trigger negative emotions such as worry and shock (Fahmy, Cho, Wanta, & Song, 2009) that are subsequently used to judge future risks (Slovic, 2004). Affective information drives judgments and behavior even more when an event is widely covered by the media, as has happened with terrorist attacks that occurred in Europe and other Western countries. Dreadful images and stories of what witnesses of attacks saw and experienced create vivid emotional cues that people will use when they assess the likelihood of future attacks (Sunstein, 2002).

However, the extent to which such images influence people's estimates of the likelihood of an attack depends on how similar past events are to the location for which this judgment is given. This means that people will estimate future attacks as highly likely in Europe or in geographical locations that include potential targets such as large cities (e.g., Italy). When making these judgments, people are likely to remember many previous events in similar cities or areas and end up thinking that attacks are very likely to happen in the near future.

In contrast, this is less likely to happen for specific towns (i.e., Padova, a small city in the north of Italy) that are not comparable to the

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cities in which past attacks took place. In this case, people's estimates will be driven by their general emotional reactions to terrorism. If people experience negative emotion when thinking about terrorist attacks, they will expect these events to be about as likely in small towns as in areas including major cities (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000). Otherwise, if their negative emotion is not particularly high, people will perceive an attack in a local town as being less likely than in other areas with large cities.

Finally, based on past work showing that familiarity with certain stimuli or situations tends to decrease risk perception (Song & Schwarz, 2009), people should perceive an attack in their local town (Padova) as being less likely to happen than in larger areas such as the whole country (Italy) or continent (Europe). We thus hypothesize that:

H1. Negative emotion elicited by thinking about attacks should correspond to higher estimates of the likelihood of future attacks when people are asked about their local hometown rather than about larger locations that include major cities.

The emotions in reactions to attacks also affect public opinion of immigrants because people perceive a connection between terrorism and immigration. Hellwig and Sinno (2016) found that security fears shape attitudes toward immigrants, and Levine and Campell (1972) showed that negative emotions in the aftermath of an attack increase xenophobia. Finally, Huddy et al. (2002) showed that terrorist attacks can lead people to exhibit biases and negative views about other out-groups, and Bar-Tal and Labin (2001) found that emotions related to terrorist attacks are with negative stereotypes toward member of the out-group.

The work outlined so far clearly shows that attacks trigger negative emotions, which in turn shapes people's perceptions of out-group members. At the same time, attacks also influence how people feel about and perceive these persons. For instance, Legewie (2013) reports that after the 9/11 attacks, people started to see immigrants as a threat to security and social order, and Echebarria-Echabe and Fernandez-Guede (2006) found increased negative attitudes toward Muslims after the 2004 Madrid bombings. Taken together, these findings suggest the possibility that negative emotion leads people to perceive all immigrants – and not only those who share the same religious affiliation as the attack perpetrators – as dangerous. Support for this prediction comes from a recent work by Bouman, van Zomeren, and Otten (2015), who found that realistic threats led to generalized intolerance toward local members of groups who did not necessarily share the same identity as the threatening individuals. Since those who carry out attacks are – generally – perceived as immigrants, this work suggests that people will tend to see most immigrants as dangerous. This leads us to predict that:

H2a. Negative emotion elicited by terrorist attacks should correspond to a stronger belief that immigrants are threatening.

Relatedly:

H2b. Negative emotion elicited by terrorist attacks should correspond to a lower willingness to accept immigrants in the country.

2. Trait emotional intelligence

Trait EI is defined as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions assessed via questionnaires and rating scales (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007), and it occupies its own unique location in the personality space, together with two other dominant trait theories: the Big Three (Eysenck, 1967) and the Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1992) theories.

Research has shown that trait EI moderates the effect of emotion on people's behavior in stressful situations within different settings. For instance, Pittarello et al. (2017) found that people with high (vs. low) trait EI were more successful at managing the emotional distress arising

from moral dilemmas, and Agnoli, Pittarello, Hysenbelli, and Rubaltelli (2015) showed that high-trait-EI individuals were more resilient to failures. Relevant to our work, Mikolajczak et al. (2008) showed that people with low (vs. high) EI were more likely to perceive events as threatening.

Since negative emotion elicited by terrorist attacks corresponds to a heightened perception of risk, it is reasonable to assume that negative emotion will impact people with low trait EI more than it will people with high trait EI. Put differently, being less successful at recognizing and utilizing negative emotional information should lead people with low levels of trait EI to perceive risks as greater than they actually are (Sunstein, 2002), when it comes to both estimating the likelihood of future attacks and judging immigrants.

Thus, we predict the trait EI will moderate the effect of negative emotion on people's estimates of the likelihood of future attacks and opinions toward immigrants and immigration. Formally put:

H3a. Negative emotion will correspond to a greater perceived likelihood of future attacks, especially in one's local hometown rather than in larger locations that include major cities, particularly for people with low trait EI compared to people with high trait EI.

H3b. Negative emotion will correspond to more adverse perceptions and a lower willingness to accept immigrants for people with low trait EI than for people with high trait EI.

3. Method

We recruited 202 respondents (46% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 45.18$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.02$ years) in Padova, a small city in Northern Italy. The demographic characteristics of our sample reflect the mean age of the population in the province of Padova (44.7 years) and are aligned with the actual prevalence of women (51.4%).² Thus, we believe that our respondents are representative of the population, to an extent. The respondents were randomly approached in the streets during the day, and data collection took place between March 13, 2016, and June 13, 2016. The respondents were asked to complete a survey structured as follows: We first presented them with a list of five emotions (sadness, worry, anger, fear, and stress) and asked them to rate, on a slider scale from 0 to 100, the intensity to which they felt such emotions immediately after thinking about possible terrorist attacks.

From a theoretical standpoint, asking respondents their emotional reactions immediately after they think about attacks is in line with previous work (Fredrickson et al., 2003; Lerner et al., 2003) and allows us to test the specific effect of the integral emotions, rather than the mood, elicited by attacks on respondents' subsequent opinions. Importantly, the order of the questions reduces the possibility that estimating the likelihood of future attacks will increase emotional reactions. Ratings on the emotions showed good consistency ($\alpha = 0.78$) and were thus averaged to create a single score for negative emotion.

In the following section, the respondents were asked to estimate the likelihood of a future attack across three locations: Padova, Italy, and Europe. Answers were given on a 0 to 100 slider scale expressing each probability (0 = not at all likely, 100 = absolutely likely).³

Next, we asked the respondents to rate on a slider scale the extent to which they felt that immigrants posed a threat to Italians' jobs, safety, culture, and religious identity (0 = no threat at all, 100 = very high threat). We averaged these scores ($\alpha = 0.95$) and created a single measure of threat. The following questions asked respondents to rate on a slider scale the extent to which they favored accepting immigrants in Italy as well as preventing them from coming to Italy (0 = not at all

² <http://dati.istat.it/>

³ The verbatim Italian wording was “Per niente probabile” and “Assolutamente probabile”, whose meaning in English corresponds to “not at all likely” and “absolutely likely”.

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