Fear of Terrorism and the Coping Paradox

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Abstract

In recent years, terrorist attacks on the Israeli people have continued to increase. The literature in the field indicates, interestingly, that although women are less likely to encounter terrorism, they exhibit a higher level of fear and more negative psychological symptoms than men. The major gender differences raise two main paradoxes; ‘the fear-victimization paradox’ and ‘the coping paradox.’ The purpose of this article is to examine the field of fear of terrorism, and to suggest an integrative explanation for the gender differences. The explanations presented in this paper discuss gender differences according to the way in which each gender perceives terrorism, and the use of different, gender-specific coping styles. These explanations help to clarify both paradoxes, and may assist in gaining a better understanding of the gender differences that exist in the levels of fear of terrorism.

Introduction

Terrorism is psychological warfare waged on the public mind for political gains. Its aim is to paralyze the population with fear and anxiety, to intimidate and to induce worry and concern that is disproportional to and far exceeds the actual damage it caused (Friedland & Merari, 1986). Terrorists terrorize by using threats or physical actions to kill and injure innocent people. In other words, although terrorist acts injure and hurt the immediate victims, their ultimate goal is to cause sense of fear and anxiety, helplessness and vulnerability among the general population. As a result, these acts evoke feelings of potential victimization (Krupnick, 1980; Freedman, 1983;
Schmid & Jongman, 1988) unrelated to the actual probability of becoming a victim (Friedland & Merari, 1986).

The fact that terrorist attacks are unpredictable creates a perception of uncontrollability, which affects one's capability of coping with the threat (Rachman, 1978; Friedland & Merari, 1986; Klar, Medding & Sarel, 1996).

In Israel, terrorism is a daily reality affecting its citizens in various aspects of their every day life. During the past five years, thousands of civilians have been killed and injured by terrorist attacks. Terrorism carries out its deadly strike at the heart of the civilian population, both in central areas and in more isolated locations. Continual exposure to the threats of terror elicits a sense of anxiety, helplessness and great concern.

Due to the increase in terrorism and the wide exposure it has received in the past few years (due to both the radical growth in numbers of terrorist attacks and the fact that terrorism has reached places never imagined before), there has been a significant rise in the amount of research on the issue, and most of it has focused on the psychological impact of terrorism.

Studies conducted in Israel reveal an amplified sense of anxiety, helplessness and increased concern (Ventura, 1999; Klar, Zakay & Sharvit, 2002; Bleich, Gelkopf & Solomon, 2003). The Israeli population perceives the chance of being a victim in a terrorism attack as almost completely beyond their personal control (Dekel, 2004; Klar et al., 2002), and although the research participants reported some level of behavioral change and precautionary measures taken against the threat, most of them were doubtful about the effectiveness of these preventive attempts (of 458 participants, 59% rated their degree of control as a flat zero) (Klar et al., 2002).

These findings are not isolated, and are consistent with studies conducted in other environments where terrorism is a problem. For example, studies conducted in the United States have examined the psychological reaction to the ongoing events of September 11, 2001 (Galea, Ahern, Resnick, Klipatrick, Bucuvalas, Gold & Vlahov, 2002; Stephenson, 2001; Schlenger, Caddell, Ebert, Jordan, Rourke, Wilson, Thalji, Dennis, Fairbank & Kulka, 2002; Silver, Holman, McIntosh, Poulin & Gil-River, 2002). The findings indicate post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, symptoms consistent with depression, anxiety, and a reduced sense of safety. Although the prevalence of probable PTSD symptoms was significantly higher in the New York City metropolitan area, it was shown that the psychological effects were not limited to
those who experienced it directly. Research shows that the effects of the events on September 11 spread throughout the country and that although PTSD symptoms are declining, they still remain more elevated than elsewhere, and individuals continue to have substantial anxiety about future terrorist attacks.

One of the most interesting and conflicting finding in the field of terrorism is embedded within the gender differences. Studies found that although women are less likely to be exposed to terrorism (Solomon, 2004), they exhibit higher levels of negative psychological symptoms, anxiety (Bleich et al., 2003; Solomon, 2004), and fear of terrorism (Klar et al., 2002; Silver et al., 2002).

The elevated reaction to terrorism and the higher level of psychological vulnerability was illustrated by the fact that woman had significantly more frequent symptoms of PTSD (Bleich et al., 2003), and higher levels of both depression and anxiety than men (Gidron, Gal & Zahavi, 1999; Silver et al., 2002; Solomon, 2004).

**Fear-Victimization Paradox**

The fact that women have a more elevated fear of terrorism than men (although men are more likely to be exposed to terrorism) strangely resembles a phenomenon from the field of fear of crime known as the “fear-victimization paradox.” This paradox is manifested by the disproportion between the lower likelihood for women to become a victim and the higher fear they express of becoming one (Garofalo 1979; Warr, 1994).

This parallelism is particularly interesting in light of the fact that terrorism is significantly different than other crimes regarding its nondiscriminatory nature. For its central purpose, nature and aim, terrorism does not target a specific sector of the population. Rather, it tries to plant seeds of fear and chaos far beyond its immediate victims and among a wider “public.” This allows the creation of a reality to which both men and women are equally vulnerable.

The extensive literature in the field of fear of crime presents a variety of explanations for the higher levels of fear common among women. One of the widespread reasons given in the literature is called the ‘Shadow Theory,’ which claims that women associate rape with different types of offenses. Thus, fear of crime actually expresses their fear of rape. In other words, sexual assault may ”shadow” other types of victimization among women (Warr, 1985). Women reported that their
fear of other crimes stems from their concern that those crimes may eventually lead to rape (Ferraro, 1995, 1996).

Since the nature of terrorism differs from other crimes, as aforementioned, this reason cannot explain the gender differences that arise in the field of fear of terrorism. However, the Shadow Theory does reveal an important principle that can be applied (or at least must be taken into consideration) in the research of terrorism affects.

It demonstrates that a substantial difference between the perception of events by men and women exists. While men tend to exhibit a kind of “what you see is what you get” perception, for women there is more than meets the eye.

Indeed, studies that focused on gender discrepancies revealed significant differences concerning how terrorism is perceived by each gender. Thus, an alternative interpretation concerning the gender differences in the fear of terrorism might be found in the risk assessments and perception processes undergone by men and women who are faced with terrorism threats (Slovic, Fischhoff & Lichtestein, 1984, 1985).

The major studies in this field discovered that women rate the threat of terrorism as posing a direct, intermediate-level danger, not only to themselves but also to their loved ones (even if those people were not in the immediate vicinity, or sharing a common or close living space) (Klar et al., 2002). For women, terrorist attacks are not a vague threat. Rather, they represent a tangible stressor that is based on a real and actual danger to themselves and to people close to them (Solomon, 2004). These findings demonstrate that women’s risk evaluations, unlike men who are able to distance themselves from others anxieties (Solomon, 1995), include not only the threat to themselves but also the threat to their family and to the people surrounding them (Shapiro, Marganitt, Roziner, Shochet, Bar & Shemer, 1991). Hence, because women feel responsible for their family and relatives as well as for themselves, they are more vulnerable to terrorism and more anxious about it (Solomon, 1995).

Confirmation on the aforementioned theories can be found in a study conducted on a similar, vague hazard (although not a terrorist attack) - that of the missile threat in Israel during the first Gulf War. Studies referred to the heavy emotional burden of women under the missile threat due to the heavy weight of their responsibility towards their children, and to their sensitivity to other’s people needs and emotions under external and unfamiliar circumstances (Lomranz & Eyal, 1994).
Thus, it can be concluded from various research that women’s risk perception is more generalized than men’s, and that it includes the evaluation of risk and threat to more than just the individual self. In consequence, women suffer from an increased level of fear of terrorism. Unlike women, men do not tend to direct their emotions towards other people. Moreover, they have a tendency to deny danger (Kessler & Maleod, 1984). Thus, their risk perception and their level of fear is lower compared to women.

Therefore, the ‘fear-victimization paradox’ may be explained by those two different perceptions of fear. The real difference is not truly quantitative in nature but perceptive. Women are not more afraid than men; they simply fear for more people.

Coping

The threat of terrorism contains various stress factors, and therefore it may have different affects on the psychological, physical and social well-being of an individual. The purpose of coping is to reduce or avoid psychological stress (Fleishman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person” (p 141).

In other words, coping is a never-ending quest for balance between the demands imposed by the stress factors in our life and the mental resources available. Each cognitive or behavioral act that helps an individual to restore or achieve the balance between what sometimes seems as infinite stream of stress catalyses and the limited resources available may be considered coping (Lazarus, 1974).

Coping is a vital mental skill required in order to be able to adapt to stressful situations. The different strategies applied in the struggle to reconcile the continuous conflict between the negative life events and the one’s mental well being can have a crucial impact on the end result (Parker & Endler, 1992).

Researchers generally agree that the general population uses three main coping strategies: problem-focused, emotionally-focused and avoidance coping. The aim of all of the above strategies is to eventually reduce stress levels, yet the means each one uses in order to reach the same goal differs (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980).

Problem-focused coping centers on the problem that causes the stress. It attempts, using a wider array of supporting techniques and complimentary strategies, to alter the source of the stress so that it no longer violates the self’s cognitive and behavioral
balance. One could say that problem-focused coping directs available resources inwards towards the stressor in an effort to overcome the obstacle it presents.

Contrary to problem-focused strategy, the emotional-focused strategy directs resources and attention away from the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980). Emotional coping reduces stress by utilizing cognitive processes that lower and relieve distress using various strategies, such as minimization and distraction (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

The third coping style could be defined as a radicalization of the emotional coping style and is termed ‘avoidance coping.’ This coping style occurs in situations in which an individual is unable to cope efficiently with the problem or with its emotional byproducts. Avoidance, denial and distraction are used in order to ignore the stressor and its affects, or to avoid coping with the situation directly (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980).

**Gender Differences**

It has been widely recognized within the coping literature that gender differences exist. Women tend to use emotionally-focused coping styles more often in stressful situations, whereas men largely rely on problem-focused style coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Viney & Westbrook, 1982; Stone & Neale, 1984). Men usually tend to use strategies that are directed towards the stressful situation in order to change it, while women frequently look for relief through emotional and social support (Patterson & McCubbin, 1987; Hauser & Bowlds, 1990). These gender differences in coping style strategies are more significant when a stressful event perceived by an individual (male or female) is ambiguous or uncontrollable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980; Viney & Westbrook, 1982; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Conway & Terry, 1992).

According to the ‘goodness of fit’ theory (Forsythe & Compas, 1987), problem-focused coping is more applicable to situations evaluated as controllable, since it produces practical solutions. In opposition, emotion-focused coping and avoidance coping are less adaptive since they are directed towards the symptoms or the byproducts of the problem rather than with the problem itself.

However, it was found that in situations considered to be uncontrollable, the use of an emotionally-focused control style seemed to be more effective in reducing the negative psychological symptoms than a problem-focused coping style (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980; Viney & Westbrook, 1982; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Conway &
Studies conducted in Israel during the Gulf War show that under the "Scud" missile attacks, an inherently uncontrollable situation, individuals that used problem-oriented coping reported higher levels of anxiety and other negative psychological symptoms in comparison to those who used emotionally-oriented and avoidance coping (Lobel, Gilat & Endler, 1993; Weisenberg, Schwarzwald, Wysman, Solomon & Klingman, 1993). These findings suggest that in uncontrollable situations, the use of problem-focused coping will not reduce the level of fear but instead increase it (Lobel et al., 1993). Similar to those studies, research exploring the terror effect found that the use of problem-oriented coping was associated with a high level of fear (for example; Gidron et al., 1999). It was mentioned that problem-focused coping may be related to greater fear as individuals focused on the stressor, its source and its solutions. Yet, in the absence of an available solution, this type of coping re-emphasizes the uncontrollable aspects and increases the level of fear.

The Coping Paradox

A more scrutinized observation of the above studies and findings raises the obvious contradiction between the findings and the theory. On one hand, the “goodness of fit” theory suggests that in uncontrollable and ambiguous scenarios the use of problem-focused coping will cause elevated levels of anxiety and fear, whereas in the same situations, emotionally-focused coping reduces levels of fear and stress. There are also research findings indicating that men usually use problem-focused coping while women tend to use emotionally-focused coping. On the other hand, undisputable evidence exists that in the face of terrorism, an obvious uncontrollable scenario, higher levels of fear (Klar et al., 2002), PTSD symptoms (Gidron et al., 1999; Silver et al., 2002; Solomon, 2004) and depression (Solomon, 2004) were reported by women. Thus, although according to the “goodness of fit” theory, higher levels of fear should have been found in men than in women, in reality the opposite was recorded. This contradiction will be referred to as the ‘coping paradox.’

There are several possible solutions to the ‘coping paradox’, all of which are derived from the unique nature of the terrorism threat.

An unpublished study, which involved in-depth interviews with a terror stricken population, shows evidence of the emergence of a unique coping style – integrated
coping (Cohen-Louck & Ben-David, 2004). This research suggests that under extreme circumstances, people use uncharacteristic counter measures in an effort to achieve the mental equilibrium they desperately seek. In those unique situations, such as terrorism, people will alternate and integrate different coping styles until a suitable solution is found. For example, men, who generally use their characteristic problem-focused coping style, initially try to find ways to solve the problems in order to reduce stress. Once they realize that the problem at hand is too vague and too intangible to grasp and solve, they change their approach and use a more affective and tailored coping, such as emotionally-focused coping. By applying this more resilient coping style – the integrated coping – men are able to reduce their fear and stress levels, although their default coping style initially put them in a disadvantageous position.

An alternative solution suggests that in extreme and uncontrollable situations (such as terrorist attacks), people may change their coping style and choose a coping style that suits the situation (Cohen, 1987). A recent study (not yet published) of the fear of terrorism has re-authenticated the suggestion that, under the threat of terrorism, men resort to an alternating, differential coping style in order to achieve the desired balance between stressors and mental resources (Cohen-Louck & Ben-David, 2004).

Men may appraise terrorism as a situation that has no available solution and no resources to confront it. Thus, if their initial coping style is found to be unsuitable, they will resort to emotionally-focused coping methods, such as a belief in God or religion, or even try avoidance coping, such as denial, instead of using problem-focused coping, which is usually their first choice.

This explanation presents the differential coping style as one that people, in this case men, use to vary their coping style based on the situation. By applying differential coping, men are able to maintain low levels of fear.

However, although women facing terror threats use the emotionally-focused coping style that is suitable to the situation, their fear levels and their negative psychological symptoms remain high. Women fear not only for themselves but also for their family members and friends (Shapiro et al, 1991; Lomranz & Eyal, 1994; Solomon, 1995) this results in higher fear levels.

**Summary**

This article presents two paradoxes that arise from research in the field of fear of terror- the ‘fear-victimization paradox’ and the ‘coping paradox.’ Solving the
paradoxes requires master juggling in order to keep track of empirical facts, psychological theories and research findings. In this section, a brief summary presents the various components in a jigsaw-puzzle way designed to demonstrate the multi-layered nature of the issues. This bottom-up approach should help to diffuse the complexities involved.

The cornerstone of this article is the undisputed (and well-documented) empirical fact that women exhibit more negative psychological symptoms and show more fear of terrorism than men (Klar et al., 2002; Silver et al., 2002; Solomon, 2004). At a first and isolated glance, this fact, although interesting and curious, does not seem confusing or conflicting. Yet, after delving deeper into the field of terrorism, some new factors are introduced into the equation, making it difficult to balance. Research discovered the following three intriguing facts:

1. When facing a situation perceived as uncontrollable, men tend to use “problem-focused” coping, while women resort to “emotionally-driven” coping.

2. Problem-focused coping is less effective than emotional coping when the individual is presented with a vague, uncontrollable and indiscriminate threat. Moreover, in those situations, applying problem-focused, oriented coping will induce higher levels of fear.

3. Terrorism is generally perceived as a vague, uncontrollable and indiscriminate threat.

A layman’s isolated view of the above three statements expects that higher levels of fear exist among men than among women regarding terrorism, yet the empirical facts clearly state the opposite. Thus, the ‘coping paradox’ emerges. As described in the main body of the article, the explanation of the ‘coping paradox’ comes from the realization/discovery of an integrated coping mechanism used by men for the sole purpose of facilitating coping styles and reducing fear levels when facing a threat. However, although integrated or differential coping theory resolves the ‘coping paradox’ and achieves the desired convergence of facts on a surface level, a deeper analysis of known fact asserts that major quandaries still exist.

On the surface, the solution to the ‘coping paradox’ states that both genders have an effective coping strategy when confronted with terrorism. Hence, we would expect them to demonstrate somewhat similar fear levels. However, again, our cornerstone,
undisputable fact states that the fear levels among women is higher in comparison to men. Moreover, recent studies have shown that women not only show more fear of terrorism than men, but they also fear more, despite the fact that men are more likely to be exposed to terrorism than women. Thus, the ‘fear-victimization paradox’ emerges.

The resolution to the fear-victimization paradox lies in the understanding that major differences in the perception of fear exist (especially fear of terrorism – due to its uncontrollable and indiscriminately nature) between men and women. The solution to the paradox can be elegantly paraphrased by the statement that women are not more afraid, they simply fear for more people.

This article covers the main theories and research conducted in the field of terrorism and confronts the major dilemmas, conflicts and paradoxes. These problems were brought to a satisfactory conclusion by the presentation of an integrative explanation that accounts for the gender differences in the field.
References


