The Importance of Being September 11: Terrorism and Indirectly Affected Populations

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Abstract:
Terrorism has an impact on populations distant from the initial victims. The extent of the impact is an area of considerable debate. An expanding literature exists examining the impact of terrorist violence on indirectly affected populations. Such populations are not easily definable and existing research focuses on people in cities close to where terrorism has occurred. Research is needed to understand the impact in more distant populations from terrorist violence. Millions live thousands of kilometers from where terrorism has occurred and researchers argue that geographical distance is an effective buffer. Geography, whilst important, is made problematic in a world where technology continues to shrink time and space. The media image brings distant acts of terrorism into the living rooms of people in all parts of the world. In research conducted in organisations in Melbourne between December 2004 and December 2005 many concerns surrounding terrorism were uncovered. Most concerns, however, are caused by memories of September 11. The perceptions, fears and anxieties of participants in the research are a product of images of September 11.

The terrorism of September 11 2001 continues to have a significant impact throughout the world. Everyone who owns a television or computer had front row seats at the ‘mother of all events’ (Baudrillard 2002: 4). Millions of people around the world were able to watch continuous coverage of the event as it unfolded. We saw the second plane crash into the second tower. We saw the towers collapse. This event has come to define modern terrorism. The lasting impact of terrorist violence is felt in New York, Bali, London and Madrid but also in other cities where a major terrorist act has not taken place. People in these cities are referred to in the literature as indirectly affected
populations. Indirectly affected populations include people who work and live in a city that has not experienced an act of terrorism. Melbourne is an ideal setting for researching this phenomenon. Whilst this city is geographically isolated and socially multicultural, many experts and politicians extensively prepare for worst-case terrorist scenarios. The impact on people in Melbourne is an important test case for people in all cities remote from terrorist violence yet significantly affected by the threat. In this paper the impact of terrorism on an indirectly affected population in Melbourne is examined. The literature is surveyed and two studies are presented as the best research on the subject. In doing so, the nature of an indirectly affected population is discussed. It is argued that the people interviewed believed September 11 was the most significant and important all terrorist acts. Terrorisms’ effect remains difficult to assess and the impact of the image of September 11 poses special challenges in the worlds’ major cities.

Indirectly Affected Populations

Terrorism has devastating psychological impacts in cities where it occurs (Horgan 2005). Terrorism since September 11 and the ease with which it is viewed through the media and the internet has given this type of violence unprecedented effect. Acts of terrorism subsequently have an impact far from the city where the violence is perpetrated. Physical distance is no longer the protective shield it once was and people throughout the world, including in New York, Madrid and London, witness terrorism the same way as people in distant cities did; on television (Barnett 2002: 249). People in cities in distant locations experience some of the trauma associated with those geographically closer. Yet, as Perry and Lindell (2003: 49) argue ‘some policy makers and planners appear to have expectations about human response to disasters and terrorism in particular that are not compatible with known behavioural principles and with data on human behaviour under emergency conditions’. Understanding the reactions of people in cities that are geographically distant to terrorist violence yet considered at risk is essential for developing counter-terrorism preparedness and predicting public response. Two studies have examined in considerable depth the impact of terrorism on indirectly affected populations with a focus on psychological distress and anxiety. Whilst psychologically oriented, they provide important arguments from which social science research can emerge.
A study by Schuster et al. (2001) examines the impact of the September 11 attacks on the stress levels of indirectly affected population. Five hundred and sixty adults in the United States were surveyed for their perceptions of terrorism. Forty-four per cent reported one or more significant symptoms of stress and 90 per cent had one or more stress symptom to some degree. Ninety-eight per cent coped by talking to others, 90 per cent turned to religion, 60 per cent participated in group work and activities and 36 per cent donated to the recovery effort. Eighty-four per cent of adults reported that they or another adult in their house spoke to their children for more than an hour about the attacks and 34 per cent prevented their children from watching excessive amounts of television. Parents reported their children having one or more stress symptom (34 per cent) and believed their children were worried about their safety and that of their families (47 per cent) (Schuster et al. 2001: 1507). The study concluded that after acts of terrorism clinicians in areas large distances from the attack, not just in the effected city, should be prepared for adults and children exhibiting substantial stress symptoms (Schuster et al. 2001: 1507-1508).

In this study perceptions of terrorism are attributed to media coverage and interpersonal distance to the victims. According to Schuster et al. (2001: 1508);

> Television coverage was immediate, graphic, and pervasive. Newscasts included remarkable video footage showing two airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center and the aftermath of four airplane crashes. People who are present at a traumatic event often have symptoms of stress, but there is evidence that adults and children need not be present to have stress symptoms, especially if they consider themselves similar to the victims. The events of September 11 were widely described as attacks on America, and most or all Americans may have identified with the victims or perceived the attacks as directed against themselves. More generally, 36 per cent of respondents believed that terrorism was a ‘very serious’ or ‘somewhat serious’ concern in their personal and work lives, 44 per cent felt that terrorism would increase in regularity over the next five years and 21 per cent believed it would remain constant (Schuster et al. 2001: 1510). Americans managed their stress by embracing religion and turning to other social groups for support and embraced community projects. Ongoing media coverage of threats and lingering anxieties leads the
authors to conclude that the stress from terrorist violence lasts long after the act. A second predictor related to respondents who, whilst not knowing anybody killed or injured, had a friend who knew people who were killed or injured. This is referred to as interpersonal distance and is related to increased stress and anxiety and symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Pfefferbaum et al. 2000).

Liverant et al. (2004) conducted research amongst university students in Boston in the weeks following September 11. The focus of the study was anxiety and coping strategies. The stress levels in 178 psychology students were measured at two time intervals; two and four months following September 11. Liverant et al. (2004) concluded that despite geographical and temporal distance between the September 11 attacks and the participants, severe psychological impacts were evident. Respondents held significantly changed perceptions of their security and threats of future harm. Others reported feelings of anxiety and anger. Liverant et al. (2004: 136) argues that terrorism disrupts core beliefs and underlying assumptions of safety that people in nations such as the United States have. These impacts diminish over time.

A number of negative or ‘maladaptive’ coping strategies were detected and were closely linked to levels of anxiety. Such strategies included behavioural disengagement, anti-social activities, and denial (Liverant et al. 2004: 136). Such feelings make people vent their emotions often against the racial or religious groups to which the terrorists are perceived to belong (Freyd 2002). Interpersonal distance, once again was an important factor in relation to stress and anxiety. Respondents who knew somebody injured or killed, or knew someone who had experienced loss as a result of the attacks, were more likely to experience stress, anxiety and engage in maladaptive coping strategies (Liverant et al. 2004: 136). Several studies have operationalised ‘indirectly affected populations’ in differing ways. Often it merely constitutes non-presence and viewing the violence through the media. Liverant et al. (2004) acknowledges alternative definitions where friend-of-a-friend impacts becomes relevant, but emphasise the importance of researching populations that are geographically distant. Previous research has found that increased geographical distance from a terrorist attack will decrease the likelihood of adverse reactions in a victimised population (Mainiero and Gibson 2003) however research carried out in Melbourne does not support this general proposition.
Methods
Researching perceptions of terrorism is difficult. Terrorism is a term with no universally accepted meaning so the methods employed need to be sufficiently broad to allow full and frank explanations to be offered by respondents. The data needed to be information rich and highly nuanced in order to best understand respondents’ perceptions and how terrorism impacts on their lives. To achieve this a phenomenological inquiry was conducted through in-depth interviews. These interviews are semi-structured with four key questions; What is terrorism in your opinion? How does terrorism influence your life in Melbourne? What things do you do differently in Melbourne because of terrorism? And, how do you gain information about terrorism? The first three are designed to gather information about what terrorism is in the perceptions of Melburnians and how it impacts on their daily lives. The fourth question is designed to test the argument in the indirectly affected population literature that the media is highly complicit in the damaging affects of terrorism in distant cities.

Respondents were chosen using purposive sampling. Organisations based in inner city Melbourne were contacted and offered an opportunity for employees and managers to participate. Recruitment fliers were posted on notice board within organisations and the researcher was contacted directly. From this 55 people agreed to be interviewed across six industries; legal, retail, financial, sporting, administration and transport sector.

Melbourne as an Indirectly Affected Population
Many Australians have definite ideas of what terrorism is. These ideas revolve around the most recent manifestations of terrorist violence. The attacks in New York on September 11, in particular, have attached to the psyche of Melburnians who live in a city that has been mentioned in al-Qaeda communiqués and regularly hosts major sporting and cultural events. Many people, as such, perceive the threat of terrorism to Melbourne to be high (Michaelsen, 2005). This coupled with some expert and political commentary creates further fear and anxiety. Michael Roach, formerly of ASIO and a prolific security expert, has stated that terrorism in Australia is a matter of ‘when not if’ (Roach in ABC 2005). These perceptions of terrorism can affect the way people work, live and think (Burke 2005: 11).
The Interview Responses

Interviews respondents were asked to list the most important acts of terrorism in order of significance to their lives. Invariably September 11 is the event most recalled. Second is the Bali bombings of October 12, 2003. Outside of these two terrorist acts there is some confusion. Respondent 3 recalls something about an attack at the Olympic Games in the 70’s. Respondent 1 notes attacks by the IRA and how many groups are violently anti-government. More than anything else September 11 is the event by which perceptions of terrorism are formed (Respondents 1 & 3, retail manager and retail employee, December 5, 2004).

I think September 11 definitely brought it to the forefront but other than that, it (terrorism) didn’t mean anything to us because, it is almost just because it wasn’t used as often (before September 11). They spoke about it as much, but it didn’t mean as much to us. That’s what it did for a lot a people. It’s brought it right to the forefront as a problem yet it’s been a problem for a hundred years

(Respondent 3, retail employee, December 5, 2004).

Discussions of terrorism with other respondents follow a similar path. On several occasions September 11 is considered the source of perceptions of terrorism.

It was just that after September 11…that people who had to work, and had to get there with public transport, trains and stuff, suddenly felt different about things. You couldn’t be sure anymore that, you know, something wouldn’t happen. Because now we know they can

(Respondent 2, legal employee, December 15, 2004).

Another respondent, whilst not feeling fear herself, knows that others do.

My parents have brought it up in conversation with me. I was thinking about going to New York for a year, my parents have brought that up as a fear they have. It shows that a lot of people do have these fears, but it is not something that I would see as realistic

(Respondent 1, sports industry employee, December 16, 2004).

What becomes obvious is not that terrorism is a source of extraordinary fear or that fundamentalist Islamists are the likely perpetrators, rather it is the importance of that one day; the importance of being September 11. This event has had an unprecedented impact, not because of the violence or because it was terrorism against the superpower, but because of its reach as an image to many diverse and distant corners of the Earth. It was
the unprecedented impact of terrorism as image; the spectacle of terrorism (Baudrillard, 2002). Respondents scarcely mentioned ‘terrorism’ at all.

The retail manager when asked what terrorism is in his opinion responded ‘Terrorism to me is like people [pause], or for example, September 11, bombing the twin towers. Terrorism is suicide bombing’ (Respondent 1, retail manager, December 5 2004). And this, from a retail employee when asked about what are some examples of terrorism other than September 11; ‘I think September 11 definitely brought it to the forefront but other than that, it (terrorism) didn’t mean anything to us because, it is almost just because it wasn’t used as often (before September 11). They spoke about it as much, but it didn’t mean as much to us’. And this from a legal employee;

I don’t know shit about terrorism. I know September 11. When I was watching the news, people immediately ringing up like radio stations, mosques and leaving abusive messages and threatening messages on the answering machines of the Muslim people. That’s terrorism. If someone did that to me, rang me up and threatened me, obviously I’m going to feel scared. Being scared to me is terrorism. If you threaten someone and they feel intimidated or they feel unsafe, that’s terrorism. September 11 is something else

(Respondent 2, legal employee, December 15, 2004).

Terrorism is something different to September 11. Whilst terrorism is frequently discussed in the media as a significant threat that we all must face September 11 is the event that is pictured by respondents. For them the day will always be remembered with clarity yet it is somehow less fathomable, more appropriately based in fiction; a phantasm. Paradoxically it is also more knowable, more relevant to personal experience, more viewable and more relevant to reality. The media by immortalising images of that shocking day offered the events up for consumption. Without the cameras it is remembered with less clarity and its impact diminishes (Baudrillard, 2002). September 11 has a power beyond the violence, over and above the fear and dread, and a power above reality. As Baudrillard (2002: 52) argues ‘By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world’s most beautiful building’. The violence was despicable but, much like pornography, people are both fascinated and appalled
(Baudrillard, 2002). Images of September 11 have attached to the psyche of these Melburnians.

Conclusion

In this paper the impact of terrorism in indirectly affected populations is examined. Two important studies researching these issues are presented. These studies conclude that the response in these populations is dependant on geographical and interpersonal distance and viewing terrorism in the media. People in Melbourne are presented as a case study to examine these issues. In this population there is evidence of negative impacts. It is clear from these interviews that respondents were distancing themselves from the word terrorism and preferred to speak about their perceptions of September 11. Terrorism is a word rarely used by interviewees. This is likely a result of images of September 11. The September 11 attacks were communicated in real-time, round the clock coverage to a massive worldwide audience. The collapse of the Twin Towers has been viewed by many millions and continues to feature in documentaries, on websites and in feature films. September 11 had an unprecedented impact; not as terrorism but as an image event. As Baudrillard (2002) argues the spectacle of terrorism has lead to the terror of the spectacle. Terrorism is subsequently a devastating tactic when it maximizes its symbolic currency. September 11, indeed, is the mother of all events. It has created a worldwide epidemic of fear and anxiety that was reinforced with attacks in Bali, Madrid, and London. It is no wonder that Melburnians fear that the spectacle of terrorism will arrive in Australia where we will once again watch the events unfold live on television.

References


