

Enemy Construction After 9/11: aggressor identity effect on the representation of terrorism

Construção do Inimigo após o 11 de Setembro:
os efeitos da identidade do agressor
na representação do terrorismo

Construcción del Enemigo Después del 11 de Setiembre:
los efectos de la indentidad del agresor
en la representación del terrorismo

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Abstract

At the time of the research, there were daily reports in the media regarding terrorist acts. What is it that indeed characterizes an act as being a terrorist one? From a psychosocial perspective, an ambiguous notion of terrorism may legitimate the ingroup/outgroup differentiation that affects intergroup relations. The aim of this research is to understand what people refer to when they talk about terrorism and to study the influence of different variables on the interpretation of some actions such as war or terrorism acts. Results on a sample of 251 University students confirm that the basic criterion for the evaluation of the actions is founded upon the distinction between military or civilian targets (i.e. target effect). However, some subjects use also a criterion based on the aggressor's ethnic-cultural identity (i.e. actor effect).

Keywords

Terrorism, War, Ethnocentrism, Intergroup relations, Political attitudes, Social distance.

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Resumo

No momento da pesquisa, haviam registros diários na mídia sobre ações terroristas. O que de fato caracteriza um ato como sendo terrorista? A partir de uma perspectiva psicossocial, uma noção ambígua de terrorismo pode legitimar a diferenciação de pertencimento ou não ao grupo, que afeta as relações intergrupais. O objetivo dessa pesquisa é entender ao que as pessoas se referem quando falam sobre terrorismo e estudar a influência das diferentes variáveis na interpretação de algumas ações como guerras ou atos terroristas. Resultados de uma amostra de 251 estudantes universitários confirmam que o critério básico para a avaliação destes atos é encontrado na distinção entre alvos civis ou militares (efeito alvo). No entanto, alguns participantes também usaram um critério baseado na identidade étnico-cultural do agressor (efeito ator).

Palavras-chave

Terrorismo, Etnocentrismo, Relações intergrupais, Postura política, Desigualdade social.

Resumen

En el momento de la investigación, había registros diarios en la prensa sobre acciones terroristas. ¿Lo que de echo caracteriza a un acto como terrorista? A partir de una perspectiva psicossocial, una noción ambigua de terrorismo puede legitimar la diferenciación de pertenecimiento o no al grupo, que afecta a las relaciones intergrupales. El objetivo de esa investigación es entender a lo que las personas se refieren cuando hablan sobre terrorismo y estudiar a la influencia de las diferentes variables en la interpretación de algunas acciones como guerras ó actos terroristas. Resultados de una muestra de 251 estudiantes universitarios confirman que lo criterio básico para la evaluación de estos actos es encontrado en la distinción entre dianas civiles o militares (efecto diana). Todavía, algunos participantes también utilizaran un criterio basado en la identidad étnico-cultural del agresor (efecto actor).

Palabras clave

Terrorismo, Etnocentrismo, Relaciones intergrupales, Postura política, Desigualdad social.

Introducion

The attacks on the United States of America on September 11, 2001 (9/11) emphasized a dramatic issue for world equilibrium and for intergroup relationships, i.e. the role and meaning of terrorism. Since these attacks and since President George W. Bush declared on November 6, 2001 that “over time it's going to be important for nations to know they will be held accountable for inactivity. You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror,” the issue of terrorism has influenced political and economic decisions the world over (Chomsky, 2002). Furthermore, the idea of “terrorism” has changed our everyday lives as well as our ideas and representations about the personal and national security, about a possible culture clash, interethnic relationships, etc. (Echebarria-Echabe & Fernández-Guede, 2006; Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Kastenmüller, 2007; Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008).

In this article, the actual common sense definition of terrorism is analysed. In particular, our purpose is to understand if, when people think of terrorism, they think of an action or a person. And if so, which action and which person? Indeed, who are the terrorists? Have they some specific and recognizable characteristics or are they an invisible entity that promotes a culture and a politics of fear? Moreover, the news has for long talked about the inevitability of a “pre-emptive self-defense” – a neologism indicating an attack made in anticipation of an attack – in opposition to terrorism. But what differentiates war from terrorism? What do people think about the specificities of war and terrorism?

In the introduction, we will first of all discuss the role of terrorism in the construction of a culture and politics of fear that in some way guides our everyday lives. After that, some psychological approaches to the study of terrorism will be considered.

A Politics and Culture of Fear

As Altheide (2004) pointed out, mass media have contributed to changing the meaning of terrorism from a war strategy or event to a condition of the world. It can be hypothesized that some political and economic elites systematically use “terrorism” as a way to promote a specific worldview (Chomsky, 2002). Every day the mass media talk about a “terrorist world” and about “a war against the empire of evil.” As the Patriot Act (October 26, 2001) revealed, this worldview has affected and changed the social life of people and their civil liberties. In some way, the presence of an invisible enemy changes the way in which we see others. For instance, Mythen and Walkate (2006) observed that “the ideology of ‘new terrorism’ demands that citizens are not only fearful of the terrorist Other, but also take on responsibility for managing their safety in the ever-presence of this terrorist Other” (p. 133).

Some recent analyses (Furedi, 2002; Giroux, 2003; Greer & Jewkes, 2005; Huddy, Khatid, & Capelos, 2002; Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006; Mythen & Walkate, 2006; Skitka, Bauman, & Mullen, 2004) have pointed out that the issue of terrorism has been constructed upon a cultural climate of fear and uncertainty. Mythen and Walkate (2006) analyzed the ways in which the United Kingdom government has set about communicating the terrorist threat after the New York, Madrid and London attacks. They highlighted that the construction by the government of a representation of terrorist threat was mainly finalized to gaining public support for international military excursions, the tightening-up of national law and ordering

measures and people's attitudes and feelings against the "terrorist Other". Altheide (2006) analyzed some news reports about terrorism in five national United States newspapers and found that the term *terrorism* is associated with the terms *crime*, *victim* and *fear*. For the author, "the extensive use of fear to highlight crime news has produced a discourse of fear, which may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the effective environment or the physical and symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday life" (Altheide, 2006:417). In that way, the use of the term *terrorism* could bring people to seek protection within the symbolic order of the politics of fear. Terrorism becomes an instrument for the control of law and order and a way to curb dissent as being unresponsive to citizens' needs. But what does terrorism mean? How did psychology – and in particular social psychology – analyze terrorism?

A Problem of Definition

A new interest in terrorism has been growing in psychology after the attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC) (Breckenridge, Beutler, Bongar, Brown, & Zimbardo, 2007; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, Orehek, 2009; Martin, 2006; Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004; Post, 2007; Richardson, 2006; Silke, 2003; Smelser, 2007; Stout, 2002). Research in the database *PsycINFO* revealed that the articles and the books with the word "terrorism" in the titles had been just 144 until 9/11. After that date, they are an average of about 112 every year. Nevertheless, a first issue about terrorism is the ambiguity of its definition. Schmid and Jongman (1988) list no less than 109 different definitions of terrorism. In the article "Terrorism: the problem of definition revisited" (written before the WTC attack), Cooper (2001) started his discussion from a widely accepted definition of terrorism: "terrorism is the intentional generation of massive fear by human beings for the purpose of securing or maintaining control over other human beings" (Cooper, 2001:883). However, as the author pointed out, the problem with this definition is that one person's terrorist may well be another's revolutionary freedom fighter. Thus, some people can defend terrorism as a necessary "bad" action aimed against other people enacted to prevent or deter the latter from doing worse things to them (this issue is not very distant from the justification of the pre-emptive self-defense). Indeed, the word *terrorism* has been consistently plagued by a need to justify the reprehensible. This was possible by the use of the antinomy: "what *I* do, however unpleasant is not terrorism; what *you* do is terrorism" (Cooper, 2001:884, original italics). By means of an analysis of the main events of the 20th century, Barkan (2000) posed the question as to whether it is really possible to distinguish between a humanitarian mission and a war of conquest, between the repression of a population and the defence of nation's borders, between terrorism and a war of liberation. According to Cooper (2001), a possible solution for the definition of terrorism may be to shift the focus away from the reasons and the actors involved in an action to the characteristics of the same action. In that way, even if fighting for freedom can be the purpose underlying a specific action, if this purpose is undertaken through the deployment of terrorist means, this action remains a terrorist act.

According to Kruglanski and Fishman (2006), it is largely possible to identify two divergent psychological approaches to the analysis of terrorism: terrorism treated as a syndrome and terrorism treated as a tool (i.e. a means to an end). The former analyzes

terrorism as a monolithic psychological construct with identifiable properties. From this viewpoint, a terrorist group has a specific organizational structure and terrorism has specific causes, both internal (i.e. personality traits) and external (i.e. poverty, political oppression). The latter is rooted in the psychology of goals-means relations (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996; Kruglanski e col., 2002) and analyzes terrorism as a warfare tactic directed to an end of whatever kind that anyone could use (Carr, 2003; Telhami, 2004). A definition of terrorism as a tool reduces the possibilities of a manipulation of the word to portray the enemy. Moreover, it allows for a definition of some State-originated violence (i.e. the Dresden bombings and the atomic bombs released on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the of World War II allied forces, or the bombings of London and Guernica by the German Nazis) and the incidental killings of non-combatants (so-called “collateral damage”) as acts of terrorism (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006). The recent analysis of Wardlaw (2009) indeed underlines the ethical complexity and moral ambiguity of State-sponsored terrorism.

War and Terrorism: an intergroup perspective

If when seeing terrorism as a tool we focus on the action (and not on some specific characteristics of the actors involved), a question remains unanswered: what indeed are the characteristic of a terrorist act? A possible solution may be found in the definitions of Townshend (2002) and Wagner (2006). The two scholars define terrorism as violent acts directed deliberately at *innocent* or *non-combatant* people, designed to achieve a certain political, ideological, or emotive goal. Focalising on the target of the action, this definition reveals that the *war* vs. *terrorism* antinomy, abused by the media, is alleged and constructed to define a distinction between “good” and “evil.” Indeed, from a psychosocial perspective, the use of the term “terrorism” may support and legitimize the *ingroup* vs. *outgroup* antinomy.

According to Tajfel’s *Social Identity Theory* (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986; see Brown, 2000) and its derivatives (Brewer, 1991; Hogg, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), ingroups strive not only for differentiation from outgroups but for positive distinctiveness (Turner, 1975), seeking ingroup-outgroup comparisons that favour the ingroup over other groups. Indeed, various studies on intergroup relations have been focalized on the tendency for ingroup favouritism, that is to favour ingroup members and discriminate against outgroup members (Brown, 1995; Levine & Campbell, 1972; Tajfel, 1981). These studies have shown that ingroup favouritism may be linked to negative attitudes toward the other groups, as ethnocentrism (Turner e col., 1987). Ethnocentrism is by definition referred to viewing one’s own group more positively than others and to judging other groups by standards established by one’s own group, including perceiving other groups as inferior and less valuable (Aiello & Areni, 1998; Levine & Campbell, 1972). The hostility toward an outgroup is also motivated and enhanced by the perception of a threat accruing from this group. The more a group is perceived as a threat to ingroup’s existence and values, the more it is perceived as inferior compared to the ingroup.

Apart from ethnocentrism, another variable commonly studied in intergroup dynamics and – as some recent studies (Eller & Abrams, 2004; Hortiz & Harwood, 2007; Nadler, Malloy, & Fisher, 2008; Velasco González e col., 2008) have pointed out as well – linked to ingroup favouritism and to intergroup bias is social distance. These studies underline that the concept

of social distance – by which people are expected to act more favorably toward those with a higher degree of social kinship (Bogardus, 1933) – is often related to attitudes of prejudice and discrimination towards groups perceived as distant. In this sense, reducing social distance with some specific outgroups may be an opportunity to decrease intergroup bias and ethnocentrism towards them. Indeed, social distance is defined as the extent to which people wish to maintain social distance and avoid increasing levels of intimate contact between themselves and members of different social, racial, ethnic or national groups (Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996). Recent studies (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005; Stephan & Renfro, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 2001) suggest that threat and fear perception about specific outgroups plays a crucial role in encouraging social distance towards outgroup members. On the other side, as Levin, Henry, Pratto and Sidanius (2003) have demonstrated, a strong identification with some specific ethnic-cultural groups may influence positive attitudes towards terrorism and support of violence against the West.

Hence, given the relevance of threats and fear in supporting intergroup bias, we think that the common representation of terrorism promoted by media and politics may enhance ingroup/outgroup opposition and social distance between groups. In this sense, we consider SIT to be a relevant theoretical framework for better understanding how people conceive of terrorism. Indeed, especially in conflict situations – such as the one introduced in this research – the representation of terrorism may promote an implicit ideology on the notions of war and terrorism according to which “we do war, they do terrorism,” where war is considered more legitimate and justifiable while terrorism is more illegitimate and criminal.

Hypothesis

The aim of the present research is to evaluate some criteria that people may use to define terrorism and to differentiate it from the concept of war. Specifically, we hypothesize that, as the definition of terrorism of Townshend (2002) and Wagner (2006) suggested, terrorism is distinguished from war on the basis of the military or civilian nature of the target (“target effect”). Apart from that, we claim that a second criterion exists, linked to the aggressor’s ethnic and cultural identity. Indeed, we advance the idea that some groups will be perceived as closer and others as more distant and different on the basis of presumed cultural parameters (e.g. ethnic group, religion, language, etc.). In this sense, we expect that an action will be defined more as terrorism when it is enacted by some actors perceived of as being more distant to the ingroup than others. Thus, we suppose that this criterion – defined as ‘actor effect’ – is used more by people with negative attitudes towards outgroups, who are more socially distant to other groups, with a Right-wing political bias and a high amount of trust in media information.

Method

Participants

A total of 251 University students (88 males, 156 females; 7 individuals of undisclosed gender) at the University of Bologna (Italy) served as participants. The mean age among the participants was 23.83 years ($SD = 5.47$).

Measures

The respondents completed the following measures:

War-terrorism scale. We asked the participants to evaluate some events presented as having occurred in the Middle East (i.e., “an Arab blew himself up on a bus filled with civilians” or “an American threw a grenade against a military base”). Using a 7-point scale (from 1 = war to 7 = terrorism), the participants had to indicate whether the action perpetrated is closer to their idea of war or terrorism. In each event, we varied the target of the action: civilian target ($\alpha = .90$), such as a bus or a marketplace, or a military target ($\alpha = .89$), such as a military unit or a base. Then, we varied the identity of the actor: American, Arab, Israelis, Palestinian. On the whole, the scale was made up of 16 items: (2 items x) 2 targets x 4 actors, both *within* variables.

Ethnocentrism. To assess the level of ethnocentrism, we asked the participants to respond to ten items from the ethnocentrism scale (Aiello & Areni, 1998; De Grada e col., 1975). All the items were measured on a 7-point scale, anchored at “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” and showed good reliability ($\alpha = .85$).

Social closeness scale. On the basis of the Bogardus “social distance scale” (Bogardus, 1933) – which measures people’s willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degrees of closeness with members of diverse social groups – we asked the participants to respond to 4 items for each of the 4 actors of the war-terrorism scale (Arab, American, Israelis, Palestinian): (1) there are no problems having an [actor] as co-worker in the same occupation; (2) there are no problems having an [actor] as neighbour in the same apartment building; (3) there are no problems having an [actor] as a close personal friend; (4) there are no problems marrying an [actor]. All the items were measured on a 7-point scale, anchored at “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.”

Socio-political indexes. We asked the participants to state their political affiliation (on a 7-point scale, from 1 = far Left to 7 = far Right), the importance attached to religion (on a 7-point scale, from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much) and their trust in newspaper and TV news information (both on a 7-point scale, from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

Results

As can be seen from Table 1, general means showed that participants do not have high ethnocentric attitudes and perceive a medium-high closeness with all the four actors. However, by a within ANOVA, a significant Actor effect ($F_{3, 750} = 37.05, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .13$) was found. Newman-Keuls *post-hoc* comparisons showed that American and Israelis actors are considered closer than Arabs and Palestinians (always with $p < .0001$). Instead, differences between American and Israelis and between Arabs and Palestinians were not significant. Thus, with reference to the context of the war-terrorism events analyzed (Middle East), we think that these results can be interpreted as a tendency to assimilate Americans and Israelis to the ingroup versus the outgroup made up of Arabs and Palestinians. Finally, participants attach medium importance to religion, they tend to be politically situated in the left of centre and consider media information as not very trustworthy (in particular TV news information).

Table 1 – General Means on all the Research Variables.

	α	M	SD
Action vs. civilians (Arab)	.71	6.13	1.21
Action vs. civilians (Palestinian)	.79	6.14	1.31
Action vs. civilians (American)	.84	6.06	1.41
Action vs. civilians (Israelis)	.84	5.95	1.37
Action vs. military (Arab)	.77	3.01	1.70
Action vs. military (Palestinian)	.73	3.42	1.67
Action vs. military (American)	.77	2.72	1.66
Action vs. military (Israelis)	.82	2.76	1.58
Ethnocentrism	.85	3.63	1.12
Social closeness (Arab)	.75	4.75	1.09
Social closeness (Palestinian)	.72	4.82	1.04
Social closeness (American)	.80	5.29	1.03
Social closeness (Israelis)	.70	5.19	.94
Importance religion	—	4.04	1.89
Political affiliation	—	3.27	1.23
Trust in TV news	—	3.18	1.32
Trust in newspapers	—	3.82	1.24

Note. Actions vs. civilians and actions vs. military target extended from 1 (war) to 7 (terrorism). Ethnocentrism, social closeness, importance attached to religion, political affiliation and trust in media extended from 1 to 7.

Concerning the war-terrorism scale, means show that participants consider terrorism as those acts carried out against civilians, and as war those actions against military targets. This is confirmed by a 2 within (target) \times 4 within (actor) ANOVA. As hypothesized, the main criteria for the classification of the actions used by the participants was actually the distinction between targets as military and civilian (Target effect: $F_{1, 250} = 756.32, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .75$). Moreover, we also found a significant Actor effect ($F_{3, 750} = 20.74, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .08$) and a significant interaction Target \times Actor ($F_{3, 750} = 13.21, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .05$). Thus, there is a general consensus towards considering the actions against military objectives as war and the actions against civilian objectives as terrorism. Moreover, as hypothesized, the so-called ‘actor effect’ shows that people change their evaluation of the action dependent upon the actor’s identity. Indeed, regardless of the target, American (4.39) and Israeli (4.36) actions are considered less terroristic than the Arab (4.52) and Palestinian (4.78) actions. Moreover, Newman-Keuls *post-hoc* comparisons on Target \times Actor interaction showed a significance for Arabs and Palestinians only on military actions. That is, the actions against military targets of

these two actors are considered more terrorist than the actions of all the other actors. Instead, no significance was found on civilian targets.

Furthermore, to deepen the influence of ethnocentrism on the evaluation of the actions, an extreme third (tertile) split of scores on ethnocentrism score permitted a classification of the participants as low ($n = 89$) or high ($n = 68$) in this variable. Then, a 2 within (target) \times 4 within (actor) \times 2 between (low / high level of ethnocentrism) ANOVA was performed. The analysis revealed a principal effect of ethnocentrism ($F_{1, 165} = 7.12, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$). The most ethnocentric participants tend to evaluate actions as terrorism more ($M = 4.75$) than the less ethnocentric subjects ($M = 4.37$). Newman-Keuls *post-hoc* comparisons on the interaction Ethnocentrism \times Actor ($F_{3, 495} = 2.73, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$) showed that this is significant for Arabs and Palestinians. That is, more ethnocentric subjects tend to evaluate Arabs and Palestinians actions as more terrorist.

In the same way, we analyzed the effect of social closeness on the evaluation of the actions. Participants were split on the basis of social closeness with each actor, considering the low and high extreme third (tertile). As we can see from Table 2, when people perceived themselves more socially distant to the actor, they tend to see this actor's action against military targets as being more 'terroristic.'

Table 2 – ANOVA on War-Terrorism Scale by Social Closeness with Each Actor.

	<i>M</i> Distant	<i>M</i> Close	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Actions vs. civilians (Arab)	6.13	6.20	1, 171	0.148	ns
Actions vs. civilians (Palestinian)	6.18	6.11	1, 168	0.122	ns
Actions vs. civilians (American)	6.05	6.28	1, 166	0.243	ns
Actions vs. civilians (Israeli)	5.93	5.93	1, 191	0.001	ns
Actions vs. military (Arab)	3.22	2.61	1, 171	4.213	.04
Actions vs. military (Palestinian)	3.88	2.92	1, 168	15.683	.0001
Actions vs. military (American)	3.06	2.42	1, 166	5.827	.02
Actions vs. military (Israeli)	3.02	2.52	1, 191	3.780	.05

Note. Actions vs. civilians and actions vs. military target extended from 1 (war) to 7 (terrorism).

Then, a series of regression analyses were conducted with all the actors' actions vs. military and vs. civilian target as dependent variables and gender, age, importance to religion, political affiliation, trust in media, ethnocentrism, and social closeness as independent variables. All predictors were entered into each regression analysis in a single step.

All the regression models concerning actions vs. civilian target were not significant. Instead, concerning actions vs. military target, the regression models revealed different patterns of association (see Table 3). In particular, the evaluation – on the war-terrorism scale – of the Arab actions vs. military target was predicted by political affiliation ($b = .15$) and trust in TV news ($b = .19$). Ethnocentrism ($b = .18$) and trust in TV news ($b = .15$) had a positive effect and social closeness with Palestinians had a negative effect ($b = -.20$) on the

Palestinians actions against military targets. Moreover, social closeness with Arabs had a positive effect ($b = .37$) and social closeness with American had a negative effect ($b = -.19$) on the American actions against military targets. Finally, the actions of Israelis against military targets had no significant predictors.

Table 3 – Regression Analysis Summary for Demographics, Socio-political indexes, Ethnocentrism and Social Closeness Predicting Arab, Palestinian, American and Israelis Action vs. Military Target

Independent variable	Dependent variable: Actions vs. military target			
	Arab	Palestinian	American	Israelis
Sex	.10	.06	.03	.10
Age	.02	.02	.06	.05
Importance religion	.07	.08	.09	.07
Political affiliation	.15*	.07	.08	.06
Trust in TV news	.20*	.16*	-.04	.12
Trust in newspapers	-.11	-.11	.06	-.10
Ethnocentrism	.02	.18*	.12	-.07
Social closeness (Arab)	.10	.07	.37*	.12
Social closeness (Palestinian)	-.05	-.20*	-.17	-.17
Social closeness (American)	-.01	.08	-.19*	-.02
Social closeness (Israelis)	-.06	.03	.06	.03
<i>F</i>	2.49**	3.27***	3.08**	1.55
<i>Df</i>	11, 250	11, 250	11, 250	11, 250
<i>R</i> ²	.10	.16	.14	.08

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The main purpose of this article is to study the influence of different variables on the interpretation of some violent actions such as war or terrorism acts. In particular, we have sought to understand whether, when people read or listen about events concerning the war on terrorism, they discern war from terrorism and, if so, focus on the actors or the targets involved.

As a first result, we found confirmation of the definitions of terrorism provided by Townshend (2002) and Wagner (2006). Indeed, the data on the war-terrorism scale showed that participants effectively distinguish between war and terrorism, and that this distinction is based on the target of the action: war refers to actions against military targets, while terrorism concerns innocent and non-combatant targets. However, as hypothesized, a second

classification criteria exists of actions as war or terrorism linked to the ethnic-cultural identity of the aggressor. It is important to note that these criteria become effective in the most ambiguous situations, such as the ones in which the victims are not civilians. As the interaction Actor x Target revealed, this effect concerns Arabs and Palestinians. In that sense, when these two actors hit a military target they are considered to be more terrorist than the others. This tendency to evaluate the same actions made by different actors differently is associated to ethnocentrism. More ethnocentric people tend to evaluate the actions of some actors (in particular the ones of Arabs and Palestinians) as more terroristic than the ones of the others.

Another important result concerns closeness to actors. Indeed, in accordance with intergroup studies and with SIT (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005; Moghaddam, 2008; Musgrove & McGarty, 2008; Stephan & Renfro, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 2001), whereas the participants state that they feel close to one actor (whether they be Palestinian, Arab, American or Israeli), they tend to evaluate his/her action as being less terroristic. In this sense, perceiving oneself to be closer to an outgroup member may reduce intergroup bias. This is confirmed by regression analyses predicting Palestinian and American military actions. Moreover, as regression predicting American military actions showed, there is also a complementary effect, by which people that feel closer to Arabs, tend to perceive Americans' actions as more terrorist. Thus, it seems that the evaluation of American actions is also dependent on the social proximity with the Arab world, so that my friend's enemy is my enemy, and the *vice-versa*. In accordance with the research of Levin, Henry, Pratto & Sidanius (2003), we think that this effect may be accounted for within the specific situation of Italy, where sometimes Leftist ideology is connected to the safeguarding of peace vs. the use of war and – by analogy – it sometimes supports anti-American feelings.

In general, these results suggest that the Actor effect disappears when people are willing to get in touch with other groups. We can explain this by recalling various theoretical frameworks. Indeed, as the SIT suggested, the decategorisation and the redrafting of categories boundaries – so that the other is included in the ingroup – promotes a change in intergroup attitudes and the occurrence of ingroup bias. Likewise, as the moral inclusion theory (Opatow, 1990) suggests, the more the others are perceived as being close, the more they are included in one's own moral community and scope of justice, the less they are judged prejudicially. Thus, a way to promote a better understanding of terrorism and a better disposition to multiculturalism passes by way of a reflection of our psychological boundary of fairness, human rights, norms and moral rules. Indeed, events such as prisoner torture in Abu-Ghraib or the abuses in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp bring to light the issue that moral and juridical norms and respect for human rights may be suspended on the basis of the categorization of the violation victim. In this sense, in people's minds the label "terrorist" may legitimate violations of human rights and abuses on suspected people.

Our results also underline the media influence. People who have more trust in TV news information tend to evaluate Palestinian and Arab military actions as more terrorist. This prediction does not exist as concerns trust in newspapers. Some inferences may be put forward on this non-influence of newspapers on the evaluations of the actions. First, the use of visual images in TV news may be more evocative of the existence of a relationship between terrorist acts and some ethnic identities and between military actions and some

others. Second, it may be that the greater trust placed in newspapers – as the means revealed – may be suggestive of greater activism in the understanding of the war-terrorism events. Thus, as the studies on the culture and politics of fear (Altheide, 2006; Mythen & Walklate, 2006) have suggested, the influence of news in the construction of the terrorist prototype is relevant. The daily, incessant warnings provided by the media on the risk of terrorism and the chances of a culture clash between Western and Islamic societies, construct and sustain a climate of fear and uncertainty.

As a matter of fact, a limit to this study are the sample characteristics consisting only of students from the University of Bologna. In further studies, the results should be replicated with other groups, taking into consideration subjects of different ages and educational and cultural levels. Moreover, it may be interesting to study the representations of terrorism and war in countries that have recently experienced terrorism or conditions of war.

In conclusion, it seems that the notion of terrorism, in its diffuse and undifferentiated use, was become a connotative label, enhancing the spread of discriminatory social and political attitudes and opinions, as also demonstrated by the recent works of Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede (2006) and Roncarati and Ravenna (2006). In this sense, if it seems that terrorist acts define the actors as terrorists – independently from their ethnic-cultural identity – alike some actions are defined terrorist because they are perpetrated by actors labelled as terrorists – in this case dependent upon their ethnic-cultural identity.

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