The Psychology of Ingroup-Outgroup Distinctions in the Aftermath of Terrorism

Saturday, February 15, 2014, 5:00 PM - 6:15 PM, Room 19

Chair: Nour Kteily, Harvard University
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We investigate how acute outgroup threats affect the ways individuals delimit their group boundaries and psychologically distance outgroups. We show how threat contributes to greater restrictiveness in ascribing ingroup characteristics, more stereotypical outgroup characterizations, and the valuing of security over civil liberties. We describe an intervention that mitigates these effects.

Bridging the Chasm: The Effects of Virtual Intergroup Contact on American-Muslim Attitudes

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Intergroup contact has the demonstrated potential to stem the tide of intergroup negativity. However, socio-political conflicts spanning great distances make direct contact difficult and costly. We describe the results of a “virtual exchange” program that aimed to provide the benefits of intergroup contact by digitally connecting American students with students in the Arab and Muslim world. These students engaged in video dialogue online, sharing personal stories over several months in groups of 8 to 10 individuals. We conducted the program during the Spring 2013 semester (encompassing the Boston Marathon Bombings), evaluating its effects on participants’ outgroup attitudes relative to a matched control group. Supporting and extending intergroup contact theory, participants exhibited increased positivity towards Muslims, perceived greater overlap between American and Muslim identities, and decreased distancing of Muslims for the self-concept. Moreover, participants were insulated from increased threats exhibited by the control group in the aftermath of the Boston bombings.

“Not one of us”: The denial of ingroup characteristics to suspected perpetrators of terrorist acts.

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The categorization of individuals as ingroup vs. outgroup members profoundly affects the levels of trust, cooperation, and punishment they are extended, and can also carry implications for the group’s standing itself. Two studies investigated target categorization following the UK Woolwich and Boston marathon attacks: events involving maligned targets whose status as national (Woolwich attackers) or racial (Tsarnaev brothers) ingroup members remained ambiguous. Within two days, we presented Brits and White Americans with the suspects’ images. As predicted, those higher in social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism—concerned with the ingroup’s status and norm-adherence, respectively—perceived suspects as looking less British and less White, thus denying them critical ingroup characteristics. Individuals feeling more fear (but not anger or sadness) following the attacks also distanced the suspects in this way. Highlighting its importance, perceiving suspects in outgroup terms increased support for their punitive punishment and for militaristic policies targeting outgroups more generally.
Outgroup threats, Ingroup compromises: Security over Privacy in the Aftermath of Terrorist Acts
Sarah Cotterill, Nour Kteily, James Sidanius, Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington, Robin Bergh
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The Snowden revelations highlight the tension between protecting civil liberties and ensuring public safety. Incidents making security threats to the ingroup salient can tip the balance in favor of protecting safety, even at a cost to privacy. Whereas most responses to outgroup threat investigated target the outgroup itself, the cost of reduced privacy is one the ingroup bears. We expected fear would activate individuals’ existing authoritarian tendencies, associated with the trust of established leadership necessary for relinquishing autonomy. We assessed Americans’ support for measures that prioritized safety over privacy following the Boston Marathon bombings. As expected, fear interacted with right-wing authoritarianism to predict support for privacy restrictions. Moreover, controlling for fear and authoritarianism, closely following news coverage of the bombings led to support for privacy restrictions by increasing the perceived likelihood of future terrorism. These results emphasize the interplay between individual differences and contextual factors in affecting responses to outgroup threat.

Effects of Terrorism-Related Media on American-Muslim Intergroup Relations
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Most Americans depend on media for information regarding Arabs and Muslims; however, the portrayal of these groups within media is largely negative. In three studies, we explore how media images of Arabs and Muslims influence Americans’ perceptions of these groups. In Study 1, American participants exposed to terrorism news show greater support for aggressive actions against predominantly Muslim countries and this relationship is found to be mediated by negative attitudes and emotions towards Muslims. In Study 2, American participants exposed to terrorism news show support for harsher civil restrictions for American-Muslims such as annual background checks and random phone screenings. This relationship is mediated by perceptions of American-Muslims holding values that are incompatible with American values and perceiving them as “less American”. Finally, an experimental study reveals that participants who play terrorism-themed, relative to neutral, video-games are more likely to draw “typical” Arabs with stereotypical traits, angry expressions, and weapons.