

Attitudes toward terrorism: an explorative analysis on a Northern-Italian sample

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Introduction

- Political and sociological scholars ask the question “what is terrorism?” and try to find a definition for terrorism
 - People find their own meaning through television, newspapers and magazines
 - So we decided to investigate what people think about terrorism
 - Do the definitions given by scholars and lay-people match?
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Political and sociological scholars have long debated the question “what is terrorism?” and have tried to find a definition of the term *terrorism*. There are a number of definitions primarily constructed by first naming certain organizations or events as “terroristic” and only subsequently searching what these events have in common.

However lay-people decide upon their own definitions of “terrorism” based mostly on the news on television, commentaries, articles in newspapers and magazines.

Do people’s ideas resemble in any way, the theories constructed by scholars? To answer this question we investigated what people think about terrorism.

Aim and hypothesis

- Design a questionnaire to measure what people think about terrorism and terrorists, terrorist organizations and actions (ETA, IRA, the Palestinians, September 11, March 11)
 - Particularly, see if people use the same “theories” about terrorism which scholars suggest i.e.:
 - a) explanations due to individual characteristics;
 - b) explanations related to the environment and the context where terrorism and the terrorists were born
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The general aim of this search, is to construct a questionnaire that can discover the attitudes towards terrorism of people who have no direct experience of it and whose knowledge is based on information from the media. The analysis of the literature on the topic allows us to identify two main theoretical areas: a) explanations linked to the terrorist's personal characteristics; b) explanations linked to the environment and the context in which the notion of carrying out an attack developed. The hypothesis of the current study is to verify whether these same two explanations (individual and context) can be traced also in the lay people's ideas on terrorism.

Hypothesis

- Do lay people, like scholars, relate terrorism to the individuals' characteristics and their environment?
 - Do political and religious orientation influence attitudes towards terrorism?
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We also decided to take into consideration a number of other aspects which may be linked to a person's attitude and ideas about terrorism i.e. political and religious orientations and prejudice towards others.

Material

The data collected and instruments used comprise:

- Demographic data (age, gender, educational level, occupation)
 - A number of independent variables (political orientation, frequency of mass-media consumption) relating to the sample
 - An *ad hoc* questionnaire on attitudes towards terrorism (120 items)
 - The subtle and blatant prejudice questionnaire (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995; Italian translation modified by Manganelli and Volpato, 2001)
 - The Religious Orientation Scale I-E Revised (Gorsuch and McPherson, 1989; Italian translation by Rossi and Iovine, 2004)
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The data and instruments used comprised:

- + a survey of demographic variables such as age, gender, educational level, occupation;
- + a number of independent variables such as political orientation (Jennings and van Deth, 1989, p. 208) and frequency of media use (TV and newspaper)
- + a questionnaire on the opinions and attitudes towards terrorism which we developed specifically for this study
- + the subtle and blatant prejudice scale (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995) translated into Italian by Arcuri and Boca (1996) and modified by Manganelli and Volpato (2001).
- + the religious orientation scale I-E revised (Gorsuch and McPherson, 1989) translated into Italian by Rossi and Iovine (2004)

Political orientation was measured by indicating one's position on a ten point scale with the word 'left' placed at one extremity and the word 'right' at the other. However participants could declare a lack of political preference if they so wished.

Preliminary interview

To construct the attitudes questionnaire on terrorism, we conducted two sets of preliminary interviews:

- 17 participants (10 male and 7 female): structured interview on the definition/s and causes of terrorism and the characteristics of terrorists
 - 12 participants (5 male and 7 female) who were asked only one question: *"In your opinion, what is terrorism?"*
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To construct the attitudes questionnaire we needed a series of attitudes and opinions expressed by common people regarding terrorism. For this reason we interviewed a total of 17 people (10 males and 7 females) in their home environment and recorded the interviews with their permission so as not to lose any information. The interview was structured with 6 questions regarding terrorism: definitions, causes, characteristics of the terrorists, etc... A second survey which involved 12 people (5 males and 7 females) consisted of only one question: "In your opinion, what is terrorism?" The statements which emerged from these preliminary interviews were heterogeneous and diversified.

The analysis of the answers revealed three core issues.

- 1) the first class of statements, is on the general definition of terrorism, the perceived causes and the possible strategies to fight it;
- 2) the second group, comprise phrases that emphasize the characteristics of the people identified as terrorists;
- 3) and the third were a series of statements, regarding Islam and Muslims. This subject was not dealt with directly in the interview, but rather emerged spontaneously, showing the strong association -in people's minds- between Islam and terrorism, probably caused by the continuous exposure to news relating to terroristic attacks and attempted attacks prepared and carried out by Islamic people.

The final questionnaire

- 120 items in 3 sections
 - Section T: Terrorism in general
 - Section I: Terrorist and Islam
 - Section A: Terrorist organizations and actions
 - Likert scale (-2 to +2; from max disagreement to max agreement)
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Based on these statements we defined 120 statements divided into 3 sections.

In section “T”, we collected the items regarding the general view on terrorism, its causes and possible remedies (as an example: “Terrorism is an act of war with no rules”; “In order to contain terrorism potential future terrorists must be exposed to culture”; “One cause of terrorism is the nastiness of terrorists”);

In section “I”, statements on terrorists as people and statements concerning Islam and Muslims (for example: “A terrorist is an idealist”; “Islam preaches war”) were grouped together, mostly in order to compare the same statements referring to terrorists and those concerning Muslim people;

in the third and last section “A”, we collected other statements referring to different terroristic organizations and/or attacks (IRA, ETA, BR, Palestinians, attacks on abortion clinics, 11 March 2004, 11 September 2001), with the aim of verifying the attitudes towards different types of terrorism; this section, includes also a series of items regarding Italian partisans, since the media often portrays terrorists as partisans fighting for their people’s freedom.

These statements were presented so as to ask participants their agreement level on each item. A five point Likert scale was used, where minus 2 meant "absolutely disagree with the statement", 0 meant “uncertainty, indifference, towards the statement” and +2 meant "absolutely agree with the statement”.

Sample

249 participants (52,2% female, 47,8% male)

<i>Age</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Young (18-24 yo)	105	42,2
Adults (35-50 yo)	101	40,6
Elderly (>60 yo)	43	17,2

<i>Ed. lev.</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Graduate	28	11.2
High school	138	55.5
Middle school	54	21.7
Primary	29	11.6

The sample was composed of 249 individuals from Milan, Brescia and Bergamo, divided into three age-categories (young people: between 18 and 24 years old, adults: between 35 and 50 years old and elderly people: over 60 years old) and by gender (male and female).

Data were collected in June and July 2005; and it took participants between fifteen and thirty minutes to complete a questionnaire.

In our sample we have 47,9% male and 52,2% female.

Regarding the three age-groups, 42,2% were young, 40,6% adults and only 17,2% elderly people.

As for educational level, more than half the sample (55,5%) had an High School degree; 21,7% finished Middle school, 11,6 % completed primary school and 11,2 had a university degree.

This work of classification was also carried out using occupation as a variable. We thus created ten different occupational categories grouping together similar professions. Craftsman (3,2 %), personal assistants (4 %), housewives (8 %), employed (18.1%), teachers (4,8%), freelance (6 %), workerers (10,4%), pensioners (14,9 %), students (30.1 %) and unemployed (0,4%).

Sample

<i>Political orientation</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>		News	Daily
Nothing	75	30.1	Regularly	68.3%	24.9%
Leftwing	91	36.5	Sometimes	25.3%	46.2%
Center	32	12.9	Rarely	5.2%	22.5%
Rightwing	51	20.5	Never	1.2%	6.4%

Political Orientation (measured on a 1-10 scale where 1 is "extreme left" and 10 is "extreme right") was divided into four categories: "left" (1-4 on scale), "centre" (5 and 6 on scale), "right" (7-10 on scale) and "nothing" (who declare that don't have political preferences).

30% declared not to have a political orientation, 36.5% declared a "left" political orientation, 12.9% a "centre" and 20.5% a "right" political orientation;

The reading of the daily paper frequency was decidedly inferior to watching the news on television.

Prejudice

	Mean	Sd
<i>Subtle</i>	36.1	7.5
<i>Blatant</i>	28.6	10.3

		<i>Blatant</i>		
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	Total
<i>Subtle</i>	<i>Low</i>	Egalitarians (89)	error (1)	90
	<i>High</i>	Subtles (91)	Bigots (68)	159
		180	69	249

With the prejudice scale, we constructed a score for subtle and for blatant prejudice. The two means are similar to those obtained by Manganelli and Volpato (2001) for another Italian sample.

With the two prejudice subscales, following Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) indications, we constructed the four prejudice types: 89 participants were classified as Egalitarians (low subtle prejudice, low blatant prejudice), 91 as Subtles (high subtle prejudice, low blatant prejudice), 68 as Bigots (high and high) e only 1 as error.

Religious tendencies

	Italian sample		Original sample	
	Mean	sd	Mean	sd
Intrinsic	23.9	6.3	37.2	5.8
Extrinsic	15.6	4.3	25.6	5.7

The religious orientation scale produced scores about the intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to religion. A means comparison between the Italian sample and the original sample collected by Gorsuch and McPherson are statistically different. The Italian sample presents lower score than the original sample.

Data analysis

- ❑ Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis on the questionnaire items
 - ❑ Cluster analysis on factors to obtain a typology classification (Euclidean + Ward)
 - ❑ Association between age, educational level, politic orientation, prejudice and religiosity with factors and typology
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The data from the attitudes' questionnaire was analysed both globally and for each section separately. Two methods were used to analyse results: 1. explorative factor analysis and 2. confirmative factor analysis. The latter was consisted of an Asymptotic Covariance Matrix using the Lisrel software.

Results converged on 11 factors referring to 77 items only. Using composite factors, A cluster analysis was then carried out to order participants into different categories according to the answers given. The relationship between results and the independent variables considered were then analysed.

Factor analysis: Section T

- 4 factors

- 28 items; 42% of total variance

1. Causation linked with the individual
 2. Causation linked with the context
 3. Definitions linked with violence
 4. Use and abuse of power
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The items in section T (terrorism) lead to the identification of 4 factors which however account for only 42% of the total variance.

The first factor may be defined as ‘Causes of terrorism linked to the individual’ and comprises such statements as “the cause of terrorism is the terrorists’ desire for revenge” and “the cause of terrorism is the terrorists’ nastiness”. This factor thus expresses the belief that terrorism is caused by the terrorists personal characteristics which are mostly negative (nastiness, envy, desire for revenge, thirst for power, madness, desire to cause pain).

The second factor links the causes of terrorism to external/environmental factors, it is comprised of items expressing the idea that terrorism is a result of a major gap in welfare between world countries. Statements referring to this factor are for example “the cause of terrorism is the enormous difference in the socioeconomic situation of countries around the world” and “terrorism is a consequence of decades of exploitation” “terrorism is a consequence of political decisions not accepted by all”. This factor is made up of two subscales (with a correlation of 0.77) consisting of, love for ones country, and placing the responsibility for terrorism on economic differences.

The third factor load on items centrated on a stereotyped view of violence for example “terrorism is a form of psychological violence” and “ terrorism is war with no rules”.

The fourth factor, is composed of only two items, which deal with the use of force in the fight against terrorism (“the use of force can block terrorism” “the use of force is not a legitimate weapon against terrorism”)

Factor analysis: Section I

- 3 factors
 - 20 items; 45% of total variance

1. Stereotyped (negative) view of Islam
 2. Weakness of terrorist
 3. Terrorist as a normal person
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The first factor groups together all the items referring to Islam and Muslims. All these items present a negative view of the Islamic religion, viewed as being linked to violence, fanaticism and the lack of culture. This factor is thus considered a measure of the stereotyped view of Islam, based on the idea that this religion is based on war, the imposition of its values and the religious expression of an inferior people.

The second factor groups together items describing the characteristics of terrorists (both positive and negative). The majority of items contain adjectives referring to terrorists as normal people and noting their idealism, with far less items expressing negative views (for example statements such as “terrorists are mad” or “terrorists are revengeful”). Thus the factor expresses a description of the terrorists which is not all negative but has also positive aspects (a terrorist is a normal person with no particular desire for vengeance nor particularly nasty, but someone who has strong idealistic views and high levels of exasperation).

Factor analysis: Section A

- 4 factors

- 29 items; 49% of total variance

1. Dislike towards America
 2. Terrorist organizations as idealistic people
 3. Terrorist organizations as negative people
 4. Red Brigades are not terrorists
 5. Partisans are not terrorists
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The final section of the questionnaire, section A, presents a structure consisting of 5 factors amongst which three very important ones:

First, a dislike towards America, which represents the view that the US and its political agenda and power are responsible for September 11th.

Second the view of terrorist organizations like the IRA, ETA and Italian Red brigades as idealistic, i.e. as attempting to do some good at least for their own people.

Third the opposite view, i.e. terrorist organizations as groups of people just wanting to perform acts of cruelty.

The last two factors are specifically related to the Red brigades and the Italian partisan movement.

Clusters

	Tot	A	B	C	D	E	F
N		27	59	32	31	31	64
Individual	0.62			-6.47	-10.39	8.68	6.66
Context	-1.25			-8.72			
Violence	10.76	6.83			2.95		
Stereot. Islam	-3.76		-11.78			6.98	
Weakness of terrorist	5.54					11.48	
Terrorist normal people	-2.77				6.50		-7.97
Dislike of USA	3.13				11.34		-4.84
Idealism	-1.92			-6.80			
Vengeance	-.94				-7.10		
Red brigade	-8.18	-2.15				-3.16	

In cluster A we can find subjects with scores generally around the sample mean, but with a low score for the Red Brigades factor and for terrorism seen as an act of violence.

Subjects in cluster B scored around the sample mean except for a very low scores on a stereotypic image of Islam. In this cluster there were 44% of people expressing a leftwing political orientation, 46% of egalitarians with high scores of intrinsic religiosity.

Subjects in cluster C had scores below the mean, and particularly low scores regarding ideas of idealism being linked to terrorism and for individual and contextual causes of terrorism.

In cluster D we can find subjects thinking that terrorism is not linked with the individuals and they do not interpret terrorism as acts of violence. They consider terrorists as normal people, have an aversion for the USA and think that terrorist organizations operate for vengeance.

F cluster subjects show scores opposite to D cluster subjects. Here we found 46% of rightwing people and 38% of fanatics.

Cluster E subjects view terrorism as being linked to the individual, hold a strong negative stereotype regarding Islam, and consider terrorists as weak people. In this cluster 41% of subjects are older, with a low educational level and high intrinsic religiosity.

Conclusions

- People, like scholars, link terrorism both to the characteristics of individuals and to their environment
 - Opposite political orientations (left and right) and opposite prejudice attitudes (Egalitarians and Bigots) influence individual opinions toward terrorism
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After these explorative analyses, we can conclude that ordinary people, like scholars, link terrorism both to the characteristics of individuals and to their environment. However, single individuals could also make use of other opinions.

In particular, opposite political orientations (left and right) and opposite prejudice attitudes (Egalitarians and Bigots) may influence individual opinions toward terrorism.