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The Psychological Impact of Terrorism on Collective Identity and Social Behavior in Pakistan

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Abstract

Terrorism has remained a persistent challenge in Pakistan, leaving profound psychological consequences that extend beyond individual trauma to shape collective identity and social behavior. This study examines how prolonged exposure to terrorist violence influences fear, trust, social cohesion, and patterns of collective behavior within Pakistani society. Drawing on psychological theories of collective trauma, social identity, and fear conditioning, the article analyzes how recurring incidents of violence contribute to heightened anxiety, social polarization, and altered perceptions of “in-groups” and “out-groups.” The research further explores how fear and insecurity affect public trust in social institutions, normalize defensive social behaviors, and, in some cases, increase susceptibility to radical narratives. By focusing on the interplay between terrorism, collective psychology, and social responses, the study highlights the long-term psychosocial costs of violence and emphasizes the need for trauma-informed public policy, community-based mental health interventions, and inclusive narratives to restore social cohesion. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of terrorism’s impact on societal psychology in conflict-affected contexts such as Pakistan.

Keywords: Terrorism; Collective Identity; Social Behavior; Collective Trauma; Fear and Anxiety; Social Polarization; Pakistan

Introduction

Terrorism has emerged as one of the most destabilizing forces in contemporary societies, particularly in regions experiencing prolonged conflict and political instability. In Pakistan, decades of terrorist violence have not only resulted in significant loss of life and material damage but have also deeply affected the psychological well-being of individuals and the collective social fabric. While much scholarly attention has focused on the security, political,

and economic dimensions of terrorism, its long-term psychological impact on collective identity and social behavior remains comparatively underexplored.

From a psychological perspective, terrorism operates as a mechanism of fear production, aiming to disrupt everyday life, weaken social trust, and alter perceptions of safety and belonging. Repeated exposure to violence generates collective trauma, reshaping how communities perceive themselves, others, and the state. In Pakistan, this has manifested in heightened anxiety, social polarization, mistrust between social groups, and shifts in collective identity along religious, ethnic, and ideological lines. Such transformations influence social behavior, including withdrawal from public life, increased suspicion of “out-groups,” and, in some cases, vulnerability to radical or extremist narratives.

Understanding the psychological consequences of terrorism at the collective level is essential for developing effective responses that go beyond military and security-based approaches. This study seeks to examine how terrorism has shaped collective identity and social behavior in Pakistan, emphasizing the role of fear, trauma, and social fragmentation. By integrating psychological theory with socio-political realities, the research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of terrorism’s enduring impact on Pakistani society.

Literature Review

Existing literature on the psychology of terrorism highlights trauma as a central outcome of sustained exposure to violence. Scholars argue that terrorism produces not only individual post-traumatic stress but also collective trauma, defined as a shared psychological injury that alters group memory, identity, and behavior (Alexander et al., 2004). Collective trauma disrupts social norms and weakens communal bonds, leading to long-term changes in societal functioning.

Social identity theory provides a useful framework for understanding how terrorism affects collective identity. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), individuals derive a sense of self from group membership, particularly in times of threat. Terrorist violence intensifies in-group and out-group distinctions, often resulting in increased social polarization. Studies have shown that societies affected by terrorism experience heightened nationalism, religious exclusivism, or ethnic consciousness as a defensive psychological response (Huddy et al., 2005).

Fear and perceived insecurity also play a critical role in shaping social behavior. Research suggests that chronic fear reduces interpersonal trust and civic engagement while increasing support for authoritarian measures and restrictive policies (Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). In conflict-affected societies like Pakistan, fear-driven behaviors may include social withdrawal, suspicion toward minorities, and acceptance of violence as a normalized feature of daily life.

Within the Pakistani context, existing studies primarily focus on terrorism's impact on youth radicalization, mental health disorders, and political attitudes. However, there remains a gap in systematically examining how terrorism influences collective psychological processes such as shared identity, social cohesion, and behavioral norms. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing psychological theories of trauma and identity with empirical observations of Pakistani society.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, suitable for exploring complex psychological and social phenomena related to collective identity and behavior. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of perceptions, experiences, and meanings associated with terrorism within Pakistani society.

Research Approach

The research employs a thematic analytical approach, drawing on secondary data sources such as academic literature, policy reports, psychological studies, and credible media analyses related to terrorism and social behavior in Pakistan. This approach facilitates the identification of recurring psychological patterns, social responses, and identity-related themes.

Data Sources

Data are collected from peer-reviewed journals in psychology and social sciences, reports published by international organizations (e.g., WHO, UNDP), and scholarly books addressing terrorism, trauma, and collective psychology. These sources provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing long-term psychological trends rather than isolated incidents.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is grounded in an integrative psychological approach that combines collective trauma theory, social identity theory, and fear and risk perception models. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive structure for examining how terrorism influences collective identity formation and social behavior in Pakistan.

Collective Trauma Theory is employed to analyze the shared psychological suffering produced by prolonged exposure to terrorist violence. Unlike individual trauma, collective trauma refers to a socially mediated experience in which a group's sense of history, memory, and identity is disrupted (Alexander et al., 2004). In the Pakistani context, repeated terrorist attacks, military operations, and media coverage of violence have contributed to a shared narrative of loss, insecurity, and victimhood. This framework enables the study to explore how traumatic events become embedded in collective memory, influencing societal attitudes, emotional responses, and long-term behavioral patterns. Collective trauma theory also helps explain intergenerational transmission of fear and anxiety, whereby narratives of violence are passed down, shaping how communities interpret present and future threats.

Social Identity Theory provides the second analytical lens, focusing on how terrorism reshapes group boundaries and collective self-perception. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), individuals derive meaning and self-esteem from their membership in social groups, particularly under conditions of threat. Terrorism intensifies in-group solidarity while simultaneously hardening perceptions of out-groups, often along religious, ethnic, or ideological lines. In Pakistan, such dynamics can be observed in increased social polarization, heightened sensitivity to identity markers, and growing mistrust between communities. This framework allows the analysis to examine how fear-driven identity consolidation influences social cohesion, political attitudes, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion within society.

The third lens, Fear and Risk Perception Models, is used to understand behavioral and decision-making changes under conditions of chronic threat. Psychological research suggests that persistent fear alters cognitive processing, leading individuals to overestimate risks and prioritize security over civil liberties (Slovic, 1987; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). In terrorism-affected societies, fear becomes normalized, shaping public behavior, media consumption, and support for coercive or authoritarian measures. Applying this model enables the study to analyze how perceived insecurity affects trust in institutions, civic

engagement, and everyday social interactions in Pakistan, as well as how fear can be exploited by extremist narratives.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on secondary data, including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports, and documented analyses; therefore, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. Nonetheless, ethical responsibility remains central to the research process. Particular care is taken to avoid stigmatization or collective blame of specific religious, ethnic, or social groups when discussing terrorism and its psychological consequences. The study frames terrorism as a socio-political and psychological phenomenon rather than an attribute of any community or belief system.

Furthermore, findings are contextualized within Pakistan's broader historical, political, and socio-economic realities to prevent oversimplification or deterministic interpretations. The research adheres to principles of academic integrity, cultural sensitivity, and responsible scholarship by accurately representing sources, acknowledging limitations, and avoiding sensationalism. This ethical approach ensures that the study contributes constructively to scholarly discourse while respecting the dignity and complexity of affected communities.

Localization of the Framework: Pakistan-Based Empirical Indicators

To ground the theoretical framework in Pakistan's socio-political reality, the following context-specific indicators are used:

1. Collective Trauma (Pakistan Context)

- Long-term exposure to suicide bombings, sectarian violence, and military operations
- Shared national memories of events such as APS Peshawar attack
- Intergenerational transmission of fear through family narratives and media

Empirical Indicators:

- Prevalence of anxiety and PTSD symptoms reported in conflict-affected regions
- Public discourse centered on loss, martyrdom, and victimhood

2. Social Identity Shifts

- Strengthening of religious, sectarian, ethnic, and ideological identities under threat
- Increased "us vs them" narratives in public and political discourse

Empirical Indicators:

- Rise in sectarian mistrust
- Identity-based political mobilization
- Public suspicion toward minorities or ideological opponents

3. Fear and Risk Perception

- Normalization of security checks, fear of public gatherings, and behavioral caution
- Overestimation of threat due to continuous media exposure

Empirical Indicators:

- Decline in public participation during high-threat periods
- Support for extraordinary security measures
- Acceptance of reduced civil liberties in the name of security

4. Changes in Social Behavior

- Decline in interpersonal trust and social cohesion
- Increased social withdrawal and psychological distancing
- Polarization between liberal and conservative worldviews

Empirical Indicators:

- Reduced civic engagement
- Increased online radical discourse
- Fragmentation of public opinion on state policies

5. Role of Institutions and Media (Moderators)

- Trust or distrust in the military, judiciary, and political leadership
- Media framing of terrorism as ideological, religious, or external

Empirical Indicators:

- Fluctuating public confidence in state institutions
- Influence of sensationalist vs responsible media narratives

Updated Analytical Integration

By combining psychological theory with Pakistan-based empirical indicators, this framework demonstrates that terrorism's most enduring impact lies not only in physical destruction but in restructuring collective emotions, identities, and social norms. This localized approach enhances the explanatory power of the model and ensures contextual validity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that terrorism in Pakistan has consequences that extend far beyond immediate physical destruction, profoundly shaping collective psychology, social behavior, and patterns of identity formation. By applying an integrated analytical framework grounded in collective trauma theory, social identity theory, and fear and risk perception models, the research highlights how prolonged exposure to violence produces shared psychological suffering that becomes embedded in collective memory. This collective trauma intensifies fear and insecurity, which in turn reshapes how individuals perceive social groups, institutions, and their broader social environment.

The findings suggest that terrorism contributes to stronger in-group identification and increased suspicion of out-groups, fostering social polarization and weakening social cohesion. Fear-driven risk perceptions alter everyday social behavior by reducing interpersonal trust, limiting civic engagement, and normalizing defensive or exclusionary attitudes. Importantly, the study underscores the moderating role of media narratives and institutional trust, demonstrating that responsible media framing and confidence in state institutions can mitigate the adverse psychological and social effects of terrorism.

Overall, the research emphasizes that counterterrorism strategies focused solely on military or security measures are insufficient to address the long-term societal impact of violence. Sustainable stability in Pakistan requires policies that acknowledge and address collective trauma, promote inclusive social identities, strengthen institutional trust, and integrate psychological well-being into national security and development frameworks. By foregrounding the psychosocial dimensions of terrorism, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of conflict-affected societies and offers valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and mental health practitioners working toward social resilience and long-term peace.

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