Study: Terrorism Evokes Different Responses Among Genders and Personality Types

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Terrorism incites fear designed to coerce governments to act, according to definitions of "terrorism" in U.S. law, in U.N. resolutions and elsewhere. But terrorism often prompts as much anger and retaliation as fear and intimidation.

That's one conclusion of research by a team of professors at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

The researchers also found that simulated news reports of attacks on military sites evoked a stronger desire for retaliation than did attacks on cultural or educational sites, even after Sept. 11. They found that anger in response to a terrorist attack was more likely among masculine people and less likely among feminine people, irrespective of gender.

And while women tended to be more fearful and men angrier in response to simulated terrorist attacks, there was one notable exception: When attacks were reported to have come from enemy nations, women reacted more harshly. But when attacks came from countries that were U.S. allies, men reacted more punitively and women more leniently.

In short, the response to terrorist attacks appears to be different among genders and personality types. It also appears to be dynamic, becoming harsher after repeated attacks and decaying over time without reinforcement from subsequent attacks.

Alice Healy, a CU College of Arts and Sciences professor of distinction in psychology, has helped lead this team of researchers since the 1980s. It was then that Francis A. Beer, now a professor emeritus of political science, told Healy about a theory: that the way people respond to current events could be primed by images of history.

That view contradicted the theory that people and nations make mostly rational decisions about waging war.

"I said, ‘We could do an experiment on that,' " Healy recalls. She recruited Lyle E. Bourne Jr., now a professor emeritus of psychology, to join the team.

The idea was to gain a better grasp of how citizens -- and countries -- make decisions about whether to go to war or maintain peace. In a 1987 paper published in the American Political Science Review, Beer, Healy, Bourne and Grant Sinclair outlined an experiment on 60 psychology students asked to make decisions on peace and war.

The team found that historical images played a significant role in students' decisions on whether to wage war. "A popular aphorism holds that those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it," the authors wrote. "Our perspective suggests that those who do remember history apply it selectively."

Later, Healy's team turned its attention to terrorism. In 1997 and 1998, it conducted experiments to gauge how students responded to reports of terrorism. The students' reactions were recorded after each of five simulated reports of terrorist attacks.

They found that students' reaction to simulated terrorist attacks did not elicit fear across the board, that responses varied. "You don't have very many people melting down in a puddle," Beer said recently.

The researchers tested the reaction of subjects to terrorist attacks vs. military attacks, tested gender differences in response to terrorist attacks emanating from friendly vs. unfriendly nations, and tested the different reactions to attacks on military vs. cultural or educational targets.

"We had anticipated 9/11, essentially," Healy said recently.

Since then, Healy, Beer, Bourne and former psychology student Alison Aylward conducted simulated-terrorism experiments one and three years after the actual attacks. Those results were reported in this summer's edition of the *American Journal of Psychology*.

Students responded with a greater inclination to retaliate to terrorist attacks one year after 9/11. But three years after the attacks, students responding to simulated terrorist attacks showed less desire to retaliate.

"9/11 has changed our lives, but we're kind of forgetting about it," Healy observed. Three years after the attacks, students' "conflictual" responses to reports of terrorism had declined nearly to pre-9/11 levels.

As before, however, the research subjects responded to each subsequent simulated attack with a greater inclination to retaliate. Also as before, subjects responded more harshly to attacks on military sites than on cultural or educational sites. That result might be surprising, given that the World Trade Center, where most of the 9-11 victims died, was not a military site.

Healy, Beer and Bourne suggest that historical images such as the attack on Pearl Harbor may help explain this result. Attacks on military sites, they say, may be seen as more of an act of war -- something that weakens our national defenses and leaves us more vulnerable to further attack.