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Assessing the Effects of Terrorism on University Students: Social and Psychological Perspectives

Maryam Batool
Lahore College for Women University
Lahore, Pakistan

Sarah Shahed
Department of Psychology
Forman Christian College University, Lahore

&

Madiha Nadeem
Lahore College for Women University
Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

Terrorism has adversely affected Pakistan and has taken the lives of thousands of people in the last couple of years, even students in educational institutions becoming victims of terrorist attacks. Moreover, these terrorist attacks have a terrible effect on students and academic institutions, causing trauma, interrupted learning, and a deterioration in the sociopsychological foundation of society, which ultimately affects the economy and security. The study aimed to understand the devastating impact of terrorism on students in the universities of Lahore and Peshawar. Data was collected using purposive sampling, comprising 30 students enrolled in the universities of Lahore and Peshawar. The qualitative survey design with an open-ended questionnaire was used for data collection and responses were analyzed thematically. The responses by the students showed that they, their family, friends, and people around them were affected by terrorism psychologically, socially, physically, and economically. Additionally, losing loved ones, concerns about family security, mobility issues, and distraction in studies and careers were also reported as the main effects. The findings highlighted the need for immediate measures to provide a safe and secure learning environment for students in educational institutions.

Keywords: Terrorism, Terrorist Attacks, Social and Psychological Impact on Victims, stability and peace, Post-Traumatic Effects.

Introduction

For the last couple of decades, Pakistan has been facing terrorism and more than 35,000 citizens and 3,500 security workers have sacrificed their lives, the economic

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loss was $67.93, including the infrastructure's destruction (Ministry of Finance, 2011). Moreover, terrorist attacks not only worsened the state of law and order in the country but also discouraged the interests of foreign investors. Consequently, this situation crushed the soft image of Pakistan internationally and created an atmosphere of agitation in the country (Chachar et al., 2013; Javaid, 2011). Although these attacks disturbed all aspects of life, the terrorist attacks on educational institutions deeply hurt the people, particularly, students and their families, as these were soft and vulnerable targets. For instance, the terrorist attack on the Army Public School Peshawar on 16th December 2014 took the lives of more than 100 school students and staff members.

These acts of terrorism negatively affected the lives of students and wasted their time, because due to the threat of these attacks, educational institutions from schools to universities had to close several times. Additionally, parents were also hesitant to send their children to schools and universities (Jamal, Khan & Muhammad, 2016). Similarly, Justino (2011) also reported the adverse effects of violent attacks on the academic life of students. The presence of different emotions such as; fear, aggressiveness, and disappointment were also found by Bilal, Inamullah, & Irshadullah (2016) in secondary school students due to terrorist attacks.

Hokanson & Wirth (2000) highlighted that a secure environment is a prerequisite for efficient learning in students. Similarly, Pynoos & Eth (1985) and Hunt (2010) found that dreadful incidents affect the decision-making, problem-solving skills, and understanding of students and they become unable to absorb information. This causes distress in parents' lives too when they find their children disturbed and shocked (Bilal, Inamullah, & Irshadullah, 2016). Various internal and external factors resulted in terrorism in Pakistan, such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, foreign policy, religious extremism, economic inequality, weak institutions, political instability, and injustice. Psychologists have linked the widely exhibited behaviour of intolerance and depression in people to terrorism and the war on terror in the country (Bilal, 2013).

The Government of Pakistan is trying hard to restore stability and peace in the country by taking various initiatives, such as successfully launched operations like Zarb-e-Azab, Khyber, Al-Meezan, and Rad-ul-Fasad and measures for countering terrorism under the National Action Plan (NAP). These policies have resulted in a major decline in the number of terrorist strikes. Furthermore, Pakistan's success in confronting terrorism has been recognized by the Global Terrorism Index Report 2017 (Ministry of Finance, 2018).

The impact of terrorism on Pakistan has been devastating. While praising the resilience and bravery of the nation, the human, economic, social, political, and psychological cost that the country paid for this cannot be denied. Loss of life is the biggest loss that a person experiences through terrorism, but, there are many other losses, consequences, and effects that a person bears because of being a victim of

terrorism either directly or indirectly. The major cities of the five provinces faced terrorist attacks and many people lost their lives. Their personality and daily lives were affected because the majority of them experienced acute forms of physical, mental, and social trauma that created tension in their lives (Nasim, Khan & Aziz, 2014).

This study was conducted to explore the effects of terrorism on university students. Terrorism is usually understood as the use of violence to create fear (psychic fear or terror) to achieve certain goals. According to the World Health Organization (2002), terrorism can be defined as collective violence that is inflicted by "larger groups such as states, organized political groups, militia groups, and terrorist organizations". The Global Terrorism Index defines terrorism as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence of a non-state actor to attain a political, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation” and this definition recognizes terrorism not only as a physical act of an attack but also the psychological impact it has on society for many years after (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg (2003) gave a 'Terror Management Theory' which explains human behaviour related to the future threat people feel in life. According to this theory, people generally want to deal with the awareness of their inevitable death by keeping some certain set of values and beliefs and by making themselves busy in some particular social actions. TMT predicts that by engaging in such actions that strengthen self-esteem and defense behaviours, people can manage their fear and awareness related to death (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). This theory is based on the supposition that human behaviours are motivated by a need for self-protection. Existential terror is induced in human beings when they become aware of the inescapable annihilation of death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). To handle this contradictory paradox, man has invented an indestructible and meaningful defense system that helps him to keep himself immortal symbolically even after death, which is inescapable and unavoidable by maintaining a way of life that relates to their political system, religion, and culture. According to this theory, these symbolic and psychological defense systems buffer death fears by enhancing self-esteem and work to alleviate the feelings related to powerlessness, entrapment, and vulnerability (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1999).

Research Objectives

- To determine the effects of terrorism on students
- To understand or study different dimensions of terrorism

- To suggest the findings for the policymakers to take the necessary measures

Research Question

- How does terrorism affect university students?
- What is the dimension of the effects of terrorism?

Rationale

Studying the effects of terrorism on students provides valuable insight into the importance of creating a secure and violence-free environment for students' personal intellectual growth and better learning. Moreover, terrorism affected the academic results of the students due to the non-completion of courses in an insecure educational environment. It also reduced literacy and increased the dropout rates of both males and females (Bilal, 2013; Hokanson & Wirth, 2000). Youth are the generation who are supposed to run this country in the future; therefore, the provision of a safe and secure learning environment in institutions, and the country is a prerequisite for the preparation of skilled and qualified human resources to nurture the economy of the country.

Review of the Literature

The literature shows the diverse nature of the effects of terrorism on students and found that although students reported that terrorism is affecting their social life, mental well-being, and education, they were still enthusiastic and optimistic about controlling and overcoming this problem with their determinations (Jamal, Khan & Muhammad, 2016). Saleem et al. (2016) studied the impact of terrorism on the performance and educational achievement of students and found the impact of terrorism on males higher compared to females. The study also reported the fear regarding security threats in students after some terrorist attacks and incidents in universities in Pakistan. The findings revealed the terrorism impact as a negative predictor of the academic performance of students. Similarly, the study of Akinsola & Ojo (2015) also revealed the psychological effects of terrorism, such as distress, helplessness, and impaired cognitive abilities in Nigerian students.

Daraz et al. (2012) studied the consequences and impacts of terrorism by investigating it sociologically and psychologically. Sociologically, at the primary level, lack of socialization and political instabilities were major reported concerns, whereas at the secondary level, various other factors such as unemployment, economic instability, poverty, feudalism, and tribal culture were found as major contributors affecting the social structures. Moreover, most respondents expressed

their reservations about the security problem caused by terrorism. Additionally, tension was the major psychological issue, whereas depression was the second major issue that was affecting them negatively. Some other psychological problems were experienced by the students, for instance, the tendency for suicide, stress, worries, anxiety, and other mental disorders.

Ahmed et al. (2011) assessed the levels of stress that students faced because of terrorism and studied their coping strategies. The findings revealed that due to the threatening situation of terrorism, the students were facing stress at different levels where a severe level of stress was faced by a few of the students and most of them reported a mild level of stress. It was also revealed that a majority of them were not conscious of taking security measures; however, somehow the majority of them were using some coping strategies. Likewise, Nasim, Khan & Aziz (2014) found a mild level of stress in university students, whereas irritability was found as the most common symptom of stress in the respondents. Moreover, closeness to the religious faith was reported as the most appropriate coping strategy.

Shoshani & Slone's (2008) study revealed that terrorism leads to increased levels of anxiety, anger, enemy hostility, and stereotype attributions, whereas on the other hand, attributes like, level of trust, empathy, and readiness for negotiations were found to be low. Summers and Winefield's (2009) study on the anxiety related to war and terrorism in Australian high school students found anxiety about their family and friends' safety, which made them feel more fearful and anxious. Furthermore, students also showed their sadness and despair at the killing of innocent people. The findings also showed that whenever some students moved to other places, they faced threats and restrictions, which made them angry and frustrated. Similarly, Friedland and Merari (1985) investigated the emotional and psychological impact of terrorism and found an extremely high level of anxiety and terror. Additionally, female university students reported more anxiety than male and intermediate students.

Schuster et al. (2001) studied the emotional and behavioural reactions toward terrorism, which were generated after the terrorist incident of September 11th. The revealed results were feelings of sadness, anxiety, concentration problems, sleep disturbances, and nightmares. Some reported they had less anger, less affection, less feeling of hopelessness, less interest, and enjoyed less time with their friends than they used to before 11th September. Moreover, they stopped future planning and started to spend more time with their parents after the 9/11 incident. Abbas, Hassan & Ali (2017) studied the severity level and prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the survivors, rescuers, and those who witnessed the terrorist attacks on Qissa Khawani Bazaar, Khyber Bazaar, and All Saints Church in the city area of Peshawar, Pakistan. The study found moderate to severe levels of PTSD in the respondents. The findings of the study indicated that any person who got exposed to, survived, or witnessed terrorist incidents such as bomb blasts or suicide attacks is at a

higher risk of developing PTSD, and it is very essential to provide them with facilities related to mental health.

Ahmad et al. (2013) studied the effects of terrorism on the people living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by assessing the depression and post-traumatic effects caused by terrorism. The study found that due to the constant threat of terrorism, the majority of people living in KPK experienced depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Some faced personal effects, and some lost their shelter and business. Grieger (2006) also pointed out that people who were affected by the terrorist attacks tended to experience more acute levels of stress disorder (AST) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Another study on terrorism and mental health problems reported the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in the majority of the participants as a result of anti-terrorism drone attacks in SWAT (Khalily, 2011).

Research Methodology

In this qualitative study, the survey design was used. The sample consisted of 30 university students who were enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's programs in the public and private universities of Peshawar and Lahore. The reason for selecting only two cities was time and resource constraints and the exposure to terrorist incidents. The age range of the participants was from 19–29 years. Purposive sampling was used as a sampling technique to select those individuals who had witnessed or experienced terrorist attacks in their families or educational institutions. Data was collected by using an open-ended questionnaire keeping in mind the well-being of the participants and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Procedure

Data was collected after receiving formal permission and informed consent from university administrations and students. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The open-minded responses were then compiled and analyzed to extract codes and themes. All participants were approached by the researcher personally.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was performed as a research method to interpret the respondents' views about the effects of terrorism. Codes were used to extract themes. The categories that emerged are given in Figure 1;

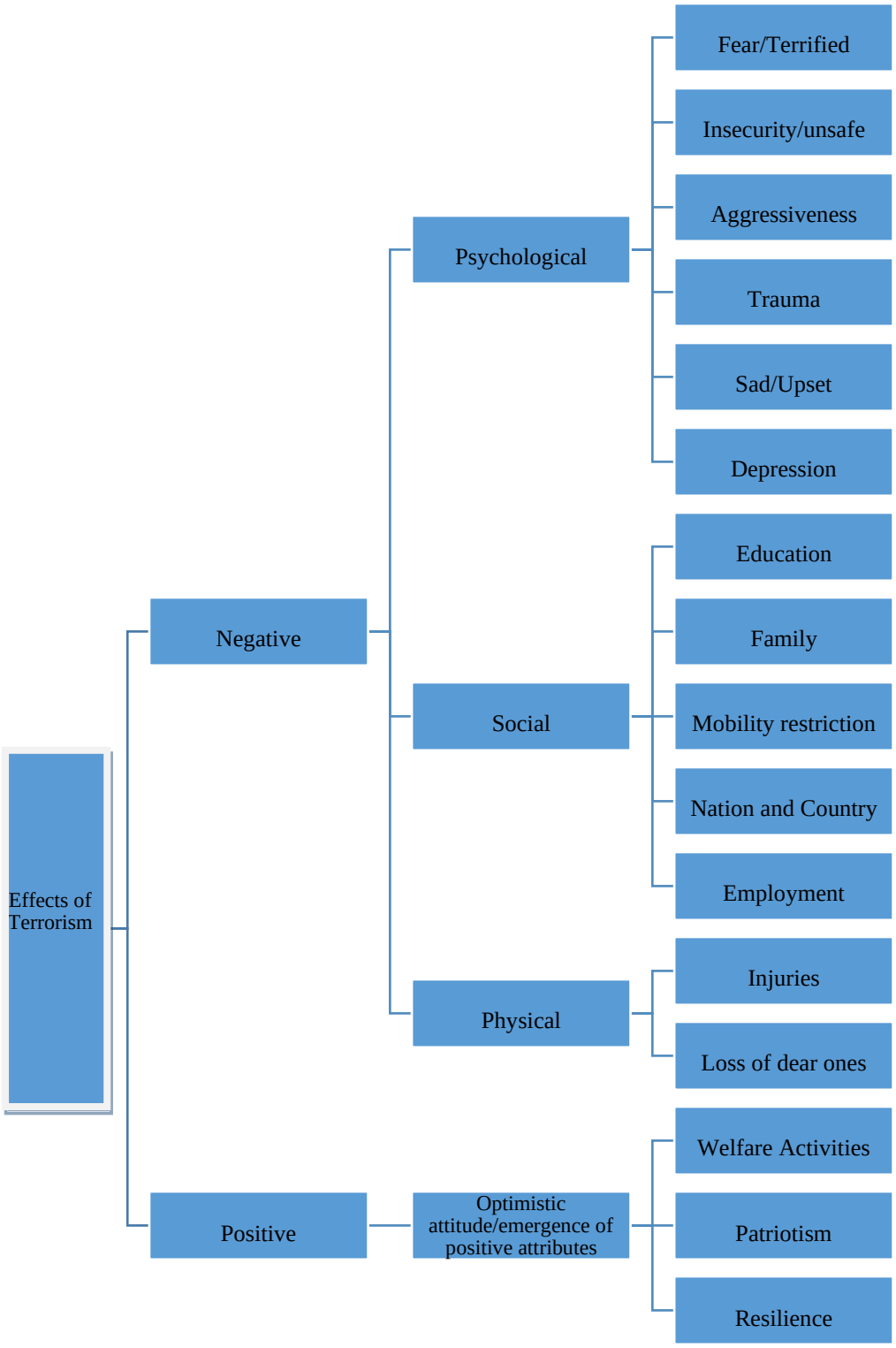


Figure 1: Categories emerged from the thematic analysis

Results and Discussion

The age range of the respondents was 19 to 29 years old. The data were collected from 30 students studying at a higher level where 15 students were studying at the bachelor level and the remaining 15 were studying at master levels. Most of the respondents in this study were single (25) and a few (5) of them were married.

Two major and four sub-categories emerged from thematic analysis as important effects of terrorism reported by respondents. Regarding effects, negative and social effects emerged as the major categories. The subcategories of negative effects are psychological effects, social effects, and physical effects, whereas the positive effects are optimistic/positive attributes. The psychological effects revealed by respondents were sadness, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, condition of trauma, fear, and continuous feeling of insecurity, which caused a disturbance in their academic learning and everyday lives. As a respondent stated:

> "*Terrorism keeps me anxious all the time, it makes me feel hopeless and disappointed about our future, it makes me see darkness all around in our country*"

Similarly, another revealed:

> *"I feel depressed and stressed while studying"*

This study showed that the threatening situation created by terrorism makes the respondents feel terrified and their level of fear was found to be disturbing their day-to-day life. Terrorism created an atmosphere of horror for the students to the extent that they felt fear and insecurity while going to study. Respondents felt that they and their family members avoided going outside, especially to places that are considered unsafe and where terrorist incidents may occur at any time. Respondents reported being emotionally upset, nervous, sad and stressed. This fear brought negativity to the thoughts of the students. For instance, a respondent responded as

> *"It disturbed my ability to think and increased negativity and fear in my thoughts"*

Another response stated:

> "……. *"Sometimes I feel unsafe due to terror threats."*

Earlier literature also revealed the lasting and powerful psychological impact on the people after any terrorist incident whether it is direct or indirect (Fremont, Pataki, & Beresin, 2005). Like these findings, various studies highlighted the impact on the mental health of the people caused by terrorist attacks, such as anxiety, aggression,

depression, fear, and feelings of insecurity (Hussain, Iqbal, Taj & Khan, 2012; Alam, 2003; Bilal, 2013; Korn & Zukerman, 2011).

Social Effects

This study found the social effects of terrorism reported by students on their education, family, mobility, and future career concerns. The constant uncertainty about their lives and security restricted their mobility to attend universities, attend family events, or even think about their future careers in their own country. As a student stated:

> *"……. The society we belong to has a negative impression in most of the developed countries, which limits our scope for growth and the opportunities for Pakistanis, as it is getting worse due to the terrorist attacks."*

Moreover, students reported that their studies suffered due to terrorism as they had to face concentration and attendance issues. Furthermore, their academic results and class schedules were affected. The majority of students reported that their parents were concerned about their children's protection and security. Students cannot go to university due to these insecure conditions; consequently, their mobility is restricted. One student responded while reflecting on the impact of terrorism:

> *"……. Due to terrorism, I cannot study as much as I used to do."*

Another said:

> *"Terrorism affects our lives that all of our relatives, friends, and family always think about the possibility of having these incidents again and we are afraid about the safety of their children".*

Similarly, studies supported the findings that academic functioning worsened after the attack and students perceived that terrorism was affecting their social well-being (Jamal, Khan & Muhammad, 2016; Sadia & Khalid, 2011). Moreover, some researchers also highlighted the financial losses and security concerns for families due to terrorism (Lemyre, Turner, Lee & Krewski, 2006).

Physical Affects

This study also showed some physical effects of terrorism on students, including losing loved ones and getting injured. Some of them revealed that they lost their loved ones in terrorist attacks. According to a respondent:

> *"This terrorism took my cousin from us as he passed away in a bomb blast"*

Some also reported injuries to family members. It further revealed that sometimes the psychological effect further resulted in physical problems such as dysfunction of the body or any other health problem. As per respondent:

> *"I was shocked when my brother was attacked"*

Another mentioned:

> *"My father got injured in a bomb blast and it was very painful for our family"*

One participant in the present study shared his experience by stating:

> *"They attacked me in the North Waziristan agency in my car with AK47 and rocket, and I felt I am gone"*

Evidence from the studies showed that in the case of terrorism, the depressive symptoms got twice in those who lost their loved ones (Lemyre, Turner, Lee & Krewski, 2006; Galea et al., 2002).

Optimistic Attitude

In the present study, the emergence of positive attributes was also found, including welfare activities, patriotism, and resilience. Some responses reported that even after terrorism, they are still very positive as it did not become a cause of demoralization for them, which indicates their courage to cope with the difficulties by taking certain interventions. This shows their resilient attitude as is clear by a response given by a student who said:

> *"Terrorism did not undermine me to stop doing my daily life activities"*

Another student responded as follows:

> *"Terrorism is itself a very cowardly act. It makes me engage myself in welfare activities to help other people"*

Findings showed that acts of terror did not decrease the inner positiveness and motivation to engage in positive activities. They still want to contribute to society by participating in welfare activities, which shows their interest in serving humanity. In this context, for some participants, terrorism incidents emerged as an opportunity to help the sufferers and needy in society. The present study showed an interesting behavioural effect found in some respondents which increased their level of patriotism' like working to defend and eliminate terrorism from the country, which shows their positive energy. As one respondent responded:

> *"Terrorism did not affect me because I am not afraid of it. I will defend my country."*

Another student responded by saying:

> *Although it makes me feel insecure about my family's protection, it also increases the feeling of working for my country as my country needs me.*

These findings are somehow consistent with the findings of a study conducted by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University after September 11 to examine the help provided by different people. Most people responded to this tragic condition of terrorism by working and volunteering for hours for the help of victims and others responded by being involved in some kind of charity activities such as giving and donating clothes, food, blood, and money (Steinberg & Rooney, 2005). Another study by Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh & Larkin (2003) on the positive effects of 9/11 revealed the important role of resilient coping style and other positive emotions. The study found that resilient people experience more positive emotions from the crisis and as a result, they grow positively. This also seems similar to the terror management theory. In this context, even after experiencing terrorist attacks, some are still hopeful and trying to strengthen their self-esteem by engaging in activities considered respectful in their culture.

Conclusion

Pakistan has been fighting a war against terrorism successfully for a long time, but it is still the most challenging issue, and it is affecting the development of Pakistan. Although terrorism has affected every individual in society, focusing on students was crucial to nurturing the secure, healthy, and peaceful minds who will lead this country in the future. The study found that respondents faced psychological, social, and physical effects that impacted their lives negatively. The study also found the emergence of some positive effects in some resilient students as they reported that terrorism did not stop them from continuing their studies and work, rather it urged them to engage in welfare activities and do work for their country. It is the need of the hour to take care of the future generation of this country by investing in the services of mental well-being and improving the overall security condition in the country. Additionally, other than security measures, the study highlights the need to have counseling services at educational institutions to assist students in their psychological recovery.

Future Implications

Some future implications are as follows:

- This study suggests the need for counseling services for students to nurture mentally healthy students who can cope with psychological issues.

- The findings highlighted the importance of security measures on a priority basis for students in educational institutions.
- It will help the policymakers to devise policies for the improvement in the security conditions in order to nurture healthy qualified youth.

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Maryam Batool is a Lecturer, Gender and Development Studies Department, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan

Prof. Dr. Sarah Shahed is a Professor, Department of Psychology, Forman Christian College University, Lahore

Madiha Nadeem is a Lecturer, Gender and Development Studies Department, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore, Pakistan