Lay theories of terrorism: Misconceptions, stereotypes formed by propaganda

Kirstie C, Domican

Department of Psychology, Dublin Business School

Abstract

This study sets out to review lay subjects theories of terrorism within an Irish context. Qualitative interviews conducted with academics and non-academics of a convenience and theoretical sample The results analysed with thematic analysis are discussed in terms of the range of determinants and attitudes of lay beliefs of terrorism

Introduction

- The media's potential to call into question stereotypical views of social groups, including those defined by race and ethnicity, has previously been demonstrated (Mastro, 2015; Tukachinsky et al 2015)
- Terrorism is socially constructed. Terrorism is different from other crimes and injustices, it is distinct because of its powerful objectives such as spreading fear (Matusitz 2013).
- Stueter (1990) examined the cogency of implicit theories the German public held regarding Muslims. German participants predicted Muslims to be more aggressive than Christians, and therefore to be more supportive of terrorism.
- Existing research appears to identify that there is a relatively large stereotype held by the public towards a typical terrorist but large sum of research has been conducted in combat countries this studied set out to review weather Irish people although a "neutral country also hold a stereotypes and seeks the lay peoples theories of terrorism.

Methods

one on one interviews 10 questions- were derived from the literature about what influences stereotypes of terrorism

6 Participants (3M)(3F) of a convenience and theoretical sample

Academics & Non academics ranging from 18-32 years from the millennials generation.

Audio recording were transcribed to text., data was then read to identify meaningful & relevant units to the research questions.

Analysed with thematic analysis using inductive and deductive coding resulting in 31 concepts and categorised in 5 themes

Results

Thematic analysis resulted in 31 concepts, which were grouped into 5 key themes. From the examination of all units of information identified in the interview, transcripts categorised (1. Knowledge of war on terror, 2. Cultural differences, 3. Media, 4. The negative wording used, 5. Association).

Theme 1- Knowledge

- Centres on the perceptions of the "war on terror" to exercise the knowledge participants have
- 1/6 knew why it occurred "*It started over oil in the Middle East with America and one September 11th attacks heightened tensions*

Theme 2 – Cultural Differences

- Focuses on descriptions and origins of terrorists/terrorism
- Gave insight to implicit attitudes and weather there was a difference across educations . Which identified that academics held a stereotype "*Generally wears clothes were minimal skin can be exposed, bearded and male many are from the eastern side of the world*

Theme 3- Media

- Centres around questions of media influence, media usage and media coverage in other countries.
- Five participants stated *"yes"* that they did think that media had an influence on their opinion. In contrast, one participant responded *"no but they do try god bless"*
- *3 participants used social media and the news others only used social media.*
- All participants agreed that media coverages varies from country to country *"Different countries media suit their own agendas"*

Theme 4- Negative words

- Terrorism is a negative aspect of the world and has negative effects such as the psychological trauma;
- 18 negative words were used throughout averaging at 3 negative words per person. *Including "Vulgar" and "Destruction"*

Theme- 5-Association – focused on the association of terrorism and Islam/Arabs/Muslim

Globally what ethnic group in your opinion accounts for the most terrorist attacks

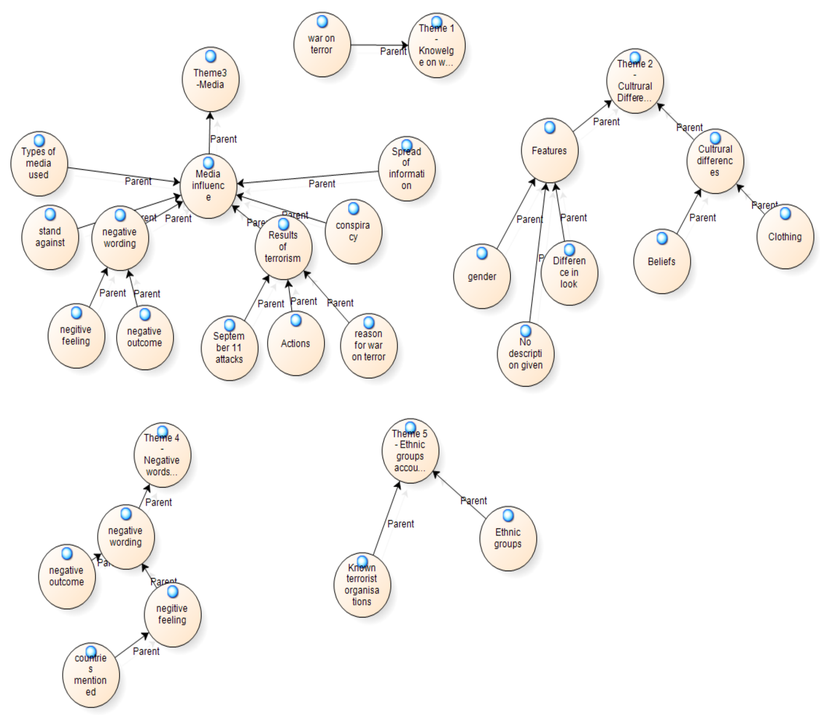
All participants selected Arabs and Pakistan giving insight to stereotype to the eastern world . regarding the second question in this theme *What terrorist organisation do you know of?* The highest known groups was ISIS, Although the IRA was included in the selection

Discussion

- These results indicate that the Irish people do hold a stereotype towards terrorists and terrorism as a whole. Significant findings from this study demonstrates that academics are no better off than non-academics concerning knowledge.
- The significant finding suggests that academics held a more stereotypical image/ attitude towards Islam/Arab/Muslims- those from the east. *A question regarding a description of a terrorist*, the range of answers varied from no descriptions to an in-depth description, describing features and skin colour, and possibly where a terrorist may come from. Five references were made to gender, three considered male aspects to predominate terrorists
- A contradictory finding within this study – Participants who did not give descriptions of what a terrorists may look like physically, when asked *"what ethnic group do you think accounts for the most terrorist attacks carried out,* Each individual had chosen Arabs as a response with six responses Arabs (100%) four responses as Pakistan (66%)
- To conclude The findings from this study are relevant and consistent with previous research that has been conducted from the 1990s- 2000s, which appears to also identify that there is a relatively large stereotype held by the public towards a typical terrorist.

- Limitations: Sample size, length of interviews, researcher influence, some questions were not understood correctly.

Theme Model



References

Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D., & Yarchi, M. (2015). Documenting Portrayals of Race/Ethnicity on Primetime Television over a 20-Year Span and Their Association with National-Level Racial/Ethnic Attitudes. *Journal of Social Issues*, *71*(1), 17-38.

Matusitz, J (2013). *Terrorism and communication* (1st ed.).

Steuter, E. (1990). Understanding the media/terrorism relationship: An analysis of ideology and the news in time magazine. *Political Communication*, *7*(4), 257-278. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1990.9962902