SHORT NOTE

Major world events and discrimination

Lorraine P. Sheridan and Raphael Gillett
School of Psychology, University of Leicester, Leicester, England, UK

It is known that a major world event caused by one group can influence perceptions of other social groups. The impact of the events of September 11, 2001 on religious and ethnic discrimination in the UK was assessed. Of seven ethnic groups, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, who were primarily Muslim, reported the greatest increase between pre- and postevent discrimination. So, the attacks on the USA by al-Qaeda, a radical Islamic organization, activated discrimination against people of Islamic faith in the UK. These results highlight links between world events and intergroup relations, and may serve to remind norm violators that the harm they do to people of other groups can impact people of groups perceived to share their values, even in geographically distant places.

Key words: major events, Muslims, racial discrimination, religious discrimination, September 11.

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, a series of terrorist attacks were launched against the USA. Four airplanes were hijacked, two of which were flown into the New York World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon in Washington DC, and the final plane crashed in rural Pennsylvania. The suspected hijackers were believed to have links with al-Qaeda (‘the base’), a radical Islamic organization. Over two million Muslims live in the UK, and although the mainstream Muslim community publicly attacked a ‘tiny lunatic fringe’ who supported the attacks on the US, the media reported instances of hate mail, verbal abuse and physical assaults on Muslims, as well as the vandalism of mosques. Anti Islamic reactions occurred in all 15 European Union member states (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). In the USA, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims increased by 1700% in 2001 (Federal Bureau of Investigation crime statistics). Media reports have also covered attacks on members of other religious groups. For example, the BBC reported that Sikh men in the UK and in the USA had been targeted due to their supposed superficial resemblance to Osama Bin Laden. The current study examines whether discrimination increased or decreased after September 11 in a sample of Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, Jews and Christians.

Correspondence: Lorraine Sheridan, School of Psychology, Forensic Section, University of Leicester, 106 New Walk, Leicester LE1 7EA, England, UK. Email: LPH1@leicester.ac.uk

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In 1997, The Runnymede Trust (the UK-based independent think tank on ethnicity and cultural diversity) coined the term ‘Islamophobia’ (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Islamophobia is thought to constitute a two-stranded form of racism, rooted in both the ‘different’ physical appearance of Muslims and also in an intolerance of their religious and cultural beliefs. Islamophobia is considered as no more than a modern epidemic of an age-old prejudice towards and fear of Islam. Malik (2001) noted that such attitudes are still manifested in modern Western society, which in itself is not considered ‘religion friendly’. Islam is still erroneously regarded as backward and chauvinistic compared to ‘enlightened’ modern Western values. More direct evidence for the existence of Islamophobia as an everyday entity is provided by the 2000 British Crime Survey (Clancy et al., 2001). This estimated that in 1999, the number of racially motivated offences in England and Wales was 280,000, and that the annual risk of being a victim of a racially motivated crime was 4.2% for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (who are primarily Muslim), compared to 0.3% for whites. In short, following the September 11 attacks, conditions were ripe for discriminatory behavior to be directed towards Muslims living in the Western world.

Early psychological studies have shown that major world events can influence stereotypical views of and attitudes toward racial groupings. Following the Second World War, for example, American children showed greater favoritism towards people from countries who had been wartime American allies (Zeligs, 1954). Favoritism held regardless of other factors such as similarity of culture and skin color, which had previously determined the children’s attitudes. Similarly, the attitudes of American students towards German people became more unfavorable both before and during WW2 (Dudycha, 1942). In India, stereotypes of the Chinese among university students became more negative after as compared with before the Indo-China border war (Sinha & Upadhyaya, 1960).

Most relevant to the present research is a study by Bar-Tal and Labin (2001). In addition to confirming the existence of a similar process following events in specifically the Middle East, this study also demonstrated that even short-term major events can alter racial stereotypes and suggested that these changes may serve as a ‘seismograph’ of intergroup relations at any particular time. Bar-Tal and Labin define major events as ‘extraordinary events, relevant to group members’ lives, which are widely publicised through group’s channels of communication and provide information that cannot be disregarded’ (p. 266). Their study concerned three points in time during 1996: first, when the Arab-Israeli peace process appeared to be progressing well; second, 1 day after two attacks by Hamas which killed 24 and left 89 wounded; and finally around 12 weeks after the last of a further series of terrorist attacks. Following each of these, Bar-Tal and Labin measured the feelings of 119 Israeli adolescents towards Palestinians, who were directly related to the attacks and who are generally viewed negatively by the Israelis; and towards Jordanians, who were not involved in the attacks and who are perceived relatively positively by Israelis; and towards ‘Arabs’, the general category term for all Arab nations, and a term which is used in Israel in derogatory contexts. Views on all three groups corresponded with the relations that Israel had with those groups at the time. For the majority of dependent variables, all three groups were regarded more negatively following the terrorist attacks. Overall, Palestinians were regarded more negatively than were Arabs, while Arabs in turn were regarded more negatively than Jordanians.

These findings were explained in terms of the theoretical arguments of Bodenhausen (1993) and Smith (1993) relating to cognition, emotion and stereotyping. That is, the terrorist attacks provoked an affective state of anxiety and threat, and in this affective state the adolescents gave responses based on stereotypic perceptions, attitudes and feelings. This use of stereotyping led to a general lack of differentiation between all three Arab groups, as this...
simplified participants’ perceptions (Bodenhausen, 1993). Following from this, it is easy to understand why at the third data collection period, as predicted, attributions of intentions toward all three groups returned to more positive levels, but stereotypic perceptions did not change: anxiety and threat were no longer likely to be so prominent in participants’ minds and, so, while the underlying stereotypes remained, they were less likely to be invoked in participants’ responses. More generally, Bar-Tal and Labin suggest that major traumatic events such as terrorist attacks provide powerful cues, which ‘automatically unfreeze held beliefs and attitudes, without […] careful consideration and assessment’ (p. 267).

The existing research on the effects of world events on stereotypes leaves one important issue unaddressed. Although it seems that the affective nature of prejudices can be affected by major world events, there is no data concerning whether the latter can also influence the prevalence of prejudice-based behavior. There is a need for research that investigates the impact of major events on the incidence of racially and religiously motivated discrimination and abuse. The current study will build on Bar-Tal and Labin’s work by investigating whether members of five religious minority groups living in the UK experienced an increase in discrimination following the events of September 11. This study differs from the Bar-Tal and Labin study in three ways. First, the impact of a single major world event was assessed. Second, the impact upon religious as well as racial groups was measured. Finally, the participants indicated their actual experiences of discrimination, rather than their views toward other social groups.

Method

Participants

A total of 398 usable questionnaires were returned by the conclusion of the study. The highest proportion of participants was Muslim (50%). The next most frequently occurring religious grouping were Sikhs (17.3%), followed by Hindus (14.3%), Jews (11.8%) and Christians (6.5%). Almost one third of participants (32.4%) described themselves as Pakistani in ethnic origin. The next most frequently occurring ethnic origin was Indian (21.1%), followed by Sikh (17.3%), Jewish (12.3%), UK white (9.3%), Bangladeshi (4.8%) and ‘other Asian’ (2.8%).

The majority of participants (85.7%) resided in two English cities, Leicester and Stoke-on-Trent. According to the 1991 population census, 71.5% of Leicester people were white, and 22% of the population of the city were of Indian origin. This figure is believed to have risen markedly since 1991, and it is predicted that by 2011, Leicester will become the first UK city where 50% of the population will hail from a non-white background. Stoke-on-Trent, in contrast, was reported by the 1991 census to have a total ethnic minority population of just 3.1%.

The participants were aged between 13 and 76 years ($M = 25.24$ years, $SD = 12.41$ years). Just over half the sample (50.8%) were female. Although age and gender were disproportional between some of the ethnic and religious groups, MANCOVA analyses showed that these differences did not significantly impact on the variables of interest. The socioeconomic status of participants, as defined by their occupational title, was as follows: a large proportion were students (47.8%), 11.9% were professionals, 9.4% were at school, 5% were retired, 4.2% were administrative workers, and 3.6% were housewives. The remainder were in unskilled or semiskilled work, employed in retail or customer services, were technicians, self-employed
or unemployed (18.1% in all). The majority of participants were single (67.6%), a further 28.6% were married, 2.4% lived with their partner, and 1.5% were widowed, divorced or separated.

**Measurements**

The questionnaire consisted of a cover sheet that introduced the research and assured confidentiality and participant anonymity, and questions that were partially based upon materials used in the (unpublished) project, ‘Through my Eyes: Perceptions and Experiences of Racism’, conducted by Shelley P. Harrell and Hector Myers of the University of California, Los Angeles, USA. In the opening section, participants were asked to state their ethnic origin, religious grouping, country of birth and citizenship, gender, occupation, and marital status via a selection of choices. Age of participants was also requested.

Discriminatory experiences were measured by 33 items. Participants were asked how often they had experienced these purely on the basis of their race, ethnicity or religion both before and after the attacks on the USA. The experiences were designed to reflect a full range of experience of prejudice, and included being treated rudely, being asked to speak for one’s entire ethnic, racial or religious group, seeing negative stereotypes in the media, being physically assaulted, and experiencing significant racial tensions or conflicts in one’s community.

Specific incidents of racism or religious discrimination were described by participants if they believed these incidents were related to the attacks on the USA. Participants were supplied with blank sheets and were asked to provide further details of any relevant incident. To provide a check that post-September 11 experiences were being described, respondents were asked to provide their age when the incident occurred.

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were distributed among mosques, temples and colleges around England between October and December 2001. The questionnaire was also placed on the Internet at http://www.le.ac.uk/pc/lph1/lph1.html and a link was kindly provided from ‘Totally Jewish’, a website that is operated from England and which provides news and commentary aimed at the Jewish community. The original sampling frame was a list of places of worship, cultural centres and religious organizations. Stratified sampling was used to select potential groups of likely participants from this frame.

**Results**

Cronbach’s alpha for the discriminatory experiences scale was 0.95, indicating that the scale has good internal consistency. Furthermore, a principal components analysis produced a single-factor solution. Thus, the 33 change scores representing differences between pre- and post-September 11, 2001 discriminatory experiences were summed to form a single, overall score. This was the dependent variable in two analyses of variance where ethnicity and religion, respectively, were fixed factors. These revealed: (i) a significant relationship between the dependent variable and participants’ ethnic origin, $F_{6,344} = 22.64, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$; and (ii) a significant relationship between the dependent variable and participants’ religion, $F(4346 = 37.7, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.05$. In terms of ethnic origin, and in descending order,
Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, UK whites, Indians, Other Asians and Sikhs all reported post-September 11 increases in discriminatory experiences. Jewish respondents were the only ethnic group who reported a decrease. Regarding religion, Muslims reported large increases in discriminatory experiences after September 11, and Hindus reported small increases. Christians, Jews and Sikhs all reported decreases. Table 1 provides details.

It is likely that colinearity existed between race and religion. To examine whether this was the case, both variables were placed into a stepwise linear regression, with change scores as the dependent variable. Religion was entered first and explained 22.7% of the variance in discriminatory experience change scores ($F_{1,349} = 102.43, p < 0.001$). Ethnicity was entered second and explained a further 2.5% ($F_{2,348} = 11.63, p < 0.001$). Thus, respondent religion explained a far greater proportion of the variance in post-September 11 discrimination change scores than did respondent ethnicity. Further, over 68% of both Muslims and Sikhs stated that they were somewhat, very or extremely, visible members of their religious groups (as did 34.9% of Jews, 20.8% of Hindus and 0% of Christians, $\chi^2(16) = 104.97, p < 0.001$). This would suggest that Muslims in particular were being targeted.

In total, 13.8% of respondents described a specific personal experience of racism or religious discrimination that was related to the events of September 11. The reporting of an incident (yes/no) was found to be related to participant religion, $\chi^2(4, N = 398) = 29.81, p < 0.001$, wherein incidents were predominantly described by Muslims (70.9% of all reports). Reporting was also related to ethnicity, $\chi^2(6, N = 398) = 30.53, p < 0.001$, with reports coming primarily from ethnic Pakistanis (58.2% of all reports).

## Discussion

The current UK-based work indicates that the events of September 11, 2001 impacted upon the experiences of Muslims residing on a separate continent. Of the five religious groups assessed, Muslims were the only group to report significant increases in prejudice. This displacement of aggression following the September 11 attacks by al-Qaeda was specifically towards Islam. This conclusion is supported by further breakdowns of the findings. After Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, whites reported the third largest overall increase in being victims of prejudice. All respondents of Pakistani ethnic origin were Muslim, as were all except two of the Bangladeshi respondents. Similarly, of the 37 whites who responded to the questionnaire,

### Table 1  
Discriminatory experiences pre- and post-September 11 by religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-September 11 2001 (aggregated mean (and SD scores))</th>
<th>Post-September 11 2001 (change scores (SD))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim ($N = 178$)</td>
<td>30.10 (20.50)</td>
<td>17.44 (16.04)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish ($N = 43$)</td>
<td>25.37 (18.75)</td>
<td>-2.39 (10.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh ($N = 64$)</td>
<td>23.89 (14.77)</td>
<td>-0.29 (9.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian ($N = 23$)</td>
<td>17.22 (14.56)</td>
<td>-6.67 (8.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu ($N = 53$)</td>
<td>17.03 (13.09)</td>
<td>1.47 (9.27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in 33 experiences were aggregated to form a change score. Answers on each of the 33 items were coded as follows: a lot less than usual (-2), less than usual (-1), the same as usual (0), more than usual (1), much more than usual (2).

*Means that share an asterisk in the second column differ at $p < 0.05$ in a $t$-test from a zero change.
15 were Muslim. Finally, more than two-thirds of both the Muslim and the Sikh samples stated that they were visible as members of their respective religions. Given that discrimination against the Sikhs in this sample decreased after September 11, and given that white British people are prone to confusing the two religious groups, this finding would further suggest that Muslims were being targeted because of their religion, rather than their ethnicity.

The present work clearly adds to the findings of Bar-Tal and Labin (2001), who demonstrated that major world events can impact upon perceptions of and affect towards persons living in countries which have various political relations with the respondent’s resident country. This study has demonstrated that a major event that occurred in one country impacted on actual rates of discriminatory behavior experienced by minority groups in another country. From a theoretical viewpoint, the notion that judgments of social groups alter following a major world event apparently applies not only to judgments made by in-group members, but also that major events appear to influence actual behaviors experienced by minority group members. How can these findings be explained? Clearly, Muslim individuals were viewed by some as representative of all Muslims, as presumably were the perpetrators of the September 11 terrorist attacks. It would appear that generalized discrimination and aggression are natural consequences when world order is threatened. Perhaps the September 11 attacks made patriotism and race a more salient source of identity for many Westerners because they felt insecure and under threat, with the effect that all Muslims were viewed by some Westerners as a possible menace.

It must be noted that the representativeness of sample is problematic for generalizing the results as robust phenomena. The sample was not randomly selected, which may have led to an overrepresentation of people who had been victimized or those who felt a need to report their negative experiences. Also, the vast majority of the participants came from Leicester and Stoke-on-Trent, cities that are not entirely comparable to all other cities in the UK or in other Western countries. Nevertheless, the results clearly demonstrate that British Muslims were specifically targeted after the terrorist attacks on the USA.

In conclusion, the results would suggest that significant world events do impact on racial and religious prejudice and on discriminatory actions, and that in the current work, religion was more important than ethnicity in indicating which groups were most likely to experience racism and discrimination post-September 11. Major world events that occur in one country have implications for social groups living in another country. There is a further implication of this work, and this relates to social responsibility. The attacks carried out on September 11, 2001 by al-Qaeda, a radical Islamic organization, activated discrimination against other members of the Islamic faith. These results highlight links between world events and intergroup relations, and suggest that norm violators should be aware that the harm they inflict upon other groups can impact members of groups perceived to share their values, even in geographically distant places. In the modern, ever-globalizing world, intergroup relations are not confined to individual societies. Rather, actions by one group can have serious implications for innocent persons living on a separate continent. Research in this area and interest in religious discrimination are severely limited, and there is a clear need for an expansion of interest.

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References


