

PERCEIVED STRESS, STRESS APPRAISAL AND COPING STRATEGIES USED IN RELATION TO TELEVISION COVERAGE OF TERRORIST INCIDENTS

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The present study examined perceived stress, stress appraisal, and coping strategies used in relation to exposure to television coverage of terrorist incidents. It was hypothesized that there is relationship between perceived stress, stress appraisal, coping strategies and television exposure of terrorism. Ninety eight students comprised the sample and were selected from different departments of Faculty of Life Sciences, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), Stress Appraisal Measure (Peacock & Wong, 1990), and Coping Strategy Questionnaire (Kausar & Munir, 2004) were used for assessment. There was relationship between perceived stress, stress appraisal and coping strategies. Stress appraisal predicted the type of coping strategies used by the participants. Significant gender differences were found in perceived stress, stress appraisal and coping strategies. Female participants perceived more stress than male students. Male participants were watching terrorism on TV significantly more than female participants. Male participants were found to be using significantly more active-practical coping than female participants who used significantly more religious focused coping strategies.

Keywords: perceived stress, stress appraisal, coping strategies, terrorism

Defining 'terrorism' is both difficult and complex and it is important to understand this term in order to conduct research on it. Media coverage has complicated the situation by offering various terms to describe terrorism; as the work of fundamentalists, commandos, guerillas, Jihadis and extremists.

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Attempts to coin an objective definition of terrorism has been further complicated due to negative connotations associated with the word 'terrorism' (Rapport, 1977; Hoffman, 1988). By operating in civilian clothes, targeting non-combatants and taking hostages, the terrorist violates war laws codified in the Geneva Conventions by the United Nations. Therefore, anyone using such tactics is considered a terrorist (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010).

Terrorism can be defined as an intended and planned use, or threat of use of violence for attaining goals that are of ideological, political or religious nature (Keet, 2002). In order

to recapture media attention, terrorists respond in horrific ways making common public numb. Terrorists may strike at various targets using diverse modes of operation in order to create a general atmosphere of fear and panic. This causes immense difficulty for authorities to predict the nature and target place of the subsequent incidents. In such situations, where, terrorist acts appear to be random, the targeted society spends large amounts of resources to avoid wider level of atrocities and casualties (Enders & Sandler, 2004).

Terrorism has been exercised through diverse ways such as kidnapping or shooting civilians and public officials; by blowing up buildings and public facilities, and hijacking of public transportation. The terrorist creates uncertainty; enhances stress, and makes government machinery paralyzed. Killing of officials and security personnel results in demoralization of survivors. Terrorism is used as the ultimate symbolic powerful weapon to mobilize and demoralize people. Effectiveness of terrorism depends on the reaction of the victims as the terrorist tries to achieve goals through reactions to their actions (Bootzin, Acocella, & Alloy, 1993; Keet, 2002).

Subsequent to the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001 in the USA, researchers have extensively studied impact of media coverage on the viewers. Through extensive media coverage, people tend to indirectly witness the terrorist attacks (Otto, Henin, Pollack, Biederman, & Rosenbaum, 2007) and are reported to experience symptoms similar to those of PTSD (Keinan, Sadeh, & Rosen, 2003; Otto, Henin,

Pollack, Biederman, & Rosenbaum, 2007), increased memory distortions regarding traumatic event (Ost, Granhag, Udell, & Roos, 2007), stress and anger (Barnes, Treiber, & Ludwig, 2005) and depression (Ahern, Galea, Resnick, & Kilpatrick, 2002). Research has reported that exposure to terrorism through media causes a variety of psychological distress symptoms (Pfefferbaum, 2004; Slone, & Shoshani, 2008).

Exposure of terrorism through media affects people across different ages. For younger children, the amount of television viewing has been reported to predict increased risk of PTSD symptoms (Ost, Granhag, Udell, & Roos, 2007). Children are more vulnerable to experience distress symptoms in relation to media coverage of terrorist attacks. In case of adolescents, the media exposure of terrorist attacks has significant impact on their emotional and behavioral functioning and is manifested with varied intensity and variety of psychopathological responses (Kennedy, Charlesworth, & Chen, 2004). Subsequent to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, middle school students reported posttraumatic stress symptoms including intrusion, arousal and avoidance in relation to viewing bomb-related coverage on television (Sara, Rick, Debby, Robert, 1999). Media exposure of anthrax bioterrorism attacks predicted negative changes in outlook of the people (Dougal, Hayward, & Baum, 2005). The available research evidence suggests that following terror attacks, media plays crucial role in determining mental health outcomes (Lewensohn, Westreich, &

Celestin, 2009).

Role of coping is important to understand the process by which victims of terror attacks either remain psychologically healthy or develop psychological problems (Lewensohn, Westreich, & Celestin, 2009). The process of evaluating a stressful event in accordance with an individual's memories, beliefs, and expectations, before responding is called stress appraisal and is also referred to as cognitive appraisal. Lazarus (1991) argued that emotions are "products of cognition" and cognitive interpretation of events has been considered an important component of emotional responses. Cognitive appraisal has two types i.e. primary and secondary appraisal. In primary appraisal, an individual evaluates the potential harm resulting from a stressful encounter. Secondary appraisal is an evaluative process by which an individual reviews the available coping options, outcome of a particular coping option and how a particular coping option can be used effectively (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Coping has been categorized into two types: problem-solving strategies are efforts to do something active to improve a stressful situation; and emotion-focused strategies involve efforts to regulate associated emotional responses. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), both types of strategies are used to deal with most stressful events. An individual's preferred use of a particular type of coping is determined in part by personal style (e.g., some people use more active strategies than others) and also by the type of stressful event; for

example, in controllable situations, people use more problem-focused coping, whereas less controllable situations (terminal illness) necessitate emotional regulations thereby increases use of emotion-focused coping (Taylor, 1998).

Coping strategies and emotional reactions have been reported to mediate the effect of television coverage of terrorism on post-traumatic growth and posttraumatic stress after 9/11 terrorist attacks (Park, Aldwin, Fenster, & Snyder, 2009). In another study, those experiencing high stress were reported to employ more spiritual and non-spiritual types of coping strategies (Meisenhelder & Marcum, 2008)

Pakistan has become the direct target of terrorism after 2001. Between summer 2007 and end of 2007, suicidal and other attacks on civilians have killed more than 1,500 people (Rizvi, 2007). Pakistan has been confronting massive levels of terrorist attacks which have badly shaken it socially and economically (Michael, 2007). In the USA, media has been extensively covering terrorism particularly the 9/11 terror attack with the main focus on how people responded, and how to help them (Keet, 2002). In Pakistan also, there is an excessive and live coverage of terrorist attacks on media. Direct and excessive media coverage has exposed people extensively to terrorism, even while they are inside their houses. Despite terrorist attacks being a regular feature since 2002, very little attention has been focused by the researchers to examine psychological

impact of terrorism in general and effect through media coverage in particular. The present study was designed to examine the perceived stress in the viewers in relation to television coverage of terrorism, and to investigate relationship between perceived stress, stress appraisal and coping strategies used in relation to television coverage of terrorism. It was hypothesized that:

1. There would be a relationship between perceived stress, stress appraisal and coping strategies used by the viewers.
2. Perceived stress and stress appraisal would be likely to predict the type of coping strategies used.
3. Male and female participants would likely to differ in perceived stress, stress appraisal and coping strategies used.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of ninety eight University MSc level students including an equal number of men and women. They ranged in ages between 20-25 years with the mean age of 21.17 years. Sample was recruited from different departments falling under the Faculty of Life Sciences, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Only day scholars, those who had been regularly watching news channels and willing to participate were included in sample.

Measures

Assessment was carried out using Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Stress

Appraisal Measure (SAM) and Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ).

1. *Perceived Stress Scale (PSS;* Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983)

Perceived Stress Scale consists of 10 items and it measures the degree to which a particular situation is evaluated by an individual as being stressful or more precisely, unpredictable and uncontrollable. An individual is required to rate each item using five point scale to indicate intensity of stress. The scale was translated in Urdu after seeking permission from the author. The scale was translated using formal procedure of translating in Urdu and back translation in English by separate sets of translators. During translation, the focus was on retaining the conceptual meaning and the context in which a particular term was used instead of literal translation. Six Psychology students and their supervisors were involved in the process of translation, back translation and the final consensus. Internal consistency of the translated PSS for the present study was .80.

2. *Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM;* Peacock & Wong, 1990)

SAM consists of 28 items and assesses different aspects of primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal includes three subscales, i.e. threat, challenge, and centrality. Three subscales, i.e., controllable-by-self, controllable-by-others and uncontrollable constitute secondary appraisal. There is one additional subscale that measures overall stressfulness. An

individual is required to rate each item on four point scale. Urdu translated version of SAM was used in the present study and it showed high reliability for the present study (.78).

3. *Coping Strategies Questionnaire (CSQ; Kausar & Munir, 2004)*

CSQ is an indigenously developed questionnaire for Pakistani population (in Urdu) following Lazarus's cognitive behavioral perspective. There are 62 items in CSQ and extent to which a particular strategy is used is estimated through an individual's rating of each item on 4 point scale. CSQ has four subscales named as active practical coping; active distractive coping; avoidance coping and religious focused coping strategies. Active practical coping refers to practical efforts to deal with stressful event; Active distractive strategies involve active but not problem focused efforts such as going out with friends, indulging in recreational activities; avoidance coping included strategies such as withdrawal, getting isolated; religious focused coping strategies included strategies such as praying more than usual, recitation of the Quran more than usual. Owing to the varied number of items in subscales, raw scores were converted into scaled scores. CSQ subscales showed high reliability for the present study (alpha coefficient ranging from .70-.85)

Procedure

Data were gathered after seeking formal permission from chairpersons of the departments who were provided

a letter explaining purpose and nature of the study. Out of eleven, heads of seven departments allowed data collection. The heads willing to permit data collection referred the researcher to program coordinators for further help and to finalize logistic arrangements for data collection. Program coordinators were also informed about the details on nature and procedure of the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Students meeting inclusion criteria and those consented to participate, completed assessment measures in classes in the researcher's presence. It took approximately twenty minutes for a participant to complete assessment measures.

Results

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used for TV viewing and participants' rating of TV channels regarding coverage of terrorism, perceived stress, stress appraisal subscales and types of coping strategies used in relation to TV coverage of terrorism.

Majority of the participants were watching terrorism coverage 1-2 hours daily. Geo News channel was rated as the most frequently watched channel and also rated on the top for depicting gruesome live coverage of terrorism (Table 1). In order to examine stress appraisal and coping strategies, descriptive statistics of stress appraisal subscales coping strategies were computed.

Participants scored higher on stress, challenge and threat subscales and

lower on centrality and uncontrollability. Religious focused coping strategies were the most frequently used followed by active practical strategies, whereas active distractive coping and avoidance focused coping

were the least used strategies (Table 2).

Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to examine relationship between perceived stress, stress appraisal, and coping strategies

Table 1

Coverage and Viewing of Terrorist Incidents on TV

Duration of terrorism viewing (hours/day)	<i>f</i>	%
1-2	62	63.2
2-3	16	16.3
3-4	10	10.2
4-more	10	10.2

Most frequently watched TV channels

	1 st preference		2 nd preference		3 rd preference	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Geo News	64	65.3	12	12.2	7	7.1
PTV	12	12.2	6	6.1	3	3.1
ARY News	10	10.2	27	27.6	15	15.3

Live and gory coverage of terrorism by different TV Channels

	1 st		2 nd		3 rd	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Geo News	84	85.7	5	5.1	4	4.1
Express News	5	5.1	31	31.6	18	18.4
ARY News	3	3.1	28	28.6	25	25.5

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Stress Appraisal and Coping Strategies Used by the Participants (N=98)

Stress appraisal and coping	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Stress	14.47	2.62
Threat	14.02	3.65
Challenge	14.48	2.56
Centrality	10.56	2.18
Controllable-by-self	13.62	3.50
Controllable-by-others	13.13	3.11
Uncontrollable	11.94	2.67
Active practical coping	13.22	2.24
Active distractive coping	11.69	1.97
Avoidance focused coping	11.32	1.65
Religious coping	13.34	1.73

used in relation to television coverage of terrorism (Tables 3 & 4).

Perceived stress had significant positive relationship with appraisal of threat and stressfulness. Negative relationship was found between perceived stress and controllability by self. Perceived stress showed no significant relationship with coping.

Analysis pertaining to cognitive appraisal and coping showed that appraisal of challenge had negative relationship with active distractive, avoidance and religious focused coping. Appraisal of centrality showed positive relationship with avoidance focused and religious focused coping. Controllability by self and controllability by others showed positive relationship with active practical coping and negative relationship with other types of coping.

Subsequent to correlation analyses, regression analysis was carried out to examine predictors of coping strategies. Time spent in watching terrorism on TV, perceived stress and stress appraisal subscales were entered as predictors of coping strategies. Separate sets of regression analysis were carried out for each coping strategy as an outcome variable (Table 5).

Active practical coping was predicted by appraisal of controllability-by-self. Active distractive coping was predicted by appraisal of controllability-by-self and controllability-by-others. Appraisal of centrality, controllability-by-others, and uncontrollability emerged as significant predictors of avoidance focused coping. Appraisal of challenge and centrality predicted religious focused coping.

Table 3

Relationship between Perceived Stress and Stress Appraisal (N=98)

Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM)	Perceived Stress
Stress	.46**
Threat	.40*
Controllable-by-self	-.21*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4

Relationship between Stress Appraisal Subscales and Coping Strategies (N=98)

Subscales	Active practical	Active distractive	Avoidance focused	Religious
Challenge	.02	-.26**	-.20*	-.25*
Centrality	-.02	.12	.25*	.24*
Controllable-by-self	.44**	-.45**	-.25*	-.20*
Controllable-by-others	.33**	-.38**	-.25*	-.07
Uncontrollable	-.09	-.05	.22*	.11

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note: only significant results are reported

However, time spent in watching terrorism on TV and perceived stress did not predict coping strategies used by the participants.

To compare male and female participants on perceived stress, stress appraisal, and coping strategies, a series of independent sample *t*-test analysis was carried out (Table 6).

Female participants perceived

watching terrorism on TV as significantly more stressful compared to male students. Male participants appraised terrorism coverage as significantly more controllable-by-self compared to their female counterparts. Women, on the other hand, perceived terrorism more uncontrollable compared to men. Male participants used more active practical coping

Table 5

Perceived Stress, Stress Appraisal and Television Exposure of Terrorism as Predictors of Coping Strategies

Outcome variables	Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
Active practical coping	Control-by-self	-.18	.07	.31**	.52	.27	.27
Active distractive coping	Control-by-self	-.16	.06	-.29*	.50	.24	.23
	Control-by-others	-.14	.09	-.23*			
Avoidance coping	Centrality	.21	.07	.28**	.54	.29	.29
	Control by-others	-.13	.05	-.26*			
	Uncontrollability	.16	.06	.26*			
Religious focused coping	Challenge	-.19	.07	-.29*	.44	.20	.20
	Centrality	.18	.07	.23*			

**p* < .05.

Note: only significant results are reported

Table 6

Gender-wise Comparison on Perceived Stress, Stress Appraisal and Coping Strategies

Variables	Men (<i>n</i> = 50)		Women (<i>n</i> = 48)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Perceived stress	31.26	5.45	34.25	4.75	-2.88	0.001
Controllable-by- self	14.52	2.85	12.76	3.85	2.55	0.01
Uncontrollable	11.86	2.85	12.04	2.50	-2.88	0.001
Active practical coping	14.08	2.30	12.32	1.8	4.19	0.001
Religious coping	12.98	1.43	13.69	1.93	-2.06	0.04

df = 96.

than female participants who used more religious coping than men.

To summarize, exposure to TV coverage of terrorism was appraised as threatening, stressful and uncontrollable. Religious focused coping was most frequently used strategy. There was relationship between cognitive appraisal and coping. Gender differences were found in perceived stress and the use of coping strategies.

Discussion

The objectives of the study were to examine psychological implications of indirect (through television) exposure to terrorism on the viewers. Specifically, perceived stress, stress appraisal and coping strategies used in relation to media coverage of terrorism were examined. Earlier research has provided evidence that media coverage is associated with emotional reactions and PTSD (Pfefferbaum, 2004).

It was hypothesized that there was a relationship between coping strategies and television exposure of terrorism. Religious focused coping was the most frequently employed whereas avoidance focused coping was the least frequently used strategy by the participants to deal with stress in relation to television exposure of terrorism. This finding is consistent with McCubbin, Needle, and Wilson's (1985) research in which they found that adolescents with many health-risk behaviors frequently used strategies that focused on externalizing feelings.

In the present study, significant relationship was found between stress appraisal and coping. Appraisal of challenge had negative relationship

with avoidance coping strategy. Appraisal of controllable-by-self had positive relationship with active practical coping strategy and controllable-by-others had negative relationship with avoidance focused coping.

Stress appraisal emerged as significant predictor of coping strategies. Appraisal of controllability by self and controllability by others predicted active distractive coping. Avoidance coping was predicted by appraisal of centrality, controllability by others and uncontrollability. Appraisal of challenge and centrality emerged as significant predictors of Religious coping strategies. In line with our findings, Pakenham and Machele (2001) in their study found HIV/AIDS patients' better adjustment predicted by symptomatic illness stage, fewer HIV-related symptoms, greater social support, challenge and controllability appraisals, problem-focused coping, lower threat appraisals and reliance on emotion focused coping. Similarly, Maestre, Esteve, and López (2008) reported high levels of challenge appraisal associated with low levels of passive coping and high levels of active coping strategies, whereas the harm, loss or threat appraisal predicted high use of passive coping strategies.

There were gender differences in perceived stress and coping. Women reported more stress than men. In line with our findings, Sever, Somer, Ruvio and Soref (2008) reported that women's vulnerability to the threats of terrorism was higher than their male counterparts despite being less exposed to terrorist incidents than were the men. In another study, Nellis

(2009) explored gender differences in reactions to terrorism. Women were more fearful, engaged in more avoidant behaviors, and were more likely to seek information pertaining to terrorism. Matud (2004) while examining gender differences in stress and coping found women scoring significantly higher in chronic stress and minor daily stressors than men. Similarly, Kimhi, Eshel, Zysberg and Hantman (2009) found significantly higher level of stress symptoms and lower level of post-war recovery among females compared to males.

Analysis pertaining to gender differences indicated that male participants used more active practical coping strategies and perceived exposure of terrorism through TV as controllable-by-self than female participants. Females used more religious coping and appraisal of uncontrollability compared to their male counterparts.

Limitations and Suggestions

One needs to be cautious while interpreting the findings of the present study as it was conducted on students, who may not be spending much time in watching TV. Moreover, the participants of this study being students could be spending more time in their academic activities. Participants being of younger age group who have very participatory life, could have been affected less by watching terrorism on TV. Future research must include people from different walks of life in order to get true impact of exposure to terrorism through viewing TV channels.

Implications of the study

Our findings can be interpreted in the context of gender role orientation which highlights role of society and culture in shaping masculine or feminine behaviors, roles and expectations. These roles are considered culturally acceptable and appropriate and get embodied in the behavior of an individual male and a female (O'Neil, 1990). Gray (2003) asserts that women are more vulnerable to stressful events than men, and both genders employ different types of coping strategies. Men and women are reported to possess different coping resources and employ differential ways to cope with stressful situations (Sigmon, Stanton, & Snyder, 1995).

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