



Psychological and social analysis of collective trauma: the enduring lessons learned 20 years after the September 11th, terrorist attacks

Análise sócio psicológica do trauma coletivo: lições aprendidas 20 depois dos atentados de 11 de setembro

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Abstract

Incidents that have a fatal impact on civilians have historically had a long-lasting impact on the psyche of those who witnessed it. The politicized September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States has been the most significant historical event of the 21st century, with major global consequences. The ongoing threats of terrorism the 9/11 incidents initiated have transformed public attitudes, socially and politically, and impacted the way people have related to one another both within the United States and globally. This paper critically examines the (i) enduring lessons learned 20 years after the tragic incidents of 9/11; (ii) global psychological response to 9/11 from a cultural-historical perspective; (iii) the broader social and socio-political impacts; interplay between identity politics, national security concerns and risks, prejudice, exclusion, and religious intolerance the events have triggered within the United States and globally; and how social media, fast information, and fake news have influenced critical thinking globally. The paper particularly explores how 9/11 could potentially impact an individual's propensity for religious fundamentalism and prejudice and intolerance towards those who are unfamiliar.

Keywords: Cultural-historical theory. Identity politics. Religious fundamentalism.

Resumo

Acontecimentos que apresentam uma consequência fatal sobre os civis têm, historicamente, um efeito duradouro na psique daqueles que os testemunharam. Os ataques terroristas politizados de 11 de setembro de 2001 nos Estados Unidos foram o evento histórico mais significativo do século 21, com grande repercussão global. Iniciadas por esses incidentes, as ameaças contínuas de terrorismo desde então transformaram as atitudes públicas em dimensão social e política, além de terem impactado a maneira como as pessoas se relacionam tanto dentro dos Estados Unidos quanto globalmente. Este artigo examina criticamente as lições duradouras aprendidas 20 anos após o trágico evento. Para tanto, são discutidos: (i) a resposta psicológica global ao 11 de setembro a partir de uma perspectiva histórico-cultural; (ii) os impactos sociais e sociopolíticos mais amplos; (iii) a interação entre a política de identidade, as preocupações e os riscos de segurança nacional, o preconceito, a exclusão e a intolerância religiosa que os eventos incentivaram nos Estados Unidos e no mundo. Além disso, analisa-se como a mídia social, as informações rápidas e as notícias falsas influenciaram o pensamento crítico em todo o mundo. O artigo explora, particularmente, como o 11 de setembro pode potencialmente afetar a propensão individual ao fundamentalismo religioso, ao preconceito e à intolerância com aqueles que não são familiares.

Palavras-chave: Teoria histórico-cultural. Política de identidade. Fundamentalismo religioso.

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Introduction

Any social event could be analyzed from multiple perspectives. Not many historical incidents had the unprecedented global impact of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center attack in New York City, USA. We tend to remember the global media and press account of the event and what ensued. Every historical event of such significance is as well accompanied by associated psychological, social, cultural, and political consequences for the people impacted by it. This paper aims to highlight key impacts of the September 11th terrorist attacks from a psychological and sociological perspective by critically examining the incidence from a religious fundamentalism, intolerance, and prejudice perspective 20 years after this global historical milestone.

Those who lived through this major historical event vividly remember how they experienced it and when empowered with critical tools to examine the experience, can fathom how it shaped them and their experiences following the event. This of course applies to the authors of this article who experienced this historically relevant event from different perspectives – Dr. Nasciutti as a teen in Brazil and Dr. Rahbari-Jawoko as a young international graduate student in England – being worth critically examining.

Dr. Nasciutti clearly remembers first hearing the news from her mom when she was picking her up from school. She was 13 years old and the sources of information she had were basically from the national TV news and some magazines that displayed the event as the beginning of an international war – at least that was the way she interpreted it – personally blaming the “terrorists” for the tragic attack. For a number of years after the event, Dr. Nasciutti recalls that, when she thought of a terrorist, she used to conjure an image of a face, clearly associated to certain cultural characteristics – a stereotype that she has fortunately had the opportunity to question and change through long years of studies and critical thinking.

While Dr. Rahbari-Jawoko recalls the commotion in the Social Policy Department at University of Bristol, England. Everyone was trying to get to a television in the Department’s common room to watch the coverage of the event that had unfolded. She had commenced her doctoral studies in 2000 and was working in the shared office with other graduates in the department at the time the news of the September 11th attacks was being broadcasted in England’s mainstream media. A group of almost 10 students and a few staff were shocked and awed watching the surreal coverage of the World Trade Center towers collapsing into a terrifying and deadly inferno of rubble. The news was repeatedly recalling the horrific events that had occurred. An American Airlines Boeing 767, Flight 11, had collided into the 110-story World Trade Center’s north tower skyscraper in New York City. The report stated that, 18 minutes later, a second Boeing 767, United Airlines Flight 175, flew into the south tower. The footage, shown repeatedly, was of the towers afire, with burning debris covering the surrounding buildings and the streets below. Hundreds of people were shown jumping from the towers to their deaths to escape the crashing building and the escalating fire. Then, it was followed by further reports of a third plane, American Airlines Flight 77, which had crashed into the west side of the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., and a fourth plane, United Flight 93, which had crash-landed into a field in Pennsylvania killing 40 people on board. The horror that unfolded seemed surreal and cringeworthy, resembling a Hollywood movie. The events that unfolded and their aftermath changed global political dynamics, and unfairly labeled as well as indirectly victimized all individuals with a perceived association to the Middle Eastern region of the world. As an Iranian/Canadian research scholar with expertise in Social Policy with a focus on immigration studies, Dr. Rahbari-Jawoko who was then residing in England, was directly impacted by the tighter air travel security checks and the associated racial profiling that was intensified post September 11, 2001 – still being enforced.

The very tragic and highly politicized September 11th attacks on the United States – indisputably one of the most powerful country in the contemporary world, is the most significant 21st century historical event which changed the world as we knew it. On an individual level, the 9/11 catastrophic incidents influenced how we think, feel, and relate to each other nationally and internationally, based on the global region we are from and in which we have the right to reside. From a psychological perspective, the terrorist attacks had a major impact on the American and global psyche. Mardikian (2007) points out that people felt terrified by the possibility of another attack and were impacted in other associated ways such as having to follow strict protocols when travelling, became aware of racial profiling, increased racism, and discrimination aimed at certain communities and consequently had increased safety concerns and broader financial implications which further exacerbated anxiety. Green (2020) highlighted an increase in psychological diagnosis such as depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) between Americans, especially those who served in the military in Afghanistan. Other studies focused on recalling the events and the direct and indirect associated trauma caused by these events both on people that had a close relation to the event and also those who followed the events through the media (Luminet *et al.*, 2014; Hirst *et al.*, 2015). The studies and what was learned from them certainly expands our knowledge on the impact major traumatic events have on the population exposed to it.

Moreover, on a global socio-political level, the fatal incidents increased suspicion of non-Americans in the United States, increased government efforts to address terrorism and encouraged more aggressive American foreign policies. The years after the attack were followed the major efforts by the USA to declare wars on Middle Eastern countries, often without strong evidence, which created a tense political atmosphere around the world. Soon after September 11, America declared war on Afghanistan followed by the declaration of war on Iraq, in March 2003 (Mardikian, 2007; Fog, 2017). The incident as well had broad consequences including: global technological advancements particularly in military, military tactics, the nature of war, and surveillance; it influenced the networking of population intelligence, mapping, and sharing of civilian data with allies; transference of power to far right politicians in a number of countries; it advanced national border controls and as a result further restricted immigration and refugees processes in the leading Western migrant-receiving countries; further exacerbated environmental problems; led to the empowerment of social media; and decreased dialogue and critical thinking due to greater prevalence of fake news.

This paper will critically examine: what are the impacts of such global traumatic events on the individual? Do the traumatic events have an impact on the individual's propensity for religious fundamentalism, prejudice, intolerance towards those unfamiliar to us and the general exclusion of those who are outside our own socio-cultural global regional affiliation? To address these questions, the paper will discuss psychological studies on terrorism and trauma and examine related theories from a cultural-historical perspective, it will then discuss key sociological studies and theories that explain the nature of prejudice and intolerance behind Islamophobia and their potential to impact religious fundamentalism, concluding with a critical discussion of the broader enduring lessons learned 20 years after the event.

Psychological development from a cultural-historical perspective

When we think about the psychological dimension of human beings from a commonsense point of view, we tend to relate it to an abstract definition, as if an individual's psyche is an inner entity disconnected

from that person's objectives and social life. Cultural-Historical Theory (CHT) is an important approach within psychology and education, as it brings an alternative way of explaining human development; since CHT is not based on an abstract and or individualist perspective, it involves critical examination of the underlying social relations as the main theoretical point. This theory began in Russia at the same time as the Soviet Revolution of 1917 and its main contributing scholars include Lev S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev, and A. S. Luria. These scholars were mainly concerned about how to restructure the educational system to create conditions for a more inclusive and fair education. They particularly focused on the importance of developing critical thinking in achieving their transformation goals. This paper will particularly refer to the contributions of Vygotsky, whose main effort was to create a new understanding for psychological human processes based on a materialist perspective (Prestes; Tunes; Nascimento, 2013).

Vygotsky's work focused on the idea that individual characteristics are not a mere physiological response or a simple product of direct social interactions, though they are a complex and dialectical outcome of cultural and social context (Fleer; Gonzalez-Rey; Veresov, 2017). He argued that although individuals are born with certain biological characteristics, their interaction with the social context and face-to-face social relations combined with the broader social context such as their culture, historical moment, and events shape the way they think, feel, and behave. [...] culture creates a special form of behavior, it changes the activity of higher mental functions and builds the superstructures within the human behavior development process (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 18)³.

There are also other psychological theories such as cognitive and behavioral theories, psychoanalysis, Gestalt, and so on that highlight human interactions as important. However, Vygotsky not only values the social dimension of human interaction, but places it as the core explanation of why we become human beings. In other words, Vygotsky argued that human traits such as emotions, cognition, creativity, voluntary attention, and memory depend on social context to become complex and fully developed. In the Vygotskian perspective, human beings may be compared to a prism which can refract the social environment. This way, instead of just being influenced by social relations, human beings have the unique characteristic of being deeply impacted in the way they feel, think, and behave. For example, human memory was impacted with the invention of photography, a human creation that records our culture and history. Before the invention of photography, people would register themselves and their families through painting and oral stories, but nowadays we can have a complete record of our life through photos and videos from day one – the day we are born. Hence, it may be argued that over the years our memory as a mental function is deeply impacted by the cultural and historical events like the invention and evolution of photography.

Besides the idea of the social as a source of individual development, the CHT argues that not all social interactions tend to affect individuals and even when it has an impact, individuals are not affected in the same manner. A certain interaction or event will have a significant impact if it was experienced by the individual as a dramatic, intense, and collisional experience (Veresov, 2015). Consequently, not all social situations will affect everyone and the individuals impacted may not be impacted in the same way:

Such emotionally experienced collisions can bring radical changes to the individual's mind, and therefore can be a sort of act of development of functions – the individual becomes different; he becomes higher and above his own behavior. Without an internal drama, an internal category, such mental changes are hardly possible (Veresov, 2010, p. 88).

³ Originally published in 1931.

Vygotsky (1998) claims that everyday crises are the moving force of human development, in other words he argues that we can only become more complex in terms of psychological functions and build new ways of thinking if we experience dramatic and intense situations in our lives. Everyday life events are related both to individual dimensions such as family and close relations and to major cultural and historical factors. The CHT is different from other theories in Psychology that tend to generally analyze human characteristics in a superficial way, predominantly searching for 'cause-consequence' explanations, it critically examines what social elements lead an individual to develop certain traits and how that individual modifies and impacts the broader social context in their environment from a dialectical point of view.

This paper applies the theoretical perspective of the CHT to understanding how the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks and its consequences have impacted peoples' subjectivity about the broader socio-political issues and debates over the years. This paper will not only critically examine this tragic event and what ensued, it will examine what the events represent in the bigger picture in which everybody is embedded today.

Psychological response to 9/11 terrorist attacks: collective trauma and PTSD

Attacks like the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks had never happened in history, consequently, the events that unfolded and what ensued, shocked people globally. Statistical evidence has proven that global conflicts where civilians are attacked are generally more traumatic and the negative implications for the individual and the collective population tend to be more long-lasting (Fortna, 2015). Evidence has proven a major reason why the psychological effect of terrorism is very strong is because it lends itself to mass media coverage which largely offers a very dramatic, highly politicized, and biased perspective. The very graphic and or explicit images and sensationalized story coverage of the events accompanied by person-centered stories of victims, heroes, and villains. Evidence has indicated that the general public is commonly drawn to the due to an inherent fear associated with such incidents, where anyone could potentially be perceived as a victim (Hirsch-Hoefler *et al.*, 2014).

People watched what unfolded globally while bombarded with a magnitude of information and traumatic images by the extensive global media coverage of the events. Mardikian (2007) conducted a comprehensive review of the medical and psychological literature published between October, 2001, and December, 2006, critically examining the psychological reactions to the devastating 9/11 attacks. This review exposed that the terrorist attacks were attributed to widespread emotional and psychological consequences which extended far beyond the immediate geographic areas (both direct and indirect exposure) where it occurred. Although they have similarities with existing global evidence, these findings are not irrefutably consistent (Mardikian, 2007).

To understand the mental health implications of the September 11th attacks, researchers from all over the world have studied individuals in most categories of the general population and in all age groups including college students; productive sector; ethnic groups; patient population; veterans, and the military. The evidence has revealed that the levels of stress and likely PTSD symptoms were highest amongst non-whites; women; immigrants; single; the poor; and individuals with previously reported mental illness conditions (Stuber *et al.*, 2006).

Existing evidence reveal that the attacks contributed to widespread and continued psychological and emotional problems particularly in the United States where the population was directly traumatized

and lived with the fear of subsequent terrorist threats and heightened alerts, anthrax contamination, and general anxiety over biological warfare (Mardikian, 2007). However, most participants reported they did not seek help from counseling services, but rather found support by talking to family and friends (Stuber *et al.*, 2006).

Studies have generally differentiated the psychological impact of 9/11 within various population groups who witnessed it in person and those who experienced it through various media sources. It is critical to note that, high distress levels were not limited to those who were physically close to 9/11 attacks only as indirect exposure to the events through television had a similar impact globally. Moreover, those who watched more hours of television seemed to be the most impacted. Such evidence emphasizes the important role that different forms of media coverage generally play in communicating traumatic events such as terrorism attacks and their influence on triggering specific emotions for their viewing audience.

The studies generally revealed a significant prevalence of psychological distress manifested through at least one symptom of PTSD – as defined in section 309.81 of the fourth edition of the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM-IV) – and trauma among adults and children (Stein *et al.*, 2004). This inconceivable event, with extensive media coverage and constant threats of more attacks, influenced the security of families. The studies revealed a prevalence of PTSD symptoms such as anxiety; sleeping issues; nightmares; difficulty concentrating; and avoidance and irritability – to name a few. The likelihood of developing PTSD was dependent on a lot of factors, though the most important ones included geographic proximity to the site of the attacks; direct exposure; knowing someone who died in the attacks; and number of hours of watching television. In adults, distress levels and adverse reactions to the traumatic incident altered behaviors such as smoking; alcohol consumption; and drug use (Boscarino; Adams; Galea, 2006). In children, the exposure to disturbing images on television was directly associated with higher levels of PTSD (Fairbrother *et al.*, 2004).

The extensive studies presented on the psychological impacts of this major tragic historical event brings to light the importance of considering individual and social contexts as a dialectical unit. The incidents of September 11th as well as the unfolding consequences of it can only be deeply understood through critical examination of the two interconnected dimensions.

The social impact of the September 11th attacks

The impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks extended beyond global geopolitics and brought out major general social and cultural changes. Immediately after the attacks, as expected, people around the world were very anxious and, for a while, had the collective fear of further terrorism. The traumatic events virtually altered every aspect of human life such as lifestyle and habits; worker productivity including levels of effective functioning; personal values associated with safety and security, and general perceptions on geo-political issues and personal beliefs. Torabi and Seo (2004) noted significant behavioral changes among the American population including focus on domestic life and time spent with family; self-limitation of engagement in outside activities; avoidance of crowds; general air-travel; increased concerns with home security; purchasing of weapons for self-protection; increased interest in world politics; generally became more appreciative of family and friends; spiritual – increase in church attendance and more patriotic. Within the U.S., there was a significant increase in the number of citizens displaying the American flag in their homes and vehicles.

Social scientists have also found that the threat of terrorism has had profound effects on public attitudes and sentiments towards a variety of social issues such as increased trust in the government and support for the respective national leaders, including the president; increased social identification with one's respective social grouping in terms of race, ethnicity, and citizenship; nationalism and patriotism (Chowanietz, 2010; Nacos, Bloch-Elkon; Shapiro, 2011); undermining of democratic principles such as civil liberties and human rights; acceptance of the limitation of freedom of press and increase in hate crimes and scapegoating (Human Rights Watch, 2014). So far, terrorism incidents have led to wars, militarism, more guns, and crimes committed by the state (Mayer, 2008). Very controversially, some global political experts have questioned whether the positive political gains from the terrorism acts for the governments of terror-ridden countries could in fact incentivize their interest in instigation of such acts (Fog, 2017).

Identity politics, prejudice, exclusion, and intolerance

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States became a nation afflicted by anxiety about terrorism and national security. The fears prompted by the tragedy changed the United States and created a general global fear of terrorism. In the U.S., the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks was characterized by a heightened suspicion of non-Americans. Such suspicions created an “*us* – Americans” and “*them* – non-Americans” binary dynamic. The ‘us’/‘them’ binary had a two-fold purpose, firstly it was invoked to clarify and define ‘security’ versus ‘threat’ concerns and secondly, to convey to an international community that support for the actions of the United States was expected, since any nation that did not support the actions, were interpreted as a terrorist threats against the United States. Such discourse was as well followed by immediate efforts to address terrorism through aggressive national actions and policies (*i.e.* increased hate crimes; ethnic profiling; the Abu Ghraib scandal; Guantanamo Bay, and the controversial Patriot Act within the United States) and through American foreign policy efforts (*i.e.* the 2003 occupation of Iraq without a UN resolution⁴; forced democratization of the Middle East; aggressive foreign policies against Iran, Iraq, and North Korea; occupation of Afghanistan; fixation on Iran’s Nuclear Program; prioritization of the security of Israel – the most important American ally in the Middle East) to achieve it.

The 9/11 attacks were followed by global changes to airline security which brought countless restrictions on civil liberties imposed by various Western governments, hastily accepted by the public. Other terrorist acts that followed around the world, further expanded the shockwaves in the United States and Europe, and the full blame of these incidents were directed to Islamic and Muslim communities. The incidents aroused suspicion against Muslim diaspora and provoked an outpouring of hatred and anti-Muslim sentiment (Acim, 2019). For instance, in 1998 a major report by the Runnymede Trust highlighted various forms of hatred practiced against Muslims in Britain, including: negative or patronizing images and references in the media and in everyday conversations; attacks, abuse, and violence on the streets; attacks on mosques and cemeteries; discrimination in employment and lack of provision, recognition, and respect for Muslims in most public institutions.

The ‘war on terror’ was a political move by the United States to meet the desperate need to comfort the Americans and the fear ignited by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Regrettably, what unfolded targeted those not involved in the attacks and increased global xenophobia, racism, bigotry, and anti-Muslim

⁴ The United States occupation of Iraq occurred despite the Madrid quartet established in 2002 including the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations, to manage escalating conflicts in the Middle East and mediate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

sentiments. The word “terrorism” globally became directly associated with Islam, the Muslim community, and the whole Middle East. The fact that radical Islamic agents sponsored the attacks further exacerbated existing Islamophobia – religious and cultural intolerance and vilification of Islam and Muslims and all forms of prejudice and racism against Muslim nations such as in Iraq, Bosnia, Palestine, Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, Libya, etc., and led to the prominent global narrative which frames Muslims as violent, retrograde, and unable to adapt to Western values. Depending on socio-political contexts, Islamophobia can have different nuances for example, the current American Islamophobia is influenced by Brexit in Europe, and is simultaneously connected to the national legal and political system and the racial and religious demographics within the U.S. (Beydoun, 2018). Whilst there is no universal understanding of the term Islamophobia, the Runnymede Trust – a think tank researching policies for multiethnic Britain – presents eight views of what commonly constitutes Islamophobia (Runnymede, 1997, p. 5): (i) a “Monolithic” view of Islam - an entity that does not change with new realities; (ii) “Separate”: Islam is perceived as separate from and lacking in commonalities with other cultures; (iii) “Inferior”: Islam is perceived inferior to the West, irrational, barbaric, primitive, and sexist; (iv) “Enemy”: Islam is portrayed as violent, aggressive, and threatening; (v) “Manipulative”: Islam is considered as a political ideology, not a religious belief; (vi) “Criticism of the West rejected”: Muslim criticism of the West are rejected; (vii) “Discrimination defended”: Discriminatory practices against Muslims are justified; and “Islamophobia seen as natural”: the acceptance of islamophobia.

Studies on the perception of European Muslims and Islamophobia in the key European Union member states, namely Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Austria, and the UK reveals they: felt under intense scrutiny; were excluded from economic, social, and cultural life; most suffered alienation and socio-economic marginalization; racial profiling; and surveillance (Hakim, Molina; Branscombe, 2018; Acim, 2019). In the United States, Alshammari (2013) has concluded that American Muslims are generally denied chances to take key social positions due to fear that they may perpetuate extremism. Though, Islamophobia is not a new problem as it historically is anchored in the grim relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews rooting as far back as the Crusades (Said, 1979).

Several studies have documented the negative relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological wellbeing among many disadvantaged groups, and have found anti-Arab/ Middle Eastern discrimination produced one of the strongest effect sizes (Schmitt *et al.*, 2014). Evidence shows discrimination has a negative impact on their integration in the United States and perceived discrimination against ethnic minorities is related to higher ethnic/racial identification as well as lower national identification (Molina; Phillips; Sidanius, 2015).

The impact of 9/11 on the propensity for religious fundamentalism

Following the 9/11 attacks, other violent events in the United States were flagged as acts of terrorism through the media and were linked with Islam, hence, inciting more hatred towards Muslims. Outside the U.S., many violent acts carried out by individuals belonging to Islamic terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al Qaeda further bolstered the negative sentiments against Islam. The resulting Islamophobia was further enhanced by media reports of violence carried out by lone attackers or terrorists who identified themselves with Islam. Regrettably, the dominant narrative that Islam promotes violence and is not in sync with American values has become the viewpoint through which the American public

and the global West at large see Islam (Dennis, 2018). Eastern countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, all Islamic countries or regions, have been assigned as global villains to be watched by the Western nations.

The 9/11 attacks occurred within the context of the West already holding an established colonial and negative perception of the East and traditions of eastern provenance – coined as Orientalism by Said (1979). He argued that based on Orientalism ideologies the Eastern region of the world is shaped by stereotypes of having oppressive governments, repressing freedom, favoring patriarchy and misogyny which were further justified by 9/11 attacks (Said, 1979; Green, 2019). More importantly, the 9/11 attacks and the events that unfolded added a new image of the religion of Islam to American and the global West's already established understanding of Islam as a "dangerous religion" with concepts (such as jihad) and practices that incite war against the West, Western values, and Western practices (Dennis, 2018). Even after many years, the negative stereotype of Islam still prevails particularly through the media which generally prefers the "good guys" versus "bad guys" stories simply because moral ambiguity does not make money, hence is not profitable for the sector.

The media coverage of terrorism since the 9/11 attacks shows signs of what is commonly recognized as a moral panic as the talks have been highly emotional; the reactions exaggerated – other dangers with higher death tolls have received less attention; there has been a lot of scapegoating in the media, common standards of justice have been undermined. Moreover, the definition of terrorism has been unclear and ever expanding including eco-terrorism, narco-terrorism, bio-terrorism, cyber-terrorism, etc. and there has been a large number of emerging experts (Altheide, 2009; Jackson *et al.*, 2011).

Terrorist attacks have since followed with tough legislation implemented hastily after the events and such legislations have not been rolled back (Douglas, 2014). Common standards of justice have as well been typically eroded by the processes involved and have spilled over into other areas of justice unrelated to terrorism (Donohue, 2012). Regrettably, ethnic, religious, or cultural differences have been amplified and used strategically by Western leaders. The popular media has as well relied heavily on Western government sources when reporting terrorism incidents and they have generally supported the U.S. government's position on the respective conflict (Brinson; Stohl, 2009). Consequently, the mass media has amplified the asymmetry of the conflict and has essentially been a barrier to peace. Evidence illustrates, peace negotiations are generally successful in situations where the media has decreased such asymmetry by equally representing the negotiators of both parties (Shinar; Bratic, 2010).

On the other hand, it must be noted that terrorist conflicts have brought gains and benefits to the stakeholders involved on both sides of the conflict including leading members of the rebel groups; the government officials of the attacked country; and weapons dealers who have little incentive in wanting the conflict to end because of the general political, economic, and psychological payoffs it provides for them. Moreover, there are other global payoffs such as exploitation of global natural resources; protection for drug trafficking and other global criminal economic activities; profit for the weapons industry; profit for the mainstream media; uniting a population around the psychological need for a strong leader; warding off democracy; and the opportunity for the military to interfere in global politics to name the most critical gains.

Although, the prevalent postmodern culture of fear is paradoxical. Evidence has proven that a safer society produces more fear and each 'fear' discourse produced is different from the previous one, as well as being symbolically constructed and intended to generate hostility towards the 'outsiders'. The associated fears produced are perpetuated by the media and the popular culture which often offer a distorted understanding of the social reality (Cricher, 2011). What is more, most of the international news

media corporations are U.S.-owned. Consequently, the U.S. has been dominating the contemporary critical global political discourse (Moghadam, 2012). The Global Terrorism Index (Statista Research Department, 2020) notes there is a lack of consensus on the definition of terrorism and the methodologies used to measure it have been contested. The Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economic and Peace, 2017) observes that “94 per cent of all terrorist deaths [have occurred] in the Middle-East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia” – corresponding to global locations with weak and failed states. Global evidence indicates the number of terrorist attacks worldwide has in fact declined between 2006 [14,371] and 2019 [8,302] (Statista Research Department, 2020). Since 2006, figures from Europol annual trend on terrorist attacks (including failed, foiled, and completed attacks) and terrorist-related arrests in the EU show five categories of perpetrators: jihadist or religiously inspired terrorism; ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism; left-wing and anarchist terrorism; right-wing terrorism; and single-issue terrorism. The Europol data have revealed that most terrorist attacks in the EU between 2006 and 2013 were affiliated with ethnonational or separatist motives, followed by left-wing and anarchist attacks, and those registered as ‘unspecified’.

The contemporary global media tends to frame terrorism stories with a focus on episodes of violence rather than on the underlying global political conflicts that may be perceived as perpetuating it. The popular discourse in Western media presents terrorists as wanting to destroy Western society and Western values and to create chaos, while some experts argue the real goal of the terrorists may be to gain independence or end occupation of their land (Fog, 2017). Existing evidence denotes terrorists are generally driven by strong grievances and become radicalized because of major injustices being committed against a group that they identify with, and that is essentially what fuels their desire for revenge. The various existing groups are supported by the population with the same ideology and tend to resort to terrorism when other strategies to achieve justice have been futile. The situation is further exacerbated as rebel groups are often unable to get media attention unless they commit shocking acts of violence and hence are encouraged by the intense media coverage they receive (Speckhard, 2012).

Although the ultimate goal of existing rebel groups often is to win a strategic victory over their enemy, they are also interested in pursuing the closer goals of: strengthening their own organization; recruiting new members; gaining adherents and supporters; fundraising; and strengthening their position. As a result, more radical and violent groups have managed to outcompete relatively moderate groups fighting for similar causes (Krause, 2013).

Discussion

This section will focus on the resonances of the September 11th attacks on the individuals from a psychological point of view and, more specifically, from the previously mentioned CHT perspective. The consideration of the resonance of September 11th on subjectivity is only possible when we consider the broad spectrum of ways in which this event has affected people. This paper previously presented how people globally experienced a wide range of consequences as a result of 9/11 attacks that were similar in some points and quite different in others, deserving attention. Traditionally, psychological theories are used as a means of understanding the “inner self” in such a way that psychological disorders or personality characteristics are explained as something that an individual is either born with or acquires through face-to-face interactions with others. Historical events like the September 11th attacks present a clear example of how social dimensions can be internalized in such a way that they can deeply modify us. For instance, the post 9/11 reflection on how people became afraid of travelling to the U.S., the

response of the U.S. government in applying more strict security measures for air-travel, or the increased global prejudice against the Middle Eastern culture is a proof that people were globally impacted by the events that unfolded and the world they knew changed after the tragic incidents.

Scholars have recorded how memory and emotions were affected. For instance, Luminet *et al.* (2014) analyzed flashbulb memories of both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens through the administration of questionnaires and critical examination of these people's memory recall of the day, the events that occurred and how they were emotionally impacted by all. The results showed that there were no significant differences between Americans and non-Americans in terms of vivid memories from the day. All participants seemed to have clear memories of how they first heard the news and tend to recall what they were doing when they heard the news. However, there were differences in the level of surprise and emotional impact in relation to the event; as in countries where terrorist attacks had happened before, people indicated they were less surprised. Yet again, this supports and may be explained by the CHT perspective, which argues for the social situational aspect of psychological development and response to life.

Our beliefs and ways of thinking were irreversibly impacted by the 9/11 tragic attacks. Vygotsky (1998) argues that all individual characteristics one expresses were once social interactions. In other words, we only become humans because we internalize cultural elements socially available through the experiences we have in our social composition. Personality; emotions; memory; perceptions and beliefs are not categories that are developed only from the close relations the individual has with others every day, as political decisions; laws; behavior protocols implemented; natural catastrophes; and major public events as well influence people and truly and deeply shape who we become and the way we relate to others.

However, to state that the social shapes us does not mean that we are passive to the environmental circumstances we find ourselves in. According to the CHT, the relations individuals establish with their social dimensions is dialectical – meaning we shape and are shaped by social interactions and cultural elements we experience in life. Therefore, individuals have the potential and facility to transform reality once they are impacted by it (Alnajjar; Elhammoumi, 2017). In this view, the September 11th tragedy may be considered as having both positive and negative consequences on the global population. Though, such analytical recognition should not undermine the terrible fatality cost of the attacks and the massive associated consequences. The 9/11 tragedy gives us the analytical vantage to critically examine: what can humanity learn from the tragedy? Provide us with a compelling reason to consider imagining how countries can build a more peaceful and solidary relationship to overcome conflicts and avoid associated consequences of such occurrences? Does it compel us to question whether we are truly teaching tolerance and respect to our children? And question can we build a more equal, fair, just, and humane society?

From a psychological point of view, humans are always in the process of development (Alnajjar; Elhammoumi, 2017). Consequently, we should strive to always ensure we create conditions that support the development of awareness, consciousness, critical thinking, and the expression of a broader range of emotions to overcome social conditions that are still oppressive and inhuman. If globally impactful, tragic historical events such as the September 11th attacks and the ongoing daily conflicts and degrading conditions we still see are maintained and continuously repeated within human history, it means that we, as critical thinking humans, still have many lessons to learn individually and societally. To avoid our own destruction and extinction, we need to focus on the promotion of social solutions to overcome our adversities.

To sum up the discussions, we are still living the negative aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks as our ideological thinking and associated Islamophobic global response has not changed 20 years after the events, and it is unclear whether and when, in the foreseeable future, we may see a shift to a fair, equitable, and civil discourse of Islam and the Muslim global population.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the consequences of the poignant and evocative September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks from the perspectives of individual and collective trauma. The paper has shed light on psychological and sociological understanding of this tragic historical event. Attention was drawn to the different ways the 9/11 attacks impacted people globally, for instance, there was an increased sense of general fear and anxiety accompanied with an associated increase in psychological disorders. Moreover, those who were perceived and or culturally associated with the terrorist groups, experienced greater consequences in the form of social, cultural, and religious exclusion; general social marginalization and intolerance; and very harmful overt and covert discrimination and prejudice that still prevails 20 years after the events. The broader analysis the authors presented is to support the scholarly thoughts that postulates that the consequences of the 9/11 attacks on the population cannot possibly be understood without the examination of the broader cultural, historical, and political contexts endorsing the act. The paper adds to the scholarly discourse supporting the CHT approach through its critical presentation of the way people globally had a shared experience of this disturbing historical event which was distinctively experienced and therefore, inevitably, were differently affected by it as well. Furthermore, the paper highlights how people can be profoundly impacted by the broader socio-cultural and socio-political context in which any public incident occurs, and have the inherent potential of overcoming as well as, to a certain extent, transforming the socio-cultural and socio-political context. In view of this, it is critical to offer conditions for people to elaborate and get the necessary social and emotional support after a major traumatic event to empower and to offer them conditions for transformation. Likewise, as Western societies continue becoming progressively more diverse, the existing confirmation bias and associated echo chambers, perpetuated and sustained through social media, will continue posing destructive barriers to critical thinking and discourse. Consequently, this will further advance a global narrow mindedness and “truth decay”. This, in turn, will further socially and politically polarize those deemed as “others” and threaten national cohesion, as well as increase the risk of both domestic and foreign extremism. In the end, it is in any society’s best interest to make a genuine concerted effort to integrate, uphold, and advocate for equity rights of all marginalized citizens, to ensure its own national security and prosperity.

Contributors

F. NASCIUTTI was responsible for the study conception and design and critically examined the psychological impact of September 11th, 2001. M. RAHBARI-JAWOKO was invited to critically examine the broader social, geo-political, and contemporary impact of social media and fake news on a comprehensive understanding of highly contested issues and debates the September 11th attacks has raised both within the United States and internationally. Although both authors contributed in equal parts to the writing of this paper, it was edited, in its English-language version, by M. RAHBARI-JAWOKO.

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