Perceived threats of terrorism and job performance: The roles of job-related anxiety and religiousness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between employees' perceptions of the threat of terrorism and job performance, as well as a potential mediating effect of job-related anxiety and a moderating effect of religiousness on this relationship. Multisource, time-lagged data from employees and their supervisors in Pakistan reveal that an important reason that perceived threats of terrorism diminish job performance is the anxiety that employees experience at work. Employees' religiousness buffers the negative effect of perceived threats of terrorism on job-related anxiety though, such that the relationship is mitigated when their religiousness is high. Finally, the results indicate the presence of moderated mediation: the indirect effect of perceived threats of terrorism on job performance is not as strong at higher levels of religiousness. In external environments in which terrorism presents a credible threat, organizations can therefore consider the religiousness of their employees as a resource for countering their anxiety.

1. Introduction

Threats of terrorism instill substantial fear in people, particularly in countries that have severe track records of terrorist attacks, such as in the Middle East (Shahzad, Zakaria, Rehman, Ahmed, & Fida, 2016; Toker, Laurence, & Fried, 2015). Such fear creates worry for people's daily lives, even among those who have never been directly impacted by a terrorist attack, because it enhances the perceived likelihood of future harm to themselves or their loved ones (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003; Sinclair & LoCicero, 2006). The recognition that future terrorist acts are a concrete reality negatively affects people's psychological functioning and daily life routines, and it also undermines their quality of life (Schuster et al., 2001; Somer, Tamir, Maguen, & Litz, 2005). Despite increasing interest in the effect of terrorism threats on people's mental well-being (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Jonas, & Frey, 2006; Shirom, Toker, Shapira, Berliner, & Melamed, 2008), scarce research has considered how these threats might spill over to the workplace and negatively influence employees' organizational functioning (Bader & Berg, 2014; Howie, 2007; Toker et al., 2015). To address this gap, we draw from terror management theory (TMT) (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004) and conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001;

Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000) to investigate how employees' perceptions of terrorism threats might diminish their job performance by enhancing their job-related feelings of anxiety, as well as how their religiousness might mitigate or buffer this process.

A key premise underlying TMT is that people are haunted by the idea of their own mortality (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2016). Perceived threats of death fuel mortality salience, or the conscious realization that death is an inevitable part of life (Greenberg et al., 1986). The prospect of dying one day then functions as a significant source of fear that motivates people to protect themselves from this threat (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Kosloff, Greenberg, Sullivan, & Weise, 2010). But previous research also suggests that people can deal better with agonizing thoughts about death when they can draw from their religious faith (Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Ellison, & Wulff, 2001). Thus, in line with TMT, people's religiousness might function as a buffer against the anxiety that results from an awareness of their mortality (Greenberg et al., 1986; Stein, Steinley, & Cropanzano, 2011).

In light of increasing fears about terrorism attacks across the globe—threats that clearly might interfere with work or have negative implications for organizational effectiveness (Kastenmüller et al., 2011; Stein et al., 2011; Toker et al., 2015)—we investigate how perceived threats of terrorism (defined as the extent to which terrorism or the use of violence in the pursuit of political goals is a significant preoccupation

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of people; Gould & Klor, 2010; Sinclair & LoCicero, 2006) might enter the workplace and diminish employees' job performance. Whereas TMT theory focuses on the effects of perceived threats of terrorism and mortality salience on the experience of anxiety in general (Burke et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 1986), it devotes less attention to how such perceptions might influence people in an organizational setting. Consistent with Toker et al. (2015), who find a positive association between employees' fear of terror and job burnout, we draw from COR theory to propose that an important reason why perceptions of terrorism threats might undermine job performance is that those perceptions make employees more anxious about their jobs. Job performance reflects employees' ability to meet their job requirements (Williams & Anderson, 1991); job-related anxiety reflects the strain that employees experience during the execution of their work tasks, due to worries about their organizational functioning and ability to meet their employer's job expectations (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983; Xie, 1996). According to COR theory, an important mechanism that connects employees' exposure to stressful conditions with lower job performance is the experience of strain, which reflects a depletion of their resource reservoirs that in turn motivates employees to conserve their remaining resources while executing their job tasks (Anand, Vidyarthi, Singh, & Ryu, 2015; Hobfoll, 2001; McCarthy, Trougakos, & Cheng, 2016).

Employees' ability to meet their job requirements is not influenced only by stress-inducing factors that reside within the organization; such factors also can come from the outside, such as negative interferences of family obligations (Witt & Carlson, 2006) or family incivility (Lim & Tai, 2014) with work. Yet insufficient research addresses how threats to the physical safety of employees or their loved ones, due to terrorism, may undermine job performance (Bader & Berg, 2014). The ability to meet job requirements represents a critical concern of both employees and their organizations (McCarthy et al., 2016; Motowidlo, 2003), so consideration of how a relevant, external stressor such as terrorism threats might shape job performance, through job-related anxiety, is critical. Moreover, extant research indicates that the experience of strain in the workplace functions as a causal mechanism that connects various unfavorable work conditions—such as unethical climates (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Solomon, 2006) or negative interference between work and family (Netemeyer, Maxham, & Pullig, 2005)—with reduced job performance, yet we know of no empirical studies that investigate this mediating role in relation to the effects of perceived terrorism threats. Our model explicitly acknowledges that an important source of the negative impact of these threats on job performance is the strain that employees experience during the execution of their daily job tasks.

Finally, it is of paramount importance for organizations to understand how to contain the harmful effect of external threats of terrorism on their employees' job performance (Toker et al., 2015; Waldman, Carmeli, & Meyrav, 2011). In line with both TMT and COR theory, we propose that employees' religiousness may function as a critical personal resource that buffers or protects against the emergence of job-related anxiety due to threats of terrorism (Park, Cohen, & Herb, 1990). Religiousness reflects the extent to which employees' faith in a God holds a prominent place in their lives and provides guidance and support (Eaves, Hatemi, Prom-Womley, & Murrelle, 2008).[1] Previous research suggests that it acts as a personal resource that provides a sense of meaning, safety, and values (Vess, Arndt, Cox, Routledge, & Goldenberg, 2009); following a COR logic, it therefore may diminish the likelihood that the resource depletion that employees experience due to terrorism threats spills over to their workplace (Hobfoll, 2001). In conditions that enhance an awareness of death, such as strong threats of terrorism, the personal resource of religiousness can provide a sense of symbolic immortality, as well as social support (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008; Pargament, 1997), which may

counter employees' resource depletion. Thus, when their religiousness is high, the negative effect of employees' perceptions of terrorism threats on their job-related anxiety might be mitigated, which would have positive consequences for their job performance.

Accordingly, this study makes several contributions. First, we consider the effect of an external life stressor, the perceived threat of terrorism, that has received little attention in prior job performance studies. Extant research has investigated the effect of mortality salience on consumer behavior (e.g., Fransen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Das, 2008; Fransen, Smeesters, & Fennis, 2011) and theorized about how terrorism threats may undermine employee performance (Bader & Berg, 2014). But organizational studies of the effects of terrorism tend to focus on intermediate outcomes, such as the extent of employee occupational networking (Kastenmüller et al., 2011) or burnout (Toker et al., 2015). By addressing the link between perceived threats of terrorism and job performance, we provide organizations—especially those that operate in environments in which terrorism attacks are more likely—critical insights into why some employees may be more or less likely to be successful in meeting their job requirements.

Second, we propose that perceived threats of terrorism lead to lower job performance because people exposed to these threats experience increased strain during the execution of their job tasks (Xie & Johns, 1995). If external conditions threaten employees' physical well-being so much that their resource reservoirs become severely depleted, the strain that they experience in their daily lives may be more likely to spill over to the workplace, which reduces their job performance (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). This argument is consistent with COR theory, which postulates that when people experience resource depletion due to their exposure to stressful situations, their performance outcomes at work suffer, because they allocate significant energy to dealing with worries about their organizational functioning instead of focusing on the job tasks that their employer expects (Hobfoll, 1989; McCarthy et al., 2016; Witt & Carlson, 2006). Job-related anxiety thus may be a critical mechanism by which beliefs about terrorism threats cause employees to underperform.

Third, we propose that religiousness functions like a personal resource that buffers against the emergence of job-related feelings of anxiety that arise with perceptions of terrorism threats (Park et al., 1990), which then diminishes the likelihood that employees underperform. Consistent with COR theory, this personal resource can compensate for the resource loss caused by perceived threats of terrorism (Hobfoll, 2001). With this view, we extend previous research that investigates the role of work support in mitigating the negative consequences of a fear of terror (Toker et al., 2015). Moreover, the emotional support provided by a strong belief in God can help reduce the harmful effect of adverse life situations on employees' mental well-being (Fabricatore, Handal, Rubio, & Gilner, 2004; Park et al., 1990), though we know of no studies that consider how religiousness might attenuate the negative effect of perceived threats of terrorism on job-related anxiety. Religiousness helps people cope with stressful life situations (Pargament, 1997); the current study offers novel insights that organizations might consider in terms of helping immunize their employees against external threats due to terrorism.

Our empirical setting is Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country that also has suffered increasing terrorist attacks (Ismail & Amjad, 2014; Shahzad et al., 2016), which is an appropriate empirical context for studying the likelihood that perceptions of terrorism threats spill over to the workplace. Moreover, religion is a significant component of how many Muslims live their lives (Khan, Abbas, Gul, & Raja, 2015). Some commentators suggest that Islamic religious practices increase support for terrorist organizations, despite the lack of any empirical evidence for such a link (Fair, Malhotra, & Shapiro, 2012). Therefore, studying the possible beneficial role of religiousness in countering negative workplace outcomes due to terrorism threats in a Muslim context is a relevant and timely topic. More generally, increasing workforce diversity and global competition require a better understanding of

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[1] Atheists, who do not believe in the existence of a higher power, would score low on the religiousness construct.