Introduction to Special Issue on Terrorism and Its Consequences

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After the jets hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, we were hypnotized by the television images and devastated by the immense destruction and the great loss of lives. Many of us questioned whether our usual activities were worth doing and wished that we could help. This special issue of Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy was conceived as a way to be helpful to faculty teaching during these difficult times, to their students, and to other readers by offering them some of the ideas and research of psychologists who have expertise in areas related to terrorism and its consequences.

The articles in this issue have come together as a result of both choice and chance. Two weeks after September 11 (after discussion with SPSSI leaders and the ASAP editorial board), I issued a call for relevant papers that was posted on several list-servs and passed on to others. There were many responses. After a great deal of e-mail correspondence, peer reviews, and revisions (all done at blazing speed compared to the usual pace of academic publishing), we have brought together a set of 15 articles on a broad range of relevant topics.

Although this was not a planned issue, it is not a random one. The articles in this issue derive from the theoretical framework of psychology and sociology, including psychoanalysis; cognitive, social, and behavioral psychology; conflict resolution; and community psychology. It is, in general, organized in terms of level of analysis—from individualistic through interpersonal and sociostructural perspectives—and concludes with several articles designed to support individual and community efforts to deal with this crisis. Variations in empirical detail and writing style were retained in the belief that this issue should offer something useful to anyone who looks at it.

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The issue begins with an editorial. This appeal by Jennifer Freyd, a noted cognitive psychologist, was widely circulated on internet list-servs shortly after September 11. She graciously agreed to add references and allow us to use it in this special issue. It seems fitting to begin the issue with something we can all do—to keep our anger and fear from turning into hate.

The first group of articles addresses the compelling questions of “what”? and “why”? Scholarly analyses of terrorism and the psychological characteristics of terrorists are provided by Charles Ruby, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who worked for 16 years in criminal and counterintelligence matters and spent the last 4 years of his military career as an investigative psychologist. Other articles are empirically based examinations by social scientists on how belief structures influence attitudes and behavior and analyses of the nonconscious bases of collective hatred and the ways that hatred causes people to target individuals who are unlike themselves. Many of these articles have been written by scholars whose names can easily be found in the pages of social psychology textbooks and in the newer area of political psychology.

Another group of articles analyzes the intergroup processes that produce conflict and the ways that our rhetoric and actions can makes things worse or better. These articles have implications for the way the United States responds to acts of terrorism politically as well as psychologically. As is true of articles earlier in the issue, these articles are informed by social psychological research and are excellent examples of how so-called pure research has important applications with respect to ongoing events. It is important to point out that several of these articles were provided by researchers from outside of the United States. These scholars are both outsiders and insiders. They can take a more “objective” look at the current crisis but also demonstrate that events like these affect everyone, not just people in the United States.

Finally, there are several articles that inform professionals’ responses to the ongoing crisis. These provide psychological principles that can guide effective interventions, offer a number of on-line resources that may be useful to communities seeking to come together (many of these are already linked), and offer instructors useful suggestions for guiding classroom discussions that may be difficult for both students and faculty.

In sum, this special issue is one way that SPSSI may be of use. We have taken advantage of the speed of communications permitted by new technology, but this issue could not have been published in such a timely manner had it not been for the dedication and responsiveness of its authors, reviewers, and the production editors at Blackwell (our publisher). Despite our speed, we have tried to be professionally responsible: All of these articles are empirically based. We believe they add scholarly expertise to our national and international discussion of terrorism and its consequences.
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