Mediating the Social and Psychological Impacts of Terrorist Attacks

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Objectives:

- Establish the importance of effective risk communication:
  - Psychological impacts
  - Physical impacts
  - Behavioural impacts

- Explain why risk communication often appears to fall on deaf ears.
  - Expert vs. Public perception and understanding of risk.

- Suggest steps that can be taken to improve the uptake of risk messages.

Why Is Effective Communication Important?:

- Public psychological and behavioural responses will help determine subsequent morbidity and mortality rates.

- Effective public communication can reduce morbidity and mortality by enhancing the likelihood that:
  - At risk populations will take precautions
    - Encourage appropriate protective actions.

  - Reassure those not at risk
    - Reduce rumours and fears.
    - Facilitate relief efforts
    - Maintain public trust and confidence in agencies responsible for ensuring the welfare of the public.

(Becker, 2004; Gray & Ropeik, 2002; Henderson *et al.*, 2004; Sheppard *et al., 2006; Vonderford, 2004;* Wray & Jupka, 2004, etc.)

The Power of Public Perceptions:

- Fear as a health risk – Risk perceptions have implications for physical health, as well as emotional health.
    - Risk perceptions inform behaviour:
        - Drive vs. Fly (September 11th, 2001) (1,595 vs. 256 (3,019 overall)
        - Antibiotics vs. Side-effects (Anthrax, 2001) – Increased use of Cipro

- Influence on policy-making – Can impact entire systems such as healthcare.
    - MMR Vaccine in UK.
    - Radioactive incident in Goiania, Brazil (1987)
        - 112,000 sought examination/Reality = 4 deaths/260 contaminations

(IAEA, 1998, Fullerton *et al.,* 2003; Becker, 2004; Gray & Ropeik, 2002; North, 2005; Gigerenzer, 2006.

Actions Speak Louder than Words: Variations in Risk Perception

Security

Reassurance

Relief

Safety

Inconvenience

Exclusion

Danger

Overreaction

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Differences in Perceptions of Risk: Comparing Apples and Oranges

- **Expert Perceptions of Risk:**
  - Can I identify a clear cause and effect relationship?
  - Can I quantify the amount of harm?
  - Do I suspect a hazard, based on past experience?
  - Is there a possibility of an accident?
  - Is there possible exposure to the risk (e.g. pollutant/violence)?
  - Is there evidence of damage?

- **'Public' Perceptions of Risk:**
  - Qualitative characteristics (see next slide)

  - Maintained via:
    - Memorability
    - Imaginability

- Focus on acceptability of risk.

- Avoid underestimating their capability of dealing with uncertainty and risk-benefit trade-offs.

All Risks Are Not Equal:

- <u>Risk Perception Factors:</u>
  - Voluntary vs. Involuntary
  - **Familiar** vs. **Non-familiar**
    - Unknown Risk: New, unknown to those exposed, delayed effects.
  - **Control vs. Lack of Control**
  - Fair vs. Not Fair
  - Natural vs. Technological
  - **Dread** vs. **No Dread**
    - Dread Risk: **catastrophic potential**, fatal consequences, uncontrollability, inequitable, and high risk to future generations

- When speaking about risk, lay-people and experts are often:
  - Speaking different languages
  - Solving different problems
  - Disagree about what is feasible.
  - See the facts differently (Tanaka, 1998).

"Yellow? Don't call us until it's at least an orange alert."

Whose Line Is It, Anyway?

Establish Relevance

The Most Important Factor is *Trust:*

- <u>Trust:</u>
  - Enables cooperation.
  - Can explain up to 50% of risk perception.
  - Pre-condition for risk communication.

  - The public *must* be able to trust their decision-makers to make choices worthy of public interest. Public opposition is the only logical response to a policy decision when trust is absent from the decision-making process (Flynn, 2003).

Rules of Thumb:

- Concentrate on <u>local relationships</u> .
  - Pre-existing relations.

- Focus on the <u>importance of the issue</u>.
  - Moral importance.

- Create an awareness of <u>shared values and agreement</u>.
  - Common goals, overlaps of interest.
  - Mismatches between policy values and individual values result in lower levels of trust.

- Trust is easy to destroy and extremely difficult to rebuild.
  - Why was trust lost in the first place?
  - Constantly test for trust.

Communicating the Risks of Terrorism:

- Important to communicate with the public in advance of any terror-related crisis. This will keep them from feeling misled and uninformed → TRUST.

- Information should include:
  - Plain, less technical language.
  - Illustrations and colours.
  - Contact numbers and other information sources.
  - Source identification and other references.
  - Action steps to foster self-efficacy.

- The public feel reassured by the provision of information.

- Trust in the experts is <u>crucial</u> = full disclosure where possible.

- People want honest and accurate information about terror-related situations, even if the info worries them.

Conclusions:

- Policy-makers must find a way to communicate the threat of terrorism and the ability of the government to respond to these threats in order to ensure that members of the public have the ability to take action.
  - Information must be issued repeatedly, including:
    - *How* the threat of terrorism has changed and is likely to change.
    - *How* safety is improved.
    - *How* Government secures and monitors safety.
    - *What* this means for them in their day-to-day lives.

  - Address issues such as home grown terrorism.

  - Ground analysis and risk communication within social contexts in order to facilitate understanding and shape behavioural change. Truthful, consistent information must be provided and regularly updated by trusted sources.

Thank you!

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<u>For further information, see:</u>

- Acton, James M., Rogers, M. Brooke, and Zimmerman, Peter D. (2007). Beyond the Dirty Bomb: Re-thinking Radiological Terror. *Survival*, 49(3), pp. 151-168.

- Rogers, M. B., Amlot, R., Rubin, G. J., Wessely, S., and Krieger, K. (2007). Mediating the Social and Psychological Impacts of Terrorist Attacks. *The International Review of Psychiatry*, 19:3, 279-288.

- Rogers, M. B., Loewenthal, K. M., Lewis, C. A., Amlot, R., Cinnirella, M. C., and Ansari, H. (2007). The Role of Religious Fundamentalism in Terrorist Violence: A Social-Psychological Analysis. *The International Review of Psychiatry*, 19:3, 253-262.*