

Dramatic Events, Fear and Prejudice: A New Approach to the Study of Islamophobia and Islamophobic Hate Crimes

Social scientists have always been interested in the significance of unexpected, dramatic events for social change. However, when it comes to research on prejudice and hate crime, the impact of sudden, dramatic events has been little considered. The purpose of this research review is to survey published European and American data to elucidate the temporal links between unexpected events and anti-Muslim prejudice and hate crime. Anti-Muslim prejudice has deep historical roots in the Western world but Islamophobic attitudes and Islamophobic hate crimes seem to a large extent to be event-driven; terrorist bombings cause Islamophobia to flare up but, in calmer times, it subsides again, although to a relatively high level. Terrorist's most persuasive message is that of fear. Fear, a primary and strong emotion, increases risk estimates and has distortive effects on the perception of ordinary Muslims. Widespread Islamophobic prejudice seems to contribute to anti-Muslim hate crime, but indirectly. Terrorist attacks and intensified Islamophobic prejudice serve as a window of opportunity for extremist group and networks. Prominent hate crimes can, however, have paradoxical effects and are, in themselves, dramatic events with the capacity to influence public opinion. When hate crime is highlighted in the media, it often triggers a strong counter-reaction; hate crimes challenge a collective moral consciousness. The recent scholarly attention paid to the role of unexpected, dramatic events represents a new and a very promising approach to the study of prejudice and hate crimes; with the earlier, essentially spatial research focus now complemented by a temporal focus, the chances increase of charting the dynamics of prejudice and hate crime.

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