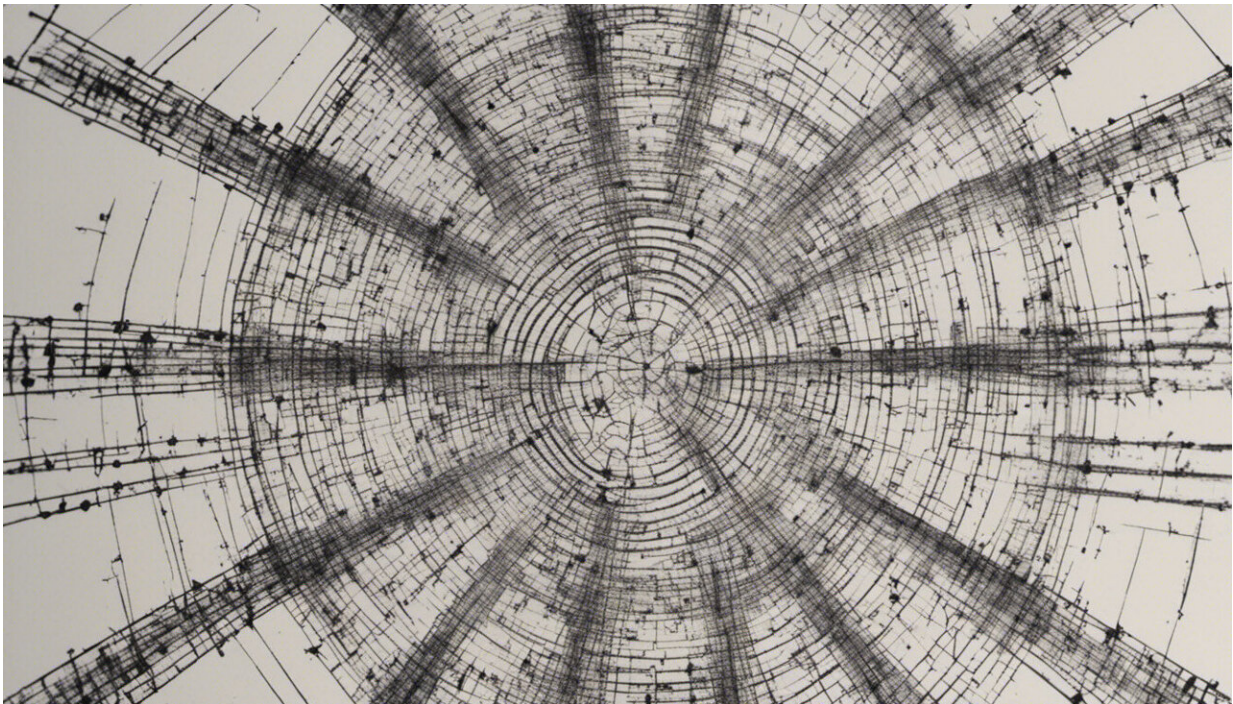


How attitudes to diversity change after a terrorist attack

May 31 2017, by Maria Sobolewska



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As the reality of the horrifying terrorist attack on Manchester sinks in, it is easy to assume that such an atrocity will make it harder for the people of the city to get on – with all their differences, divisions and diversity.

Inevitably, there are some who will react to [attacks](#) such as this with

hostility towards Islam. They will claim that all Muslims are [supposedly intolerant and hateful perpetrators](#) of attacks against Western culture and all that it stands for. We will also likely hear news of [innocent Muslims being attacked and vilified](#).

It is easy for those shocking and angry messages to spread across social media – and they too easily can drown out the quieter acts and messages of solidarity, tolerance and quiet resilience.

But despite all of this, [research](#) which looks at changes in attitudes in the aftermath of the 2015 Paris terror attacks – by me and my colleagues Rob Ford of the University of Manchester and Paul Sniderman from Stanford University – shows that tolerance doesn't always lose out.

Indeed, while a small minority of those who feel uncomfortable with diversity may well become more hostile towards Muslims and minorities after a terrorist attack, those who are committed to tolerance will become more understanding.

Rally around the flag

We know from previous research that many expressions of support for democracy and national institutions become stronger following large scale [terrorist attacks](#). This was seen after [9/11 in the US](#) and the [train bombings in Madrid](#) in 2004.

And so after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, we wanted to find out if a similar positive rally effect extended to people's views of Muslims and immigrants, in both the UK and France.

Our hunch was that because tolerance towards Muslims, other minorities and immigrants is considered by many to be "a core democratic value" – and a source of patriotic pride – that we would see similar "rallying"

effects in both countries.

We used a number of large data sets to measure immediate reactions to terrorist attacks. This included the [European Social Survey](#) – which was interrupted in France when the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo terror attack took place. A total of 1,594 French [respondents](#) were selected at random and [interviewed face-to-face by researchers](#) before the attack, and 320 were interviewed afterwards.

Another [survey](#) was gathered in the UK by YouGov – a market research firm – three days before the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015. A total of 1,707 respondents were surveyed between November 10 and 12 and then the survey was repeated four days after the attacks – on November 17 and 18 – with a fresh sample of 1,621 respondents.

A resilience in attitudes

When people were asked about their attitudes towards Muslims, minorities and immigrants, both the French and the British public remained pretty much unchanged by the horrific events. Negative changes in attitudes were seen more in France where the attacks took place. But generally, most respondents expressed a little more tolerance towards Muslims following the terrorist attacks.

Given that [tolerance](#) is not a universally held democratic [attitude](#) and some people do not value [tolerance and diversity](#) and tend to attack Muslims after such events – we also wanted to see what was happening beneath the surface of this seeming resilience.

Once we split our samples into those respondents who expressed "liberal" attitudes and those who expressed "authoritarian" views, we saw that a lot of attitude change took place.

We found that both "liberal" and "authoritarian" respondents generally became "mobilised" in the face of terrorism, each increasing their commitment to their values. "Authoritarians" became more authoritarian, and "liberals" became more liberal.

These liberal ideals were found to be greater in France than in the UK, but based on our research it is probably safe to say that in both countries these liberal attitudes are likely to outstrip authoritarian attitudes purely in terms of numbers. In short, we found that there are more liberals than authoritarians in both of these two societies.

Facing the future

What all this shows is that those who want to use terrorism as a tool to sow division and discord in Europe, largely fail – at least in the short term.

In the long term, however, [anti-Muslim sentiment](#) is on the rise in the UK. So while there is initial resilience in the face of terrorism, this may weaken as the cumulative effects of multiple attacks set in.

For now, we have a window of opportunity to make Manchester stronger after this adversity, but it is still too early to know if as a country the UK will capitalise on this or not.

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