

# Integrative Complexity and Emotional Positivity during a Terrorist Attack

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## ABSTRACT

Since September 11, 2001, much research has been conducted with a view to understand the psychological reactions of individuals to acts of terrorism. However, largely for practical reasons, there has been no systematic study of cognitive or emotional processing in the immediate moments of a terrorist attack. Using archival methods, live news broadcasts on the morning of 9/11/2001 from the United States, Canada, and Qatar were scored for integrative complexity (a measure of language structure that reflects the state level of available cognitive resources; Suedfeld & Tetlock, 2001) and negative affect. These scores were plotted against a timeline of events of that morning, beginning from baseline scores prior to the terrorist attacks. In this manner, it was possible to map out changes in both the structure and content of subjects' thinking, as well as pinpoint exactly when in real-time these changes occurred. Results show virtually identical patterns of integrative complexity among North American newscasters, while a possible effect of psychological or ideological distance was observed in the cognitive processing of the Arabic newscaster. In addition, integrative complexity was inversely related to the use of negative emotion words. Implications and future directions are discussed.