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Working experiences of airport employees after a terrorist attack in Belgium: a qualitative study

ABSTRACT

Terrorist attacks can cause loss of human lives, a possible mental health impact on those directly exposed, but also large economic and structural damage. However, few studies have looked into the work experience of those directly exposed returning to a workplace that was the target of terrorist attack. In this study, directly exposed employees of the March 22, 2016 airport bombing in Belgium were interviewed. Eighteen interviews were conducted with four women and fourteen male employees at Brussels Airport. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes arose: unsafety at the workplace, fall-out of colleagues, distrust or support of colleagues, and a lack of trust in management. The need to reopen the airport clashed with the coping of the employees and resulted in a fall-out of employees throughout the years, distrust of management, and a general feeling of unsafety in the workplace. A lack of acknowledgment of the attacks and proper mental health aid offered to the employees seems to be at the basis of the problems indicated by the employees.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been several terrorist attacks in West-European countries. For example, on the March 22, 2016 Brussels Airport, i.e. Belgium's largest airport and thus an important economic asset for the country, became target of two bomb attacks, killing 16 people and injuring hundreds. Such attacks can cause psychosocial problems for those who have witnessed them (Galea, et al. 2002; Neria, Nandi, Galea, 2008). Such problems include depressive symptoms, anxiety problems, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Galea, et al. 2002; Neria, Nandi, Galea, 2008; Deschepper, et al. 2018; Dyb, et al. 2014). Furthermore, there are indications that those exposed to terrorist attacks might have social relationship problems after the events (Birkeland, et al. 2016; Van Overmeire, Van Keer, Bilsen, 2021). A study in Australia after 9/11 showed that even though there had been no attack in Australia, employees in companies felt more occupational stress, and a work culture more focused on security (Howie, 2007).

The impact of terrorist attacks might become even more incisive for witnesses and victims who live or work at or near the place where the attacks took place, although study results regarding this are not conclusive. Whereas direct witnesses that stayed in Oklahoma City after the terrorist attack there had no significant better health outcome than those who relocated (Tucker, et al. 2018), a study on witnesses living near the WTC-towers showed that 12,6% still exhibit symptoms of PTSD, two to three years after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (DiGrande, et al. 2008).

Studies on the impact of terrorist attacks on the witnesses that work near or at the place of the attacks are scarce. The few studies that do exist about this group, seem to indicate that there might be long-term problems, both from a mental health perspective as well as from an organizational perspective. One study showed a high prevalence of PTSD among employees in the Pentagon in the period after it was hit by an airplane on 9/11 (Grieger, et al. 2005). Another study on government employees who were present in Oslo during the attacks there, showed an association

between the employees' perception of safety and sick leave (Nissen, et al. 2019; Nissen, et al. 2020). However, there is a lack of in-depth examination of employees' experiences with returning to work in a place that has also been part of perhaps one of the most threatening moments of their life. Therefore, in this study, the work-experiences of witnesses working at Brussels Airport again after the terrorist attack of March 22, 2016 will be studied, including the elements that affected this experience. Such insight might be relevant for improving the mental wellbeing and work reintegration, not only for this group, but for all groups encountering traumatic events on the workplace.

In the following sections, an explanation of the qualitative methodology used in this study will be provided, followed by the description of the data collection and the sample. This is followed by the result section, in the form of the themes that were found. We end the article with the discussion of the results, conclusion and recommendations for actions for policy makers and management positions in case of future attacks.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Design

A qualitative research design was used, consisting of in-depth interviews with employees active at Brussels Airport at the time of the attacks. Such interviews enabled us to obtain detailed in-depth information about their work-related experiences of working again at the airport after the attacks.

2.2 Participants & recruitment

This study was conducted with Dutch-speaking employees, because most employees working at this Airport live in Flanders (Dutch speaking northern half of Belgium). Employees were recruited through snowball-techniques. Airport employees were first contacted through other victims of the Brussels airport bombing, which was part of another study that was performed (Van Overmeire, Van Keer, Bilsen, 2021). These victims then referred us to other airport employees.

Employees were included if:

- (1) They were employed at a company/service located at Brussels Airport, such as Federal Police, the check-in of an Airport service ...
- (2) They were present at the time of the attacks at the Brussels Airport on March 22, 2016.
- (3) They all returned to work at Brussels Airport at some point after the attacks (at least for a certain period).

In total 18 research participants were included in the study. These include: five people who worked at the check-in counter, 12 people who were occupied with law-enforcement activities (border control, security, federal police, railway police), and one person who was part of the local fire-department/healthcare unit. The range for age varied between 30 and 59 years old. There were 14 male and 4 female respondents.

2.3 Data collection

Research participants were interviewed in depth by R.V.O, between June 2018 and February 2019. The semi-structured interview was structured by a topic guide, based on the literature (North, et al. 2013; North, et al. 2010) was used Table 1.

TABLE 1. *Topic guide.*

1. Description of exposure to the attacks
2. Description of returning to airport
3. Long-term return to work
a. Coping with terrorist attacks and threat
b. Coping with changes at airport
c. Colleagues' support
d. Leadership support
e. Grievances
f. Perception of safety
g. Perception of future airport
4. View of the future for themselves at their work
5. View of the future of terrorist attacks in Belgium

At the start of the interview, participants were told that the focus of the study was to investigate the impact of the terrorist attacks of March 22, 2016 on their lives in general, and with special attention to their work experiences. Interviews were conducted at a place of the participants choosing, which was mostly either at their home, or at a reserved meeting room at Brussels Airport. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 1,5 h and 3 h.

2.4 Analysis

Analysis was performed by R.V.O. and R-L.V.K. During analysis, the principles of reflexive thematic analysis were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019). First, interviews were transcribed verbatim by R.V.O., after which they were read and reread to get a thorough

understanding of the transcripts. Second, coding was then conducted on the transcripts by R.V.O. and R-L.V.K., supported by the software program NVivo 12.0. Third, on the basis of the codes, key themes were constructed in discussion between R.V.O. and R-L.V.K. Fourth, these themes were further discussed between R-L.V.K., R.V.O., J.B., E.M. and L.V. Feedback on the data collection and analysis was provided by the multi-disciplinary academic research group of which these authors are members. Data collection and analysis was done until saturation was reached, i.e. when additional data did not obtain new insights.

2.5. Ethics

After being sufficiently informed about the study (e.g. aim, duration of the interview ...), participants voluntarily gave their written consent to participate in the study. Also, all participants were informed of helplines to talk about any problems they might experience after the interview. Additionally, the phone number of a psychologist was given.

Any references to the identity of the respondents were deleted during transcription (e.g. name, place of residence ...) and confidentiality of the data was guaranteed. Furthermore, in the overview table, the job functions were not mentioned to avoid identification possibilities.

Finally, this research was approved by the Commission Medical Ethics of the UZ Brussels/VUB. (B.U.N. 143201836125).

3 RESULTS

Four participants were on sick leave which they attributed to the mental burden of the attacks, though they only fell out after months of having returned to work. Another person requested to be transferred to a location on the far side of Brussels Airport, as his usual office was close to where the attacks occurred and he felt it was impossible to do his work due to the many reminders of these attacks. All other participants still worked at their original location.

In total, four themes were found: unsafety at the workplace, fall-out of colleagues, distrust or support of colleagues, and a lack of trust in management. These four themes were intertwined. For example, the lack of trust in management was reflected in the sense of unsafety at the workplace, and colleagues only felt proper social support was possible from colleagues who were present at the airport during the bombing, who also share the sense of unsafety and lack of trust in management. Furthermore, as years went by, colleagues who were not present did not understand the problems of the colleagues who were present during the attacks, evoking distrust. Furthermore, as the airport began to open again, some employees had to stop working due an increased workload and mental health issues due to the terrorist attacks. Finally, as the terrorist threat faded, so did the safety measures, which then results in more distrusts in management.

In the following section, context is given between brackets for quotes when appropriate.

Feelings of unsafety at the workplace

All participants had issues with safety. Every respondent expected that there would be new attacks in the future, which resulted in a general sense of unsafety among the participants still active at the airport.

We're almost three years later, and (the safety situation) only gets worse – “worse” is maybe exaggerated. Okay, there are people (security personnel) everywhere – but they don't do anything. And politics, yeah, the first months you can do everything, but ... (the participant means that the government improved security in the country and the airport in the first months after the attack, but that these security measures had since decreased). It won't last 5 years or it happens again. We can only tell them (management and politicians) what's happening, but they won't be able to say “Wir haben das nicht gewusst”. (Male, 57)

There is less care for people's safety. They say, there is less threat, so the army goes away, but frankly, you should feel unsafe all the time. (Male, 43)

This will never be the innocent, safe airport that it once was. That feeling is gone... (Male, 44)

Furthermore, some participants still were uncomfortable and felt unsafe when being in the area where the attacks happened.

I used to go regularly to the Starbucks, but now I rather go to the Starbucks at the B dock than in the terminal (where the attacks happened). (Male, 44)

Additionally, every participant worried about the security at the airport. While they felt the security was better right after the attacks, they feel that the security has now returned to the situation it was before the attacks.

What's so sad is that they still can't draw lessons from it. And I worked at the airport, and I know what comes in and I know what they come and do here. And there are a lot of people that – sorry, but those aren't refugees like before, like those first ones from Syria. (Female, 40)

Fall-out of colleagues

Besides safety, participants worried about their colleagues not coping well with the attacks, due to the mental, physical and social consequences of the attacks, which caused sick-leave or employees finding other work. Some of their colleagues had inadequate coping strategies, such as drinking, which could eventually lead to performance problems at the workplace or quitting their job. Other colleagues stopped working at the airport after a while, partly due to an increased workload. For colleagues still present, alcohol seemed to be a common coping method.

There are of course those with whom it ends badly at home. Maybe a more difficult situation. That the spouse doesn't understand. Or you know, people that start drinking more. Not that you have an alcoholic but ... According to the norms of the firm, you'd have to take those people out and let them do a test. But if you started with that, you'd be left with hardly anyone'. (Male, 58)

And you see colleagues falling out (quitting their job), one by one. But literally! I come to the office and one leaves. Yeah ... Hell ... (Male, 48)

We talked with each other, and you know, drank a Duvel (beer) now and then. We didn't get wasted or something – maximum two, because you can't stand on one leg. But if we wanted to defuse, then we just closed the books, and went into the terminal, drank two Stella's (beer) or two Duvels (beer) – so that we weren't intoxicated if we still had to work. Yeah, that was our medicine. (Male, 55)

Distrust or support among colleagues

A discrepancy could be noticed between participants who still actively work at the airport and the participants that are now at home due to the attacks. Of those that still actively worked, all reported that their colleagues who had experienced March 22, 2016 were good support for them, as nobody else could really understand the experience of that day.

I talked especially with the people here, the ones that were there. Because, talking with someone who wasn't there isn't helpful [...] The same goes for (colleague), who also said she just needed to talk with someone who was there that day. That's completely different from talking with her friends or family. And I have to say, I get that. (Male, 55)

In contrast, three participants who were with long-term sick leave at home due to the attacks, reported that they were shunned by their colleagues, and ridiculed because they had mental health problems due to the attacks. While participants felt supported by colleagues that were present during the attacks, they felt that other colleagues did not understand or tried to understand them. These participants felt that colleagues tried to minimize the participant's contributions (e.g. helping passengers in the airport get out) during the attacks.

There was a photo of me that was in the newspapers, and they hung on the door of the office, and had written under it "The hero who has done nothing" (thus, accusing the participant of having exaggerated his role during the attacks). Those are your colleagues ... And the woman who did that, she went in on the 22nd of March, and then she ran! We went inside (in the airport immediately after the attack) with only four (four employees)! All others just ran away. (Male, 59)

This dichotomy in employees being at work or staying at home, also became apparent in the perception of three participants, being currently at work at the airport. They were distrustful of colleagues that had mental health problems or who sought financial compensation for their mental health problems due to the attacks.

A colleague that hears that you can get compensation if you have problems, and suddenly she gets problems and demands a compensation for damages ... Now, I'm no doctor, I didn't study for that, and I won't, but I think that's weird. (Male, 57)

This dichotomy can be contained in the changed perception, mentioned by seven participants, that the airport was like a family before, but now this feeling was changed since the attack.

(The airport) used to be one big family. Now, it just isn't anymore. Now it's everyone in their corner. And you know, you have to accept that. I'm just counting until my pension. (Male, 54)

Lack of trust in management

Almost all respondents experienced a lack of trust in their company's management. For the participants, the attacks of March 22, 2016 was an important and incisive event, which kept on affecting their lives. However, the weight of this event for personnel was often not acknowledged or understood by the management of the airport who often did not experience the attacks in person.

It's unfortunate that, well, except for the new boss now who was in Maalbeek (where there was also an attack), the new management has no affinity with the 22nd. And that's very confronting, like: to them it never existed and so it doesn't exist, while, for us, it is of a huge importance and it's something that will play a role in the rest of our career. (Male, 55)

This lack of acknowledgment became apparent in several ways and affected the participants negatively. It fuelled their sense of unsafety and the dichotomy that arose, and it enlarged their distrust in the management.

First, participants lacked specifically an official and personal recognition in the aftermath of the attacks and the years after the attacks. In the case of security personnel (e.g. federal police, border police ...), participants received no food and no support during the weeks they guarded the destroyed airport, and no recognition of their role during the attacks. A symbol that is used by three participants for this lack of recognition, are boxes of chocolates that were given to the entire security force as a “thank you” notice for their services during the attacks.

Brussels Airport wants there to be complete silence on the attacks. No way ... We finally got one memorial plate. On line three (of the airport check-in counter). That's the only thing. And on the roundabout there, with the statue. But other than that, people need to stay quiet about it around here. (Male, 57)

Back then they send us a box of chocolates, like this box of Merci-chocolates (a brand of chocolates). And you think they went and brought it to us personally? No, you can go get your box, ah, but ehm, you don't have to come, because your box is gone, because someone else took it. (Female, 43)

Second, in the aftermath of March 22, 2016, many colleagues went on sick-leave or had to change jobs. The fall-out was so high that an absenteeism plan was proposed. This would entail that people that would not come to the airport, would be followed up, and checked by surprise visits. The proposal was poorly received by the participants and such suggestions caused a further increase of distrust towards management. Participants felt that it showed that management had no idea what was going on, as they perceived it as if participants stayed at home to deceive management, not because they were mentally unable to work.

And then they say “We're going to unroll an absenteeism plan here”. I said “Over my dead body”. So, I went to doctors and such and I said “The problem here is not absenteeism! These people want to work, but just can't!” (Male, 58)

The hours I was with the psychologists (of the police) I still got paid. And the commissioner called me like “Hey, it better be over with profiting, you don't have any right to do that!” (Male, 54)

Third, participants had the feeling that the profits of the airport were more important than safety. It seemed that the attacks were deliberately “forgotten” by management (one respondent called it

“taboo”), according to some respondents, because the airport is a commercial institution. Increasing security or having large memorials for the event, does not help increase the profits of the airport, according to the participants.

I think it's weird that the contingency manager and the fire marshal of the airport had to go (were forced to change jobs). Because they, on security and safety, have their standards, and they do not align with those of the airport as a commercial institution. [...] There have been no lessons learned on, on, on ehm safety. Investing in security doesn't pay off, and it's a commercial institution, so ... (Male, 58)

Fourth, the lack of proper psychosocial support. The team that provided psychosocial aid, called the stress team, was undermanned to react on all the requests for help or was not prepared to handle the request properly due to a lack of training with trauma. This team organized debriefings shortly after the attacks, though it was not mandatory to be present. Furthermore, there seems to have been no long-term follow-up (e.g. a month later) of employees exposed to the attacks. While there is frustration with the stress team among some of the participants, the refusal of management to enhance the stress team with aid from a psychiatrist experienced in trauma contributed to the distrust. As a result, most people never got any aid, and one debriefing after the attacks was all that most received. Furthermore, one person reports that the one debriefing she got, was perceived as a way for management to acquit themselves from responsibilities.

We once got a debriefing from our big chief. But that was more like ... Ehm ... That wasn't a debriefing for us, but a justification for them. (Female, 40)

Fifth, the workload of participants seemed to have increased. On the one hand, this was because of the many people stopped working there or changed work. On the other hand, the workload increased each year because more and more passengers came to the airport. Here too this heavy workload affected the feeling of being recognized.

And then the number of passengers began to increase. The numbers increase each year, two million each year. And then you see less people every day, and a lot people have been hit. Those heavily hit people are out now, and there are still those that ... A number of employees just kept on working. [...] Each day we're with too few. And we still have that aftermath of the attacks, and we're just abandoned by the organization' (Male, 58)

Normally we should have 16 people here. We have 11. So ehm, if anybody else falls out (quits) ... And those long series of 8, 9 days in a row, it's just not workable anymore. And I can't point to anything else than a physical reaction to the attacks. (Male, 56)

4 DISCUSSION

This study shed light on the seldom researched topic of returning to work when one has been exposed to a terrorist attack at the workplace, using a reflexive thematic analysis on interviews with employees who work at the national airport of Belgium. We showed that the attacks created distrust, aimed especially at management. The lack of proper debriefings, recognition, concrete supportive initiatives, and remembrance of the attacks all contribute towards this distrust. While

those who were active that day can find support with each other, there is also sometimes distrust against each other, especially against those who were not present during the attacks. Due to the perceived lack of security, the airport is considered unsafe by the respondents, which makes them all expect that sooner or later, a new attack will occur. Finally, they are burdened by the increased workload at the airport in the aftermath of the attacks, and the feeling of being understaffed, is seen as an extra burden.

The overarching duality that is shown in this study is that on the one hand, a sense of safety and recognition of the attack is needed for the affected employees who might not be able to do their work as properly as before. On the other hand, to survive as a company, the financial interests must be protected after such a disaster that not only affected human lives, but also the economy (North, et al. 2010; Hara, 2005). So, companies tend to do “business as usual”, despite the impact such attacks have on their employees (Howie, 2012). The result for employees was that the lack of recognition by the management, led to a fear of showing emotions and created resentment against the company, as was found in other studies (North, et al. 2010). Yet, the need for recognition is important, as official recognition after such trauma can actually contribute to battling traumatic symptoms (Maercker & Müller, 2004). Feeling that one's problems and experiences are recognized, makes that someone feels understood, and will actually lead to discussing the experiences more, which in turn results in disclosure of the event, which can be important after traumatic events (Maercker & Müller, 2004; Maercker & Hecker, 2016).

This need for recognition is also reflected in the perception of employees that the airport management has no attention for security measures. Together with a lack of a sense of safety, respondents often mentioned absenteeism, people leaving their job, being understaffed ... This might be related to each other, as people leaving their job and a sense of safety have been found to be correlated in other studies (Nissen, et al. 2019; Nissen, et al. 2020). To improve such safety perceptions, and thus also the absenteeism and sick leave, a company should commit itself towards improving security measures (Tucker, et al. 2018; Nissen, et al. 2019; Nissen & Heir, 2017). Thus, a company can play an important role in the recovery of its employees by simply improving the security of the airport (Schouten, Callahan, Bryant, 2004). Naturally, this cannot come with the cost of disadvantaging travellers, but providing a sense of safety shows that the company cares for the safety of both employees and travellers.

This study also showed employees who had experienced the attack together, sought support with each other. This is a common phenomenon (Erikson, 1995). However, what is also seen, is the distrust that exists towards those not present, but also those on sick-leave due to the attacks, despite having faced the same events. Thus, employees on sick leave are excluded from the support, and feel like outcasts.

The social support that employees still active at the airport found with each other, created an oddity with regards to the perceived lack of debriefings and mental health aid. On the one hand, employees felt that they needed more mental health aid, on the other hand, as one respondent said, the debriefings that were given, were seen as a way for management to cover up their mistakes. Furthermore, other employees tend to feel that no one else can understand their problems, causing a vicious circle where mental health aid would never be enough, as no one can

understand the experiences with the attack employees had. In companies affected by 9/11, a somewhat similar observation was found: the mental health aid was perceived as superficial, and employees stated that mental health aid workers could never understand what they had been through (North, et al. 2013). So, mental health aid is wanted, but at the same is already discredited. Thus, here too the result was that affected employees often sought aid with each other, as with each other a feeling of being understood could be found (North, et al. 2013).

The first recommendation of this study is that companies should recognize the experiences of employees. It is a way to counter mental health issues, a way in which employees can experience proper social support without the feeling of taboo, and it also opens up the way to professional mental health aid if necessary. In the long term, this is both in the best interest of the company as well as the employees, as else there is a danger of many employees quitting or going on sick leave. Such recognition might also contribute to how long employees want to stay with a company, as in studies on communities after Hurricane Katrina, the decision to stay in a community was dependent on the perception of one's own future there, but also of the government performance in the aftermath of the disaster (Kima & Oh, 2014). If applied to a workforce in the aftermath of a disaster, that would mean that employers and politics can play a huge role in whether or not employees quit their job. However, in the case of Brussels Airport, it is precisely because there is no such recognition, that there is an increasing workload, while more people quit.

Secondly, management can play a role by facilitating the social support between employees. By allowing the event to be discussed, by letting people who were present during the attack share their experiences, it can show that the management does not create a taboo sphere surrounding the attack. Furthermore, it might allow easier social support for those on sick leave, as they are now excluded from the active employees' social support.

Third, as mentioned earlier, companies hit by terrorist attacks should take into account the sense of unsafety of employees who have experienced the attack, and should not only focus on economic profits, but also ensuring safety for those working there. These are not mutually exclusive.

To conclude, employees at the airport who had been directly exposed to the attacks felt that they received no recognition of their employers for their experiences during the attacks, and felt generally unsafe at the airport, fearing that a new attack was bound to happen. Furthermore, the workload seemed to have only increased for the employees, while the number of employees that stopped working at the airport increased as well. Due all these circumstances, employees tended to distrust the management positions at the airport, feeling management wanted to ignore the attacks happened and wanted to prioritize the economic aspect of the airport.

This study is one of the only that has researched a group returning to work at a place of a terrorist attack. The qualitative design also allows to find a deeper understanding of their problems and helps to understand the results of the few quantitative studies on returning to work after terrorist attacks. However, this study is limited because of the sample size, and a selection and recall bias: people who are frustrated with the policy, will be those who are most likely to participate, and if they are frustrated, perhaps their memories are clouded by this. Related to this, we were not able to interview all types of jobs at the airport. For example, we were not able to include cleaning

personnel, or people employed in restaurants. Furthermore, information on education levels was not included, though the education level is a predictor for how someone copes with disasters.

The results that have come forth out of this study can help influence policy of employers after a terrorist attack, but also other types of traumatic events, to recognize the problems of their employees. Economic interests and attention for employees are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the recognition and/or improvement of psychosocial aid might be able to stop people from leaving their work and can thus actually improve the commercial aspect of the airport in the long run. Furthermore, while security against every threat can never be guaranteed, it is important for managers to provide a sense of security for their employees (Howie, 2012).

Therefore, further research should focus on assessing the experiences of airport employees with quantitative research, and finding what factors can be associated with the mental health, as the lessons learned from Brussels Airport can be used at any major public place hit by a terrorist attack.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare to have no [conflict of interest](#).

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