

Marzena Walkowiak

Wojskowa Akademia Techniczna

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3317-562X>

marzena.walkowiak@wat.edu.pl

Tadeusz Szczurek

Akademia Nauk Stosowanych w Nowym Sączu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3433-8072>

tszczurek@ans-ns.edu.pl

Mariusz Kuryłowicz

Akademia Wymiaru Sprawiedliwości

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8995-6516>

mariusz.kurylowicz@aws.edu.pl

Subjective Perspective of Security in the Context of Terrorist Threats

Subiektywna perspektywa bezpieczeństwa w kontekście zagrożeń terrorystycznych

Abstract:

Terrorism, as a phenomenon based on fear, is often analysed from a psychological perspective. From the standpoint of security studies, the concept of perceived threat arises in the context of terrorism, which does not necessarily equate to actual threat. Similarly, a sense of security does not always correspond with actual safety. This article presents the results of a research process aimed at answering the central research question: how is security perceived from a psychological standpoint, and what role does the subject's subjective sense of threat play in the phenomenon of terrorism? To address this question, an in-depth analysis of source materials from social sciences—particularly psychology and security studies—was conducted. The scientific reflection on this issue was complemented by expert opinions and conclusions from Europol reports on terrorism.

Keywords: security, sense of security, perception of threat, terrorism

Streszczenie:

Terroryzm jako zjawisko bazujące na strachu, często poddawany jest analizie psychologicznej. Z punktu widzenia nauk o bezpieczeństwie, w kontekście zjawiska terroryzmu pojawia się określenie *poczucie zagrożenia*, które niekoniecznie musi oznaczać zagrożenie. Podobnie *poczucie bezpieczeństwa* nie zawsze jest jednoznaczne z bezpieczeństwem. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono wyniki procesu badawczego ukierunkowanego na rozwiązywanie głównego problemu badawczego, zaktualizowanego w pytaniu: jak postrzegane jest bezpieczeństwo z perspektywy psychologicznej i jaką rolę w zjawisku terroryzmu odgrywa subiektywne poczucie zagrożenia podmiotu? W poszukiwaniu odpowiedzi na tak sformułowane pytanie przeprowadzono dogłębną analizę materiałów źródłowych z dziedziny nauk społecznych, głównie psychologii i nauk o bezpieczeństwie. Naukową refleksję nad tym problemem uzupełniono opiniami ekspertów oraz wnioskami z raportów Europolu, odnoszących się do zjawiska terroryzmu.

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo, poczucie bezpieczeństwa, poczucie zagrożenia, terroryzm.

Introduction

In public discourse, including the official statements of politicians, the terms “security” and “sense of security” are often used interchangeably. However, these are not synonymous concepts. Security refers to a real and objectively defined process that ensures the conditions necessary for a subject’s survival and development¹. We can speak of a subject being secure only after conducting an objective quantitative and qualitative assessment of threat levels, considering the capabilities of the security system. If the system can reduce a threat to an acceptable level for the subject, we can say that the subject is secure.

On the other hand, the sense of security is a subjective assessment that often fails to reflect the full spectrum of factors that determine actual security. Many elements contribute to the discrepancy between actual

¹ Security is sometimes defined as a state, which does not contradict the broader view—particularly over the long term—that security is a process. We refer to the state of security when pointing to a specific moment within this process. Therefore, in the “here and now,” we can speak of a state of security.

and perceived safety, including: 1) an emotional approach to evaluating one's own threats, 2) insufficient specialist knowledge about the type of threat, and 3) lack of awareness about the capabilities of safety systems.

The opposite of security is threat. Most often the concept of threat is related to the concept of safety, particularly the issue of its absence. Bolesław Balcerowicz, among others, sees the relationship between threat and security. In his opinion, a threat is a situation in which there is an increased probability of creating a dangerous state for the environment, i.e. lack of safety. Waldemar Kitler perceives a threat as a "set of internal and/or external circumstances which may cause a dangerous state for a given entity (are the source of such a state)"². A threat rarely remains stable. It changes quantitatively and qualitatively. It affects one or more spheres of an entity's functioning. The scale and extent of a threat changes. These modifications and transformations may result in a situation where one threat becomes a source of a threat with a completely different face. It seems reasonable to claim that we are dealing with a dynamic nature of a threat. It is not possible to consider the nature of a threat in isolation from security. Exegesis of the scientific literature on security and analysis of a wide range of threats at first glance leads to the conclusion that a threat is an antonym of security³.

Analogous to the sense of security is the concept of the sense of threat. It refers exclusively to the subjective dimension, often disregarding actual threats present in the human social and natural environment. From this, one might conclude that security analyses should focus on real threats rather than the perceptions of endangered individuals. However, there is one category of threats where particular attention should be paid to the sense of threat—those of a terrorist nature, whose essence lies in intimidation. Therefore, it is worth examining the mechanisms of intimidation, which are deeply rooted in human psychology.

² W. Kitler, *Bezpieczeństwo narodowe RP. Podstawowe kategorie. Uwarunkowania. System* [Polish National Security. Basic categories. Conditions. System], Warsaw 2011, p. 60.

³ T. Szczurek, M. Walkowiak, M. Walkowiak, P. Bryczek-Wróbel, *Military, non-military and paramilitary threats*, Warsaw 2020, p.10.

Sense of security

The term “sense” is commonly used not only in psychology but also in everyday language, often with emotional undertones. We say, for example, “I feel satisfied,” “I feel threatened,” “I feel safe,” or “I feel free.” These expressions indicate a person’s intention to consciously communicate their feelings, experiences, and related emotions. Colloquially, we also use phrases that convey our awareness or perception of something, such as “I feel like I’m being watched,” indicating both a feeling and a cognitive realization. The concept of “sense” exists objectively. Referring to the descriptive psychology perspective, we can define a sense as a psychological phenomenon—a subjective experience of internal perception. Internal perception is considered infallible and excludes doubt⁴.

To understand the sense of security, one must first answer what a “sense” is as a psychological state. In psychology, this term is often used interchangeably with words like feeling, sensation, experience, or emotion, highlighting its subjective, personal, and emotional character. A psychological dictionary defines a “sense” as “a conscious state in which one knows something is occurring but cannot precisely define it,” most often appearing in memory and cognitive processes⁵. Consciousness is tied to abstract thinking and language. It allows individuals to have internal dialogues, refer to their knowledge and experience, and evaluate reality. Through language, people can verbalize not only what they know but also what they feel.

M. Jarymowicz argues that a sense is a state that raises no internal doubts. What is accessible through internal experience can be seen as a form of knowing—thus, the sense of security is, in some way, the experience of being secure⁶. Based on this reasoning, we can conclude that a sense is a state of awareness and a psychological phenomenon. Four types of mental phenomena are associated with this concept: 1) images and concepts, 2) judgments, 3) feelings, 4) acts of will.

According to T. Grzegorek, there are many arguments for viewing a sense primarily as a cognitive state, categorizing it as a form of

⁴ F. Brentano, *Psychologia z empirycznego punktu widzenia*, Warszawa 1999, p. 43.

⁵ W. Szewczuk (ed.), *Słownik psychologiczny*, Warszawa 1985, p. 209.

⁶ T. Grzegorek, *Tożsamość a poczucie tożsamości*, [w:] *Tożsamość człowieka*, A. Gałdowa (ed.), Kraków 2000, p. 64.

judgment⁷. In this view, to “have a sense” means to “form a judgment.” Judgments can vary in the degree of certainty with which they are made. To “have a sense” of something means judging it to be true according to one’s own conviction.

From the perspective of descriptive psychology, a sense is a psychological phenomenon classified as a cognitive process (i.e., thinking), whereas in everyday language, it is often used in emotionally charged expressions. One way of framing the sense does not exclude the other: an experience of a state may evoke emotions, which are, however, secondary to cognitive processes and intentional experiences. Therefore, the sense must be viewed holistically – considering its subjective, personal, cognitive, and emotional dimensions.

The sense of security results from fulfilling needs and realizing values⁸. Needs and values are associated with action and its dynamics, while the sense is related to experience and awareness. Dictionaries define it as the awareness of certain facts, phenomena, or internal states–awareness, feeling, or impression⁹.

This state emerges from actions that fulfil security needs and values. It is also a result of evaluating one’s current situation–economic, social, political, etc¹⁰. The external, objective situation is merely a backdrop. It is important that external conditions–shaped also by authorities and leadership–enable as many people as possible to experience a sense of security, which is vital both for individuals and for the state. The psychological perspective is inherently subjective; therefore, sometimes the external reality or actual efforts may matter less than how a person emotionally experiences and cognitively evaluates the situation¹¹. This discrepancy can lead to a mismatch between perceived and actual safety.

The sense of security is fundamental for an individual’s effective functioning and serves as a reference point for their actions. Depending on how a person perceives their safety, we can distinguish several levels of the sense of security: 1) intrapersonal – an internal perception of one’s

⁷ T. Grzegorek, *Tożsamość...,* pp. 65–67.

⁸ R. Klamut, *Bezpieczeństwo jako pojęcie psychologiczne*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Rzeszowskiej: Ekonomia i Nauki Humanistyczne” 2012, nr 19(4), p. 37.

⁹ E. Sobol (ed.), *Mały słownik języka polskiego*, Warszawa 1995, p. 641.

¹⁰ P. C. Bester, Emerging challenges in terrorism and counterterrorism: A national security perspective, lecture delivered on January 17, 2019 at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Public Management, Law and Safety, Hague 2019.

¹¹ E. Nęcka, J. Orzechowski, B. Szymura, *Psychologia poznawcza*, Warszawa 2006, p. 27, 60.

own safety, 2) interpersonal – arising from direct interactions with others, 3) group-level – based on relationships within and between social groups, 4) social-level – relating to the collective sense of security.

These levels are interconnected and mutually dependent. For example, a person's relationships with social groups (family, peers) can significantly influence their intrapersonal sense of security¹². An individual's sense of security is a subjective and complex concept. It refers to the physical and psychological feeling of calm and certainty, shaped by the absence of dangerous events or by reduced risk and uncertainty. Objectively, the structure of this sense is influenced by a dynamic interplay of several internal experiences.

According to Erikson, the dimensions of the sense of security include: 1) modes of introspective experience, 2) observable behaviours, and 3) unconscious internal states identifiable only through analysis¹³.

In a psychological context, the sense of security is the most crucial lens through which security is understood. It is a subjective experience of calm, certainty, and the absence of threat. It encapsulates the internal experience of feeling safe.

Terrorism and the Subjective Perception of Threats

Terrorism is a specific type of threat in which the subjective feelings of the affected individual are more important than the actual, objective danger¹⁴. There are many definitions of terrorism. One of the most general – hence the least controversial and most capacious – says that “terrorism is a form of violence, consisting of deliberate extortion or intimidation of governments or certain social groups for political, economic or other purposes”¹⁵. Terrorist acts usually follow certain rules. Victims of crime (terrorist attack) are in principle selected randomly (occasional targets) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets), but their death at the

¹² N. Butler, Z. Quigg, R. Bates, L. Jones, E. Ashworth, S. Gowland, M. Jones, *The Contributing Role of Family, School, and Peer Supportive Relationships in Protecting the Mental Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents*, „School Mental Health” 2022, vol. 14, nr 3, pp. 776–788.

¹³ E.H. Erikson, *Dzieciństwo i społeczeństwo*, Poznań 1997, p. 261.

¹⁴ J. Smolić, *Global terrorism: its causes and consequences*, [in:] *Proceedings from 9th International Conference on Applied Business Research ICABR 2014*, vol. 1, 2015, pp. 1033–1043.

¹⁵ *Słownik terminów z zakresu bezpieczeństwa narodowego* [Dictionary of National Security Terms], Warszawa 2002, p. 109.

hands of terrorists is primarily intended as a message¹⁶. It is supposed to arouse fear and horror, which directly or indirectly (e.g. through public pressure on decision-makers) will lead to the achievement of the main objective¹⁷. This objective is usually political change, although it may also be a criminal objective. Terrorism is a characteristic way of manipulating an audience – a society that terrorists intend to frighten. Hence, terrorism is seen as one form of communication (message) between terrorists, victims and main targets¹⁸. This communication is the so-called “terrorism chain”, which can be illustrated in four stages. Stage I are acts of terror manifesting themselves in assaults, which are aimed at causing the greatest possible loss of material and human life, and above all causing the death of as many people as possible. Stage II is to arouse widespread fear and even panic among the community, which causes a strong feeling of insecurity. Stage III is a further social response to the direct effects of terrorist acts – paralysing rational action, fear can lead to inertia and submissiveness, which would allow terrorists to act freely. Stage IV is the fulfilment of the main objective, which is most often the political change for which the terrorists fought¹⁹.

Depending on psychological factors and available information, the same external situation may be perceived in vastly different ways. An individual might feel secure in objectively dangerous circumstances or feel deeply threatened even in conditions of high social stability and peace. Adequate assessment is possible when a person correctly interprets the available cues, assigns them appropriate meaning, and creates a realistic picture of the situation—recognizing it as either threatening or safe based on actual conditions.

In assessing such a situation, various psychological factors and personality traits may play a role—such as energy levels, emotional stability, anxiety levels, optimism, available psychological resources, perception of the social environment, attitudes and beliefs toward one’s surroundings,

¹⁶ G.R. Newman, H.Y. Hsu, *Rational choice and terrorist target selection*, [in:] *Countering terrorism: Psychosocial strategies* U. Kumar, M.K. Mandal (ed.), New Delhi – Thousand Oaks 2012, p. 227–249.

¹⁷ P. Guasti, Z. Mansfeldová, Perception of Terrorism and Security and the Role of Media, [w:] The 7th ECPR General Conference, Colchester 2013, p. 55.

¹⁸ J. Horgan, *Psychologia terroryzmu /Psychology of Terrorism*, Warszawa 2008, p. 22.

¹⁹ T. Szczurek, M. Walkowiak, P. Bryczek-Wróbel, *Military, non-military...*, pp. 98-99

level of basic hope, and the degree of personal agency. In addition, variable factors such as mood or life circumstances also influence the assessment²⁰.

A second key factor in forming an accurate assessment is the nature and quality of information available to the individual. Constructing a well-founded judgment—and ensuring that the perceived level of threat aligns with the actual circumstances—requires the fulfilment of two essential conditions. First, the individual must have access to information that is both sufficient and relevant, in terms of its quantity and quality. Second, they must engage in a deliberate cognitive effort to receive, interpret, and process the data effectively.²¹

The fulfilment of both conditions presents a considerable challenge. Access to reliable and sufficient information is not easily obtained, and the overwhelming influx of data often exceeds the human mind's capacity to process it effectively²². This cognitive overload activates defensive mechanisms—simplified cognitive strategies. As a result, individuals tend to focus only on the most general information, ignoring subtle nuances of meaning²³. They remain largely influenced by emotional (peripheral) messages, rather than engaging with the essential content. It is precisely this type of emotionally charged communication that terrorists exploit, ensuring their actions receive maximum publicity and psychological impact.

Factors that influence the sense of threat within society are systemic in nature—they stem from the political system in which an individual operates (e.g., democratic or totalitarian). The historical context is also of importance—whether the society is experiencing peace, war, rapid social transformation, or a period of relative stability. From a psychological perspective, the formation of a sense of security is shaped primarily by personality and situational factors.

The personality-based determinants of the sense of security arise from individual characteristics, more precisely from one's psychological predispositions. The most significant traits affecting one's sense of security or insecurity include: 1) a tendency to experience anxiety and

²⁰ A.S.L.I. Yayak, *Terrorism and its effects on human psychology*, „Academic Research and Reviews in Social Sciences” 2021, p. 7–19.

²¹ R. Klamut, H. Sommer, K. Michalski, *Aktywność obywatelska we współczesnym społeczeństwie demokratycznym. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Kraków 2010, p. 144–146.

²² E. Nęcka, Orzechowski, B. Szymura, *Psychologia...*, p. 550.

²³ P.G. Zimbardo, M.R. Leippe *Psychologia zmiany postaw i wpływu społecznego*, Poznań 2004.

fear, 2) early childhood experiences, 3) risk propensity, 4) self-esteem, 5) neuroticism, and 6) passive egocentrism.

Anxiety refers to thoughts and perceptions saturated with worry. It is a state of psychological tension accompanied by a sense of threat. Anxiety is not necessarily linked to real or external events. Experiencing anxiety often leads to distorted thinking and difficulties in rational evaluation of the situation. In contrast, fear arises in response to a real and immediate danger and is generally considered a normal and adaptive response—a warning signal alerting the individual to the presence of potential harm.

Early childhood experiences may shape an individual's perception of the world as inherently threatening. During early childhood, a so-called *life script* is formed, which contains core beliefs about oneself and others. This script may include convictions such as “people are not to be trusted” or “the world is dangerous and hostile.” These destructive beliefs about the self and the world often originate from negative past experiences. Risk propensity refers to the tendency to engage in dangerous activities and is commonly associated with an inability to adequately assess potential threats resulting from those behaviours.

Risk propensity involves engaging in dangerous activities and is associated with a lack of ability to properly assess the potential threats that may result from such actions.

Self-esteem is expressed through one's assessment of personal worth. Individuals evaluate themselves according to various criteria—most commonly competence, decency, or moral qualities. High self-esteem, or the belief in one's own value, supports a perception of the world as friendly and safe. Conversely, low self-esteem, characterized by negative self-perception, makes it easier to notice flaws in others, thereby reinforcing a pessimistic worldview and negative expectations for the future.

Neuroticism vs. emotional stability are two opposing traits that determine emotional adjustment. Neuroticism is manifested through tendencies toward excessive worry, difficulty in controlling emotional reactions, heightened self-criticism, and pessimism. It also fosters negative perceptions of the self and the world. The higher the level of neuroticism, the greater the susceptibility to experiencing negative emotions. Neuroticism is also strongly linked to stress-related syndromes. In contrast, emotional stability is characterized by a tendency to experience positive emotions, optimism, and trust in others. It also involves the

ability to establish numerous and satisfying interpersonal relationships. A key component of emotional stability is the capacity to regulate one's emotions effectively.

Passive egocentrism, low self-worth, and a tendency to critically evaluate others give rise to fear and uncertainty. This promotes anxious self-focus, making it difficult to offer help to others, especially when combined with a lack of belief in the effectiveness of one's own actions.

Among the personality-related factors, another important element influencing the formation of a sense of security is one's worldview—understood as a relatively coherent set of beliefs, judgments, or assumptions about nature, society, and the human being. This worldview is linked to guidelines for behaviour and decision-making²⁴.

In his *Security–Insecurity Inventory* manual, Abraham Maslow presents a synthetic description of the syndrome of a disturbed need for security, identifying its key manifestations as follows: 1) A sense of lack of acceptance, of being rejected, unloved, treated coldly and without kindness, of being despised or hated; 2) Feelings of isolation, alienation, loneliness, and a perception of being separate and individualized; 3) A persistent sense of anxiety, threat, and the possibility of danger; 4) Perceiving the world and life in general as dangerous, hostile, or demanding, governed by the “law of the jungle”—every man for himself, where one either devours or is devoured; 5) Viewing others as inherently evil, malicious, and selfish, as dangerous, superstitious, and hateful; 6) A sense of distrust, resentment, and jealousy toward others, accompanied by high levels of hostility, prejudice, and hatred; 7) A pessimistic attitude, expecting the worst to happen; 8) A tendency toward feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment, experiencing life as unhappy or unfair; 9) A state of tension, arousal, and internal conflict, which may manifest as general nervousness, fatigue, irritability, stomach disorders, and other psychosomatic symptoms, as well as emotional instability, a sense of uncertainty, incoherence, and bad dreams; 10) A tendency toward compulsive introspection and over-analysis of one's experiences and emotions; 11) Feelings of discouragement, guilt, shame, sinfulness, suicidal tendencies, and lack of courage; 12) Distorted self-assessment, including striving for power or social status, excessive ambition, aggressiveness, materialism, craving for recognition or fame, envy, or attributing

²⁴ T. Mądrzycki, *Osobowość jako system tworzący i realizujący plany*, Gdańsk 2002, p. 97.

to oneself extraordinary abilities, as well as opposite tendencies such as masochism, excessive dependency, compulsive submissiveness, and a sense of inferiority, weakness, or helplessness; 13) A constant need to secure a sense of safety, neurotic tendencies toward defensiveness, escape, constant correction, and psychotic-like behaviour; 14) Tendencies toward self-centred, egocentric, and individualistic behaviours²⁵. The sense of security, as a factor encapsulating the subjective experience of being safe, becomes an object of influence within social reality. This is particularly relevant in the context of terrorism, where the perceived threat often appears to be significantly greater than the actual, objective danger. This observation is confirmed by Europol reports²⁶ as well as by expert opinions. Among fourteen experts representing various institutions involved in counter-terrorism efforts, all agreed that while the threat of terrorism in Poland and Europe is real, it is also highly exaggerated. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is the excessive media coverage of isolated incidents that exhibit characteristics of terrorism.

Coping with the Sense of Threat

The state, as the guarantor of security, holds responsibility not only for providing actual safety to its citizens but also for cultivating an appropriate level of perceived security within society. Authorities may manipulate public communication to influence the public's sense of security. Such manipulation can operate in two distinct directions. First, it may aim to minimize behaviours arising from emotional dysregulation, such as panic—in this case, the interest of the public (i.e., the threatened group) is prioritized. Under threat conditions, public messaging can be reassuring, highlighting effective measures being taken or emphasizing that the situation is under control. This generates a feedback loop that helps sustain the population's sense of security and protects the community from psychological destabilization. Second, manipulation may serve to allow the government to gain greater control over the population—here, the interest of those in power becomes central. Citizens who feel secure are

²⁵ A.H. Maslow, *Security-insecurity inventory*, Consulting Psychologists Press, 1952, pp. 3-11.

²⁶ European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2025 (EU TE-SAT), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/> [dostęp 11 czerwca 2025]

more likely to evaluate the authorities positively, which in turn makes them more receptive to persuasive or strategic messaging²⁷.

An important factor that appears to enhance the accuracy of the perceived sense of security is the dimension of subjectivity (agency). This dimension is associated with a higher level of reflection on reality, a critical assessment of incoming information, greater control over perceived threats and ambiguity, and a reduced susceptibility to external manipulation. Theoretical considerations regarding the relationship between security and subjectivity can be found in the works of Obuchowski²⁸. A different perspective on the sense of security is offered by Bańska, who links the concept of security to risk. According to this view, the sense of security is a subjective evaluation of acceptable risk. This risk can take many forms, as individuals live in a constant state of uncertainty, continually forced to assess the levels of danger, ignorance, and ambiguity in order to feel a sense of control. It is precisely the sense of security that allows individuals to maintain a feeling of control over themselves and their environment. This sense depends on many variables, including temporal, situational, emotional, and cultural factors²⁹. When undertaking actions aimed at reducing the level of perceived threat, it is essential to consider that the sense of security comprises four key components: 1) a sense of being informed, 2) a sense of certainty/stability, 3) a sense of social anchoring, 4) sense of agency.

Sense of being informed – this becomes especially crucial when an individual's safety is under threat. In the face of a disturbing and potentially dangerous situation, a person must acquire relevant information that enables them to take appropriate action. This includes knowledge about institutions responsible for protecting individuals, organizations that safeguard human rights, as well as practical knowledge and skills, such as administering basic first aid. One must also consider practical, everyday knowledge—for example, knowing the location of emergency exits in a building can significantly enhance one's sense of safety. In contrast, lack of knowledge fosters a sense of threat and undermines one's ability to function effectively in various social situations.

Sense of certainty/stability – this refers to an individual's perception of the surrounding reality as relatively stable and predictable. Such

²⁷ K. Obuchowski, *Człowiek intencjonalny*, Warszawa, 1993, p. 20.

²⁸ K. Obuchowski, *Człowiek intencjonalny...*, p. 23.

²⁹ A. Erikson, *Społeczna psychologia środowiskowa*, Warszawa 2002, p. 371.

a perception allows a person to act in accordance with established norms and rules. The sense of certainty is also closely linked to the concept of personal identity, understood as the experience of stability and coherence of the self across time and space. Any change in this stability requires a significant mobilization of psychological resources. Whether such a change has a beneficial or detrimental effect on an individual depends largely on their personal predispositions.

Sense of social anchoring (i.e., a sense of belonging to a social community) – This is manifested through the emotional, material, and social support an individual receives. The sense of anchoring is also closely related to trust in others, which serves as a foundation for cooperation and problem-solving. Social anchoring may also be enhanced by participation in various reference groups—groups to which the individual feels a sense of belonging, and about which they can say “we.” This is associated with the concept of social identity, defined as a perceived affiliation with a valued group whose members are regarded as comparable to oneself. The experience of exclusion from such a group may constitute a substantial psychological threat.

Sense of agency – this reflects an individual’s belief in their own competence and effectiveness, as well as confidence in their abilities. People with a strong sense of agency tend to experience less anxiety and are generally better equipped to cope with difficult situations. The sense of agency also involves an awareness of one’s capacity to take meaningful action across various areas of life, along with the ability to influence one’s own circumstances. In contrast, individuals with low agency are often discouraged from making any effort and tend to experience pessimism more frequently.

Parallel indicators of a sense of security may include: 1) a feeling of being liked, accepted, and treated with warmth; 2) a sense of belonging, of feeling at home in the world, of occupying one’s rightful place within a group; 3) a sense of safety, with rare experiences of feeling threatened or fearful; 4) perceiving the world and life as pleasant, friendly, kind, and benevolent; 5) viewing others as inherently good, kind, friendly, warm, and sincere; 6) feelings of friendship and trust toward others, with little hostility and instead a general attitude of tolerance and spontaneous expressions of warmth; 7) an optimistic attitude and expectations of favourable outcomes; 8) a sense of satisfaction and personal happiness; 9) a feeling of calm, peace, relaxation, low conflict, and emotional stability;

10) spontaneity in functioning, the ability to focus on the outside world and others rather than exclusively on the self; 11) self-acceptance, tolerance for one's various traits, and acceptance of one's impulsiveness; 12) a desire for strength and competence expressed more through problem-solving than through asserting superiority over others, a realistic self-assessment, a sense of strength, and courage; 13) a relative absence of neurotic or psychotic behaviour, with a realistic approach to life; 14) social engagement, such as a willingness to cooperate, interest in others, and a general sense of goodwill³⁰.

To effectively address a threat, depending on the character and disposition of the person perceiving it, support may be required in various forms: informational, instrumental, emotional, or evaluative. The ability to make use of such support is, to some extent, influenced by the individual's attachment style, which depends on one's beliefs about oneself and others. C. Hazan, P. Shaver, and M. Mikulincer identified three such styles: 1) the secure attachment style, typical of individuals whose need for closeness and safety was met in childhood by their caregivers; such people tend to form open, fear-free relationships in adulthood; 2) the avoidant attachment style, found in individuals whose childhood need for closeness was unmet or suppressed due to caregiver distance; these individuals may fear rejection or indifference and therefore often avoid seeking support; 3) the anxious-ambivalent attachment style, characterized by inconsistent fulfilment of closeness needs during childhood, leading to a simultaneous desire for intimacy and fear of entering close relationships³¹.

The secure attachment style is characteristic of individuals whose childhood need for closeness and safety was fulfilled by their caregivers. As a result, their relationships in adulthood are typically marked by openness and an absence of fear of rejection.

The avoidant attachment style is typical of those whose need for closeness and security was not met in childhood; in some cases, this need may have even been actively suppressed due to emotional distance on the part of their caregivers. As adults, such individuals may fear indifference or rejection from others and therefore avoid seeking support.

³⁰ A.H. Maslow, *Security-insecurity inventory*, pp. 3-11.

³¹ C. Hazan, P. Shaver, *Attachment as an organizational framework for research on close relationships*, "Psychological Inquiry" 1994, nr 5, p. 30-45; R. Cieślak, A. Eliasz, *Wsparcie społeczne a osobowość*, [w:] H. Sek, R. Cieślak (ed.) *Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie*, Warszawa 2004, p. 72.

The anxious-ambivalent attachment style is observed in people whose childhood need for closeness was met inconsistently; as a result, although they long for intimate relationships, they simultaneously fear entering them.

Research conducted by Florian, Mikulincer, and Bucholz shows that individuals identified as having a secure attachment style reported a higher level of access to emotional and instrumental support than those with other attachment styles³². The sense of “I can handle it” is developed not only through direct personal experience, but also through modelling—that is, by observing how others cope with specific situations. A crucial component in this process is what psychology refers to as a support network—a small group of people whom one can reliably count on in difficult situations, especially when one lacks clarity or a plan of action. In the context of building national communal security, the ideal scenario would be to include the entire society in such a support network.

Conclusions

The conditions presented in this article do not exhaust the full range of factors that shape the sense of security. It is important to emphasize that these factors are interrelated, subject to change, and vary in intensity. From the perspective of academic reflection on subjective security, the sense of security emerges as a state of experiencing calm, certainty, and the absence of threat, accompanied by a conviction that one has sufficient resources to act. It is a state of satisfaction and contentment, stemming from possessing a subjectively sufficient level of security.

This sense is shaped not only by individual experiences and the development of personal agency, but also by the presence of significant others—those who offer support and express confidence in one’s capabilities. In this context, the experience of safety can be actively cultivated. The state, as both a security provider and institutional actor, should account for a wide range of psychological determinants when fostering societal resilience to diverse forms of threat.

³² R. Cieślak, A. Eliasz, *Wsparcie społeczne...*, p. 72.

Particular attention should be paid to the case of terrorism, whose very essence lies in instilling fear. It is worth highlighting that terrorism experts point to a tendency to exaggerate these threats in the public consciousness.

However, psychological security should not be understood solely as a sense of safety. Considering security as a value, it is necessary to recognize an additional dimension—cognitive reflection on the state of security and an awareness of its importance to human life. This reflection can be understood as a cognitive activity focused on one's own safety, that of loved ones, the nation, or the world. A key characteristic of this concern is the mental orientation toward the concept and value of security. From this reflection, various forms of civic engagement may arise, such as patriotism, social activism, commitment to a healthy lifestyle, or pro-environmental behaviours. This dimension likely stems from a personal and intentional relationship with the world. Notably, this aspect is rarely addressed in theoretical or empirical analyses, clearly indicating a promising direction for further research in this field.

Bibliography

Bańska A., *Społeczna psychologia środowiskowa*, Warszawa 2002.

Bester P. C., *Emerging challenges in terrorism and counterterrorism: A national security perspective*, referat wygłoszony 17 stycznia 2019 r. na The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Public Management, Law and Safety, Haga 2019.

Brentano F., *Psychologia z empirycznego punktu widzenia*, Warszawa 1999.

Butler N., Quigg Z., Bates R., Jones L., Ashworth E., Gowland S., Jones M., *The Contributing Role of Family, School, and Peer Supportive Relationships in Protecting the Mental Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents*, „School Mental Health” 2022, t. 14, nr 3.

Cieślak R., Eliasz A., *Wsparcie społeczne a osobowość*, [w:] H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (red.) *Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie*, Warszawa 2004.

Erikson E.H., *Dzieciństwo i społeczeństwo*, Poznań 1997.

European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2025 (EU TE-SAT), <https://www.europol.europa.eu> [dostęp 11 czerwca 2025]

Grzegorek T., *Tożsamość a poczucie tożsamości*, [w:] A. Gałdowa (red.), *Tożsamość człowieka*, Kraków 2000.

Guasti P., Mansfeldová Z., *Perception of Terrorism and Security and the Role of Media*, [w:] The 7th ECPR General Conference, Colchester 2013.

Hazan C., Shaver P., *Attachment as an organizational framework for research on close relationships*, „Psychological Inquiry” 1994, nr 5

Horgan J., *Psychologia terroryzmu [Psychology of Terrorism]*, Warszawa 2008.

Kitler W., *Bezpieczeństwo narodowe RP. Podstawowe kategorie. Uwarunkowania. System [Polish National Security. Basic categories. Conditions. System]*, Warszawa 2011.

Klamut R., *Bezpieczeństwo jako pojęcie psychologiczne*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Rzeszowskiej: Ekonomia i Nauki Humanistyczne” 2012, nr 19(4).

Klamut R., Sommer H., Michalski K., *Aktywność obywatelska we współczesnym społeczeństwie demokratycznym: Wybrane zagadnienia*, Kraków 2010.

Maslow A.H., *Security-insecurity inventory*, Consulting Psychologists Press, 1952.

Mądrzycki T., *Osobowość jako system tworzący i realizujący plany*, Gdańsk 2002.

Newman G.R., Hsu H.Y., *Rational choice and terrorist target selection*, [in:] *Countering terrorism: Psychosocial strategies* U. Kumar, M.K. Mandal (ed.), New Delhi – Thousand Oaks 2012

Nęcka E., Orzechowski J., Szymura B., *Psychologia poznawcza*, Warszawa 2006.

Obuchowski K., *Człowiek intencjonalny*, Warszawa, 1993.

Słownik terminów z zakresu bezpieczeństwa narodowego, [Dictionary of National Security Terms], Warszawa 2002.

Smolík J., *Global terrorism: its causes and consequences*, [w:] Proceedings from 9th International Conference on Applied Business Research ICABR 2014, t. 1, 2015.

Sobol E. (red.), *Mały słownik języka polskiego*, Warszawa 1995.

Szczurek T., Walkowiak M., Walkowiak M., Bryczek-Wróbel P., *Military, non-military and paramilitary threats*, Warsaw 2020.

Szewczuk W. (red.), *Słownik psychologiczny*, Warszawa 1985.

Yayak A.S.L.I., *Terrorism and its effects on human psychology*, „Academic Research and Reviews in Social Sciences”, Duvar Publishing 2021.

Zimbardo P.G., Leippe M.R., *Psychologia zmiany postaw i wpływu społecznego*, Poznań 2004.