

Research Statement

Andy Cao
Texas A&M University

My research interests lie in crime, corruption, and other anti-social behaviors. In particular, I apply experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies to study factors that shape an individual's decision to transgress formal laws or social norms, and hurt others. By employing both methodologies, I aim at producing research findings that are not only causal, but also valid both in and out of experimental settings to address policy-relevant questions.

CURRENT RESEARCH

In my job market paper, titled **“Does Media Coverage of Hate-motivated Mass Shootings Generate More Hatred?”** I investigate the role news media plays in promoting hatred through the news coverage of mass shootings. While there has been a long-standing debate on how media should report mass shootings, my paper is the first to causally test whether news coverage of mass shootings can increase support for the shooter and the shooter's hate-driven ideology. I first show through observational data that whenever a mass shooting is targeting a specific race/ethnicity/gender/sexual orientation, it receives higher media coverage with more focus on the shooter. Using online searching data and hate crime data, I show that this difference in coverage is correlated with viewers' reactions and possibly results in an increase in hatred toward the victimized group in the shooting. Based on these findings and the existing literature, I design and conduct an online information provision experiment that manipulates how a mass shooting targeting immigrants is reported in the news. The study involves more than 2,000 individuals living in the United States. I stratify the randomization by political affiliation, to be able to test whether and how the information reported in the news has different effects depending on subjects' ex-ante beliefs about immigration, which are captured by Democrat or Republican party affiliation. I show that details on the shooter's ideology increases Republican subjects' support for the shooter. Emphasizing the shooter's identity and background, while highlighting past victimization and possible mental health problems, increases Democrat subjects' support for both the shooter and the shooter's anti-immigration ideology. I also find suggestive evidence that this exposure increases the interest of Democrat subjects' in white supremacy hate groups. Further analysis shows that the treatment effects on Democrats are driven by the more right-leaning individuals within the sample. Overall, my study highlights the unintended consequences of news coverage of hate-motivated mass shootings. My findings provide important guidelines to the media's approach to reporting

on such shootings and, more broadly, on crimes that have the potential to impact individual attitudes toward both the hate ideology of the suspect and the victimized group.

In a second paper, titled **“Can Social Media Rhetoric Incite Hate Incidents? Evidence from Trump’s “Chinese Virus” Tweets”** and co-authored with Jason Lindo and fellow PhD student Jiee Zhong, I focus on social media and anti-Asian incidents. In particular, my coauthors and I investigate whether former president Donald Trump's tweets, in which he referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus," contributed to the rise of anti-Asian incidents. Although many papers have shown high-profile individuals can promote pro-social behaviors like interest in preventative health care and voting, there is little evidence whether this kind of influence can extend to anti-social behaviors. We use an event-study framework and show that the number of incidents spiked following Trump’s initial “Chinese Virus” tweets and there was a subsequent dramatic rise in internet search activity for the phrase. Moreover, the spike in anti-Asian incidents was significantly more pronounced in counties that supported Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election relative to those that supported Hillary Clinton. Overall, this study shows that high-profile individuals such as Trump can have detrimental effects, even when the technology of social media substantially limits what they can say. Our findings have important implications given the recent rise of populist leaders pushing antisocial beliefs and behaviors on topics ranging from vaccine hesitancy to the treatment of immigrants. This paper received a *Revise & Resubmit* request from the *Journal of Urban Economics*, and we recently completed the revision and resubmitted it.

The third paper in my dissertation is titled **“Who self-select into committees: The honest or the corrupt?”** and is joint with Dmitry Ryvkin (Florida State University) and my advisor Danila Serra. This study focuses on another of my research interests, i.e., individual corruptibility in group settings. The motivation is that committees for the management and redistribution of public resources are common in a variety of settings, ranging from Home Owners’ Associations (HOAs), to Parent-Teacher Organizations to government councils. On the one hand, selecting into these committees is costly, but necessary for the provision of public goods. On the other hand, it can be a way to embezzle public funds, especially in an environment where corruption is widespread, and there is little transparency and accountability. We build a theoretical model of a citizen’s decision to join a committee that has discretion over the distribution of a public fund generated by taxes levied on the work/income of citizens. Committee members – who earn less than citizens – decide whether to distribute the fund equally among members of the society, or to embezzle the money. The model predicts that citizens’ beliefs play a major role. An increase in one’s own corruptibility or corruptibility of the committee—increases willingness to join for corrupt citizens but decreases willingness to join for honest citizens. We employ a laboratory experiment and a university student sample to test these predictions, and to investigate mechanisms that could induce honest and pro-social citizens to self-select

into corrupt committees. For this project, I learned how to program the experiment in the oTree platform, and have collected experimental data for one of the three treatments. The data collection for the remaining treatments is ongoing.

During my graduate studies, I have also been actively involved in three additional research projects in collaboration with various fellow PhD students and faculty members. In **“How important are climate, inclusion and wage potential to college major choice?”**, joint with Marco Castillo, Ragan Petrie and Sora Youn, we combine an online survey and an information experiment to study the determinants of college major. In **“Cooperation, Emotions, and Punishment in Public Goods Experiments: A Biometrical Investigation”**, joint with Catherine Eckel and five fellow PhD students, we use a laboratory experiment to study how changing the timing of punishment in a public goods game affects cooperative behavior. We exploit state-of-the-art biometrics including eye tracker and galvanic skin response (GSR) to examine the role of emotional arousal in decision making. In **“Becoming Friends or Foes? How Exposure to Competitive Environments and Social Proximity Shape Social Preferences”**, joint with Eugen Dimant (U Penn), Kyle Hyndman (UT Dallas), and fellow student Nanyin Yang, we conduct an online experiment on MTurk to investigate whether workplace competition has spillover effects on workplace environment.

PLANS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the years to come, I plan to continue working on topics related to hate, crime and media. First, I aim to expand my research on media coverage of mass shootings by exploring different variants of shootings and news stories. One question that I was not able to address in my job market paper is whether the media could shift the attention from the suspects in hate-motivated shootings to the victims and survivors, possibly leading to less hatred. An immediate and important extension of my work would be to test whether news coverage of victims’ identities and backgrounds could improve individuals’ attitudes and behaviors toward the victimized group. Another research topic I plan to pursue in the near future relates to the growing political polarization in the United States, and the perceptions of political correctness and cancel culture. In particular, I am interested in empirically investigating the impact of the cancel culture movement on individuals’ beliefs and behaviors towards others who hold similar or different views, and the motives behind individuals’ participation in a “cancelling” movement. As part of my preliminary motivational analysis, I researched two high-profile cancel culture cases against celebrities: JK Rowling and Joe Rogan. I collected the universe of tweets that mentions their name during the course of their cancellation. I show that while the majority of tweets are calling for accountability, a large proportion of tweets contains harassment and insulting content. In the near future, I plan to design an experiment to understand why people may actively engage in canceling attempts, with an emphasis on the desire to hold wrongdoers accountable versus the desire to signal one’s type to relevant peers to avoid backlash.