

Ibda-C, also an Islamic opposition group in Turkey, but one relatively isolated from the outside world, has orchestrated a string of terrorist attacks. Similarly, the remarkable lack of terrorism by the African National Congress during South Africa's apartheid era can be traced in large part to its extensive ties around the world, including relationships with the Soviet Union and European governments. International allies have a moderating influence on opposition groups, opening up alternative options for accomplishing their goals and reducing the attractiveness of political violence.

Why would anyone join a terrorist group? The primary route into a terrorist organization is no different than the route into any other group—social network ties. People are drawn into violent groups because of who they know, particularly those they already know in the group. Families and friendships are the building blocks of any organization's recruitment of new members. The attraction of getting involved is thus a personal one.

No single "type" of person—with particular personality traits, economic circumstances, or even a certain set of beliefs and values—becomes involved in terrorism. What matters is the social context in which they're embedded. Indeed, very often group members learn the ideology (and hatred) that accompanies terrorism only after they get involved in the first place. Organized groups can shape benign discontent into focused anger and commitment. They offer an alternative narrative of how the world might be if those currently holding power, whether Americans or

Israelis or Colombians or Sri Lankans or anyone else, could just be overthrown through whatever tactics are possible and effective.

Current debates over terrorism have thus far incorporated few insights from existing research. Many liberal-minded people cling to the idea that poverty is the basis for global terrorism, but the reality is that economists have found no significant relationship between poverty and terrorism. More conservative-minded people focus on capturing or killing "evildoers" in order to eliminate terrorism. This view also finds little empirical support—rooting out all potential terrorists is impossible and attempts to stop terror campaigns through military force have been almost universally unsuccessful, even when large numbers of individuals tied to terror organizations are captured or killed. Not only do military strategies designed to punish terrorism or eliminate terrorists fail, they also create and reinforce exactly those conditions that raise the likelihood of terrorism in the future.

People today are well aware that we live in a world in which terrorism is an ever-present threat. But we are less aware that this world didn't begin on 9/11. The threat of terrorism has been with us for many decades and will continue into the future. Understanding the basic definition of terrorism and its social constructions can help us put the threat in proper perspective. Understanding the basic mechanisms responsible for its effectiveness as a strategy—the ability to evoke fear in a population disproportionate to its true threat—can help us better confront the threat and reduce its likelihood in the future.

Making Claims: The Role of Language in the Construction of Social Problems

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If I asked you whether you supported homosexuals serving in the military, what would you say? What if I asked you whether you supported gay men and

lesbians serving in the military? Would your answer change? Are you more concerned about the impact of global warming or climate change? Although on

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the surface it may seem like these terms are identical, people perceive and understand them in very different ways. Word choice is important for anyone trying to convince others of their position, but it is especially critical if you're trying to enact social change. Because language is a powerful tool capable of shaping people's attitudes and beliefs, choosing it strategically makes it easier to make claims about, draw attention to, and ultimately develop solutions for social problems.

Claimsmakers (people who are trying to shape the attitudes of others and convince them that they should be concerned about a particular problem) use language strategically to create a particular picture of what a social problem looks like and what, if anything, should be done about it. Claimsmakers choose language designed to highlight the aspects of a problem they believe are the most important or compelling (Best, 1987). In many cases, claimsmakers will choose words intended to elicit an emotional response. After all, they are trying to convince people to care about what they are saying (Best, 2013). The words we choose shape the way we interpret and feel about a social problem, whether we believe a solution is working, and even whether we believe a problem is real or deserving of our attention.

GAY MEN AND LESBIANS VERSUS HOMOSEXUALS

Words with the same meaning can have significantly different connotations in a particular culture. One example of the way similar words develop different undertones is the way the terms "homosexual" and "gay men and lesbians" are used in public discourse. A CBS/*New York Times* poll found that people responded differently when asked whether they favored or opposed permitting homosexuals to serve in the military than when asked whether they favored or opposed permitting gay men and lesbians to serve in the military. When the question used the terms gay men and lesbians, just over 50 percent of the respondents said they strongly favored it and only 12 percent said they strongly opposed.

When the question used the term homosexuals, only 34 percent of the respondents said they strongly favored it and 19 percent said they strongly opposed (Wade, 2010).¹

This disparity resulting from language suggests that there are negative connotations to the term homosexual. At this moment in history, many people including academics, journalists, and many members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community tend to see the term homosexual as a more negative term than the terms gay men and lesbians. In 2006, the organization Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation successfully lobbied the Associated Press to restrict use of the term homosexual because of the negative connotations of the term. Because the Associated Press style guide is used by many news organizations, the term is being used less and less frequently in the media (Peters, 2014).

There are several possible reasons that the term homosexual has come to be seen as negative. The first reason is that the term homosexual contains the word "sex," whereas neither the word gay nor lesbian does. This may draw attention to the sexualized aspects of the term, whereas the words gay and lesbian do not. Another possible explanation is that the term "homo" has a history as a derogatory term. The negative associations with this term may still exist because conservative pundits frequently use the term homosexual in disparaging ways. A final explanation for the negative associations with the term homosexual is the association of this word with the American Psychiatric Association's designation of same-sex attraction as a mental disorder until 1973. Members of the LGBT community prefer the terms gay and lesbian. The term gay, a synonym for joyful, was initially used as a code word for identifying same-sex desires to others who also knew the code. Because the alternate meaning of gay was positive, this term generally has more positive associations than the term homosexual (Peters, 2014).

Although the terms gay men and lesbians and homosexual have nearly identical definitions, they have

different meanings and evoke different emotional responses. Determining the different responses words can elicit is critical for claimsmakers. In this instance there are strong emotional responses associated with the terms homosexual and gay men and lesbians, and claimsmakers interested in addressing issues concerning the LGBT community must be thoughtful about which words to use. A claimsmaker arguing in favor of legalizing marriage for gay men and lesbians would be better off choosing to use the term “gay marriage” or the more inclusive term “same-sex marriage,” whereas someone opposed may wish to use the term “homosexual marriage.”

GLOBAL WARMING VERSUS CLIMATE CHANGE

Word choice also makes a difference in how the public receives and assesses scientific information. The terms “global warming” and “climate change” are often used interchangeably in public discussions and in polls about the topic. However, just because they are used interchangeably does not mean people have the same associations with each term. People are more likely to report they think the phenomenon is “real” when they are asked about climate change than when they are asked about global warming (Schuldt et al., 2011). This discrepancy may exist because for many people the term global warming implies temperature increases; when regions are experiencing record low temperatures and record snowfalls it is much easier to believe the planet is not warming. The term climate change is more flexible and could potentially include both lower and upper extremes in temperature (Schuldt et al., 2011).

The different interpretations of these two terms are particularly interesting because there are strong political associations with each one. In one study, researchers found that conservative websites were more likely to use the term global warming (in an attempt to dismiss it) when discussing the phenomenon, whereas liberal websites were more likely to use the term climate change (in an effort to encourage others to recognize it) (Schuldt et al., 2011). These political connections

are important because people with different political affiliations differ in how they respond to the different terminology. People who identified as Democrats or as Independents reported believing the phenomenon was real at about the same rate regardless of whether it was called global warming or climate change. For example, nearly 87 percent of Democrats reported believing in the phenomenon regardless of whether the question was framed as either global warming or climate change. Independents differed slightly, with nearly 70 percent believing in global warming and 74 percent believing in climate change. The difference is much more dramatic, however, for self-identified Republicans, with 44 percent of Republicans believing in global warming and 60 percent believing in climate change (Schuldt et al., 2011). Claimsmakers should take note. Individuals and organizations that want to draw attention to and combat the phenomenon may make more headway by recognizing that the two terms have different interpretations and should consciously choose to use the term climate change instead of the term global warming. Note that even when claimsmakers have successfully garnered recognition and support for a social problem, word choice remains critical when advocating for specific solutions.

AFFORDABLE CARE ACT VERSUS OBAMACARE

Even if you recognize that our population's lack of health insurance coverage is a social problem, how claimsmakers frame solutions to such a problem will influence their acceptance. An example of this in action can be found in the discussion on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, federal health care legislation passed in 2010. Two different terms for this legislation have become common in the public discourse: “the Affordable Care Act” (the ACA) and “Obamacare.” These two terms refer to the same legislation, but people respond differently to each name. Obamacare has a lower level of support than the ACA does; a Gallup poll found that while 45 percent of Americans approved of the ACA, only 38 percent of people approved of

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Obamacare. The poll also found a higher disapproval rate for Obamacare than for the ACA (Newport, 2013).

This is a useful case because it illustrates how terms develop positive and negative associations over time as a result of claims-making. The negative associations with the term Obamacare were deliberately crafted. A Republican strategist argued that people want their health care to be personal and the term Obamacare was intentionally designed to link the president to the legislation and make the health care reform seem more political and less personal (Baker, 2012; Obernauer, 2013). In an effort to try to reclaim the term, Democrats started using it in 2012 (Baker, 2012). Even President Obama tried to put a positive spin on it. In 2012 he said “The Affordable Health Care Act—otherwise known as Obamacare—was the right thing to do. And you know what, they’re right, I do care” (Obama, 2012). However, since then there has been a shift in the way Democrats have been using the term. Instead of trying to reclaim Obamacare, Democrats started using the term the ACA instead. In his 2014 State of the Union speech, President Obama referred to the health care reform as the ACA rather than as Obamacare (Obama, 2014a). However, at some point after the 2014 State of the Union address, President Obama made another effort to reclaim the term Obamacare and change the negative association with it (Obama, 2014b). Understanding the different associations is critical for claimsmakers interested in future developments in health-care reform. If the attempt to change the negative associations with Obamacare is successful, then claimsmakers trying to raise the levels of support for this legislation could use this term. If the attempt is not successful, these claimsmakers should consider using the term ACA instead.

CONCLUSION

Social problems do not exist in a vacuum. The ways in which we describe social problems influence the ways in which people respond to them. Even words

that seem to mean the same thing can evoke different emotions and beliefs depending on who is reading or hearing them. Claimsmakers carefully and deliberately choose their words when taking a position on social problems. They select the words that will create the desired emotional response in people who listen to their claims (Best, 2013). By strategically choosing words to evoke particular responses, claimsmakers can shape the feelings people have about a certain topic and can even change whether people believe their claims are true. No matter which problems people are interested in solving, they must consider which words they will use to convince people that their claims are the best and that their solutions should be implemented.

NOTES

1. Results were obtained from a nationwide telephone poll of 1,084 adults. Researchers asked 550 of those 1,084 respondents: “Do you favor or oppose permitting homosexuals to serve in the military? Do you favor/oppose that strongly or not so strongly?” Researchers asked 534 of those 1,084 respondents: “Do you favor or oppose permitting gay men and lesbians to serve in the military? Do you favor/oppose that strongly or not so strongly?” (*New York Times*, CBS News Poll, February 5–10, 2010). This suggests that the different results were a result of the language used in the question rather than a result of differences in the sample.

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