Aberration of mind or soul: the role of media in perceptions of mass violence

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Abstract

Purpose

Unconscious biases against certain groups aid in forming assumptions which may be promulgated in the USA via popular news media linking rare but memorable violent acts with specific groups. However, the relationship between marginalized group association, assumptions regarding the motive for violent acts and individual media consumption has never been directly examined. This study aims to directly examine this relationship.

Design/methodology/approach

In the present study, individuals read a vignette of a mass shooting in which the perpetrator's implied religion (i.e. Islam or unknown religion) was manipulated. Participants then indicated their assumptions regarding motive (i.e. terrorism or mental illness) and personal media consumption habits.

More

Full Text

Introduction

Individuals hold biases that are both explicit or conscious and implicit or unconscious and these biases may influence their judgments and behavior (Bargh, 1994; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). While extensive research exists examining explicit and implicit biases, very little research concerns judgments individuals make about the violence that may be informed by those biases. We will examine if individuals make assumptions regarding the motives of perpetrators from two groups historically marginalized in Western cultures (i.e. Arab-Muslims and individuals with severe mental illnesses) who commit a mass shooting. Given that biases may be promulgated via popular news media associating mass violence with specific groups, we then address how news media may influence these assumptions.

Muslims as a marginalized group

Only a small subset of bias research focuses on prejudice against Arab-Muslim individuals specifically (Sheridan and North, 2004), however, this literature supports the notion that people in Western societies hold both explicit (Johnson, 1992) and implicit biases against Muslim individuals (Rowatt *et al.*, 2005). For example, Park *et al.* (2007) found the most salient characteristics Americans associated with Arab-Muslims were those related to terrorism and participants who endorsed these associations held greater implicit biases (as measured by the Implicit Association Test) against Arab-Muslims. In a sample of individuals in Germany, Fischer *et al.*

(2007) found participants believed Muslims were more religious, aggressive and supportive of terrorism than Christians. Further, these individuals believed Muslims were more likely to support terrorism because they possessed more potential for aggression than Christians. Indeed, simply attributing an act of mass violence to ideology results in individuals imagining the perpetrator as a phenotypically more stereotypical Middle Eastern man (Kunst *et al.*, 2018). These findings indicate individuals' biases against Arab-Muslims may be the result of an erroneous association between violent terrorism and the Islamic religion. Indeed, in the USA, public polling suggests 41% of Americans believe Islam is more likely than other major religions to encourage violence among its followers (Pew Research Center, 2016) and 35% believe there are a substantial number of Muslims who support extremism (Pew Research Center, 2017). Overall, results indicate Americans feel "far less positively" about individuals who practice Islam compared to those from all other mainstream religious groups (Pew Research Center, 2017).

These negative associations may have real-world consequences and the potential to influence people's beliefs and behaviors (Mange *et al.*, 2012; Unkelbach *et al.*, 2009). For example, Arab-Muslim individuals experience discrimination in the hiring process in the form of fewer opportunities to complete applications, less callbacks and more frequent adverse interpersonal interactions (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013; Park *et al.*, 2009). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission officials reported an almost three-fold increase in workplace discrimination complaints from Arab-Muslim individuals (EEOC, 2002). Additionally, discrimination against Arab-Muslim individuals has been reported in educational and health-care settings (Aroian, 2012; Martin, 2015; Samari *et al.*, 2018; Shammas, 2009).

Mentally ill as a marginalized group

Another marginalized group in American society includes those with severe mental illnesses (Fuller Torrey, 2011). In large part, biases against individuals with mental illness, particularly severe mental illnesses (e.g. schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder and bipolar disorder), stem from erroneous assumptions that they are inherently more violent, dangerous and unpredictable (Angermeyer and Dietrich, 2006; Fuller Torrey, 2011; Rüsch *et al.*, 2005). Although assumptions of increased violence apply to individuals with even mild symptoms of depression, this association nearly doubles for individuals with a psychotic disorder (Link *et al.*, 1999). In a large US national survey, Phelan and Link (2004) found 70% of people believe patients in psychiatric hospitals are dangerous. These findings were mirrored in a more recent study, which found that associations between mental illness and dangerousness have become even more prevalent over the past 20 years (Pescosolido *et al.*, 2019). This association is so salient that 86% of American teenagers believe preventing individuals with mental illness from having guns and improving mental health treatment would decrease school shootings (Pew Research Center, 2018).

These negative stereotypes may have detrimental and pervasive consequences for those affected by mental illness. Those who believe people with mental health problems are more dangerous also report increased fear of these individuals (Corrigan, 2005). Furthermore, individuals with mental illness experience discrimination in employment and below-standard health care (Corrigan, 2005; Russinova *et al.*, 2011).

Role of media

Stereotypes are formed within the individual and transmitted to others primarily through the use of language; a large impetus for prejudice is based on the language to which a society is exposed (Allport, 1954; Fishman, 1956). Further, automatic attitudes or biases can form when people are repeatedly exposed to information that links individuals from a certain social group to salient attributes (Devine, 1989). One medium for this association is through the news media, which includes all print (e.g. newspapers, magazines), electronic (e.g. television, social media, online periodicals) and radio broadcasts of relevant news and information. Research consistently suggests news media, either intentionally or not, influences public perceptions through the repetition of themes, a procedure akin to typical learning processes but on a far wider scale (McQuail, 1977; Perse, 2001; Schemer, 2012). This influence is particularly important, as a 2010 national survey suggested Americans follow various news sources (e.g. television, radio, print, internet) for approximately 70 min a day (Pew Research Center, 2010), and it is estimated there has been no significant change in this viewing pattern in the past decade (Nielsen, 2017).

For these reasons, biased media coverage can be particularly concerning, especially considering individuals tend to engage in belief perseverance or the tendency to maintain initial beliefs even when confronted with contradictory evidence (Tetlock, 1983). Media outlets are often the first source of information for individuals regarding an important event, such as acts of mass violence and the portrayal of these events may cause lasting impressions on the public (Unkelbach *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, the news media in society can influence thoughts and biases via consistent and repetitive framing of a particular narrative (Powell, 2011, 2018).

Muslims as "them"

One association often promulgated by Western media is between Muslims/Arabs and terrorism (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Powell, 2011, 2018). Importantly, while these terms reflect distinct ethnic (i.e. Arab) and religious (i.e. Muslim) groups which may or may not overlap, they are often conflated and used interchangeably in Western media. An analysis of media coverage of terrorist attacks suggests there is a bias in the dominant media coverage in the USA. Generally, American media propagates an "Us versus Them" narrative, where vengeful Muslims from the Mideast attack "Christian America" (Powell, 2011, 2018; Wittebols, 1992). Specifically, the media promulgates the narrative of Arab-Muslims working together in an organized fashion to harm Americans while downplaying the

danger of domestic terrorism to a handful of isolated incidents by mentally ill persons (Powell, 2011, 2018). Additionally, Western news media depicts perpetrators with Arab-sounding names as more of a threat to the public and as committing their attack to seek revenge/send a message, and less attention is given to their background or family. Importantly, American media ascribes the label "terrorism" to acts of mass violence more frequently than the media in other Western countries, such as Canada, and almost exclusively applies the term when discussing incidents in the Mideast (Wittebols, 1991).

Although American media outlets have begun taking more time to investigate the backgrounds of perpetrators before ascribing labels related to Islam or terrorism in recent years, once ties to Islamic countries are confirmed, no matter how minor, media outlets focus their coverage on religion and portray a larger threat to the USA (Powell, 2018). Additionally, once these international ties are established, these incidents receive a significantly greater amount of media coverage than terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals without apparent international ties (Elmasry and el-Nawawy, 2019; Kearns *et al.*, 2019; Powell, 2018). This practice may cause the public to form an association between Islam and violence, which could be resistant to change even after the presentation of disconfirming evidence (Unkelbach *et al.*, 2009). The repetitive negative depictions of Arab-Muslims in American news media may foster the association between Islam and terrorism, and therefore, perpetuate biases against Muslim individuals.

Severely mentally ill as "them"

On the other hand, perpetrators of terrorist attacks who do not have traditionally Arab-sounding names are often portrayed in the American media as severely mentally ill and less of a national threat. Additionally, the media gives considerable attention to their familial ties and the circumstances leading up to the attack (Powell, 2011, 2018). Analyses of news media coverage concerning individuals with mental illness indicate outlets tend to portray these individuals as dangerous, particularly those with psychotic disorders (Angermeyer and Matschinger, 1996; Jorm and Reavley, 2013). Indeed, in an analysis of 3,353 American newspapers containing a story on mental illness, 39% emphasized dangerousness and violence, and these stories were more likely to be in the newspaper's front section. This is in contrast to only 4% of stories which focused on recovery from mental illness (Jorm and Reavley, 2013).

This practice can have significant implications considering exposure to the idea of people with mental illness perpetrating violent acts fosters a belief that all such people are inherently more violent (Angermeyer and Matschinger, 1996; Dietrich *et al.*, 2006; Quintero Johnson and Riles, 2018). Even if an individual's mental illness is not explicitly stated to have caused the violent act, merely priming people with the concept of mental illness may lead them to assume a causal link (Chan and Yanos, 2018). Similar to Arab-Muslims, the American news media's consistent negative portrayal of individuals with mental illness as inherently more violent may aid in perpetuating biases.

Current study

A robust literature has established Americans generally hold negative biases of Arab-Muslims and individuals with mental illness. In addition, negative portrayals in American media of marginalized populations (e.g. Arab-Muslims, individuals with mental illness) are well established in the literature. However, the manifestations of these biases as assumptions about causes for mass violence, and how those particular biases may be influenced by news media, have not been examined. The aim of the current study was to integrate existing research and directly examine whether a perpetrator's assumed religious affiliation is associated with assumptions about the perpetrator's motive. Of additional interest was the role of news media consumption on these assumptions.

Using a fictitious news article, we manipulated the perpetrator's name (as a proxy for religious affiliation; Allport, 1954), to understand if this variable impacts perceptions regarding the perpetrator's motive. We hypothesized the main effect of religious affiliation, in that American participants would be more likely to perceive the individual with the Arab-sounding name as committing an act of terrorism and the individual with an Anglo-sounding name as mentally ill.

In addition, given research regarding the impact of news media on perpetuating biases, we anticipated media consumption would moderate the relationship between religious affiliation and assumed motive. Specifically, we expected the Arab-sounding name would be more highly associated with a motive of terrorism and the Anglo-sounding name would be more highly associated with having a severe mental illness for the participants who reported higher levels of news media consumption.

Method

Participants

A total of 200 undergraduate students at a large American state university were recruited from introductory psychology courses and received class credit for participation. Three participants were removed due to incomplete data, resulting in a final sample size of 197 participants. Over half of the participants (81%) identified as female, with an average age of 18.5 [Standard deviation (SD) = 0.86]. The majority of the sample was Caucasian (91%), followed by relatively smaller proportions of Black/African American (5.5%), Asian/Asian American (1.5%) and biracial/other reported races (2%). Participants largely identified as Republican (50.5%), followed by Democrat (15.5%), Independent (11%), Libertarian (3%), Green Party (1%), "other" reported political affiliation (0.5%) and none (18.5%). Participants identified as Protestant (30.5%), Catholic (29.5%), Jewish (3%), Muslim (1%), "other" religions (21.5%) and none (14.5%).

Preliminary analyzes indicated significant differences between conditions based on participant gender, sexual orientation and political affiliation. However, only political affiliation was significantly correlated with the dependent variable of terrorism as a motive. As such, the subsequent statistical analysis controlled for this variable.

Materials

Media consumption questionnaire.

To assess participants' media consumption habits, a media consumption questionnaire was developed for the current study (Appendix 1). This questionnaire included questions regarding how many hours they spend consuming news media sources (e.g. online, print, podcasts). To assess nuanced differences, the questionnaire further broke down the "online" category into various social media outlets (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Reddit) and differentiated between local and national news outlets. Additionally, the questionnaire asked participants to indicate the political leanings of their preferred media outlets on a sliding scale from "Left (liberal/progressive)" to "Right (conservative)." The questionnaire also included a series of attitudinal questions (e.g. "I consider myself well-informed when it comes to current events," "I take a stance on an issue after gathering all the facts") which were rated on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree "to "strongly agree."

Breaking news article.

To increase ecological validity, two vignettes portrayed a "breaking news" story describing a mass shooting, including the number of deceased and injured bystanders (Appendix 2). The vignettes included only minimal information (e.g. suspect name, location), to leave the cause of the incident ambiguous, and were identical apart from the suspect's reported name. To protect against impression management, the religious affiliation of the perpetrator was indicated through an Anglo-sounding name (Andrew Doran) and Arab-sounding name (Ahmed Nassar), which were confirmed to have elicited assumptions regarding the religious association, Non-Muslim and Muslim, respectively, through pilot testing with a large sample that was demographically similar to the study sample. Additionally, previous research suggests name manipulations are sufficient to elicit assumptions regarding religious affiliation (Allport, 1954; Park *et al.*, 2009).

Perception survey.

A survey inquired about participants' perceptions of the cause of the mass shooting (Appendix 3). The questions were constructed to reflect previous research (Powell, 2011) that identified factors American news media associates with terrorists who perform acts of mass violence (e.g. "How likely is it that the shooter was sending a message through this incident?" "How likely is it that there will be subsequent related incidents?") and individuals with severe mental illness who commit acts of mass violence (e.g. "How likely is it that the shooter has strong familial ties and social support?" "How likely is it that the shooter was acting alone?").

The questions were answered on a Likert-type scale of 1–8 with 1 representing "Very Unlikely" and 8 representing "Very Likely." Scores for each question pertaining to a motive were averaged to create the corresponding dependent variables (terrorism and mental illness).

Procedures

All study procedures were conducted remotely from the location of the participant's choosing. Prior to beginning the study, participants read through a document describing the study as "an investigation into media consumption habits and perceptions of the news media." The true nature of the study was not disclosed at this point to guard against the possibility that participants may engage in positive impression management.

Participants then completed the media consumption questionnaire. Following this, participants read one "breaking news" article describing a mass shooting that was committed by a male perpetrator (either Anglo- or Arab-sounding name). After reading their assigned vignette, participants completed the perception survey. Finally, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire regarding basic information such as age, gender, race/ethnicity and religious and political affiliation. After all study procedures were completed, participants were debriefed about the true nature of the project and afforded the opportunity to have their data removed and destroyed, although none opted for this choice. All study procedures were approved by *[redacted for peer review]* Institutional Review Board.

Results

Terrorism as motive

The effect of assumed religion on the belief that terrorism was the perpetrator's motive was explored using a one-way analysis of covariance, controlling for participants' political affiliation. The main effect for religious affiliation was not significant, $F(1,196) = 2.584$ $p = 0.11$; participants did not differ in their belief that the perpetrator was motivated by terrorism regardless of whether the perpetrator had an Arab-sounding name ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.65$) or Anglo-sounding name ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.58$, Cohen's $d = 0.18$).

Severe mental illness as motive

The effect of assumed religion on the belief that the perpetrator's act was due to a possible severe mental illness was explored using a one-way analysis of variance. The main effect for religious affiliation was not significant, $F(1,196) = 3.404$ $p = 0.07$; participants did not differ in their belief that the perpetrator's actions were the result of mental illness regardless of whether the perpetrator had an Arab-sounding name ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.60$) or Anglo-sounding name ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 0.50$, Cohen's $d = 0.27$).

Given the null findings for the main effects, analyzes to assess the moderating effect of media consumption were not conducted. However, correlational analyses indicated self-reported total news consumption (i.e. average number of hours per week spent consuming all news media) was not significantly correlated with participants attributing terrorism as a motive, $r(195) = 0.01$, $p = 0.93$ or severe mental illness as a motive, $r(195) = 0.03$, $p = 0.72$.

Discussion

The current study examined whether a perpetrator's assumed religious affiliation impacts participants' perceptions of motive for committing an act of mass violence. Given the role news media may play in the formation and perpetuation of biases through repeated portrayals of certain associations (e.g. Islam and terrorism, mental illness and dangerousness), the effects of media consumption were of particular interest in this study. However, inconsistent with hypotheses, participants in the current study were not more likely to associate an assumed Muslim perpetrator with terrorism or an assumed non-Muslim perpetrator with having severe mental illness. It is unlikely these null findings are due to a failure of the manipulation because perpetrator name was manipulated to indicate religious affiliation consistent with previous research (Allport, 1954; Park *et al.*, 2009) and large-scale pilot testing confirmed this manipulation elicited salient associations with Islam (Arab-sounding name) and an unknown religion (Anglo-sounding name).

The lack of an association between an assumed Muslim perpetrator and terrorism is unexpected given the existent literature showing Westerners often associate Muslims with aggression and violence (Fischer *et al.*, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2016), as well as greater support for extremism and terrorism than Christians (Fischer *et al.*, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2017). Additionally, the lack of association between an assumed non-Muslim perpetrator and mental illness is unexpected, considering public opinions about the link between mental illness and violence (Pescosolido *et al.*, 2019) and the American media's portrayal of non-Muslim offenders (Powell, 2011, 2018).

An optimistic perspective might be that these null results reflect a change in public perceptions regarding these traditionally marginalized groups. Indeed, recent polls suggest the number of Americans who perceive Arab-Muslims as more violent is declining (Pew Research Center, 2017) and people are becoming more receptive to individuals with mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2019). However, recent research also indicates that in the context of mass shootings, people still associate mental illness with a non-Muslim shooter and religion with a Muslim shooter, but these relationships may be moderated by attitudes toward Muslims and political affiliation (Habib *et al.*, 2019; Mercier *et al.*, 2018). It is possible that the current sample was comprising individuals who were relatively low in negative attitudes toward Muslims, although such attitudes were not specifically assessed in the present study.

Another explanation for these unanticipated findings may be the timing of data collection, which occurred during late September to mid-November of 2017. Importantly, the 2017 Las Vegas shooting took place less than a week into data collection on October 1, 2017. During that attack, the perpetrator, Stephen Paddock, opened fire into a crowd at a music festival, killing 58 people and injuring 851 others. Because Paddock killed himself prior to being apprehended, a motive for the attack was not readily apparent (Berman, 2018). However, in the subsequent days, many media outlets followed the same pattern of coverage as previous other non-Muslim perpetrators: focusing on humanizing aspects of his character (e.g. "liked to gamble, listened to country music"; Wan *et al.*, 2017), emphasizing he was acting alone (e.g. "lone wolf"; Del Real and Bromwich, 2017), and describing him as mentally ill in relation to a possible motive (e.g. "crazed lunatic full of hate"; Bacon and James, 2017). Surprisingly, however, a lengthy and well-publicized debate then ensued regarding the very subject matter of this study: whether non-Muslim perpetrators of mass violence are less likely to be associated with terrorism than their Muslim counterparts (BBC News, 2017; Friedman, 2017; Gessen, 2017). It is certainly possible these topics were on the forefront of participants' minds in this study and may have influenced the results.

In support of this notion, Dolliver and Kearns (2019) examined beliefs regarding the 2017 Las Vegas shooting and found participants were more likely than not to classify the attack as terrorism, but those who did consider it terrorism were less confident in their opinion. Furthermore, the researchers found that participants who consumed more media were more likely to consider the shooting a terrorist attack and participants who indicated news media was more important to them in their daily lives were less confident in their characterization of the attack. These findings are particularly interesting considering the then-active debates in the media about assumed religion and terrorism. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that unforeseen contextual factors directly relevant to the present study (i.e. media coverage of a notable act of mass violence) may have suppressed historically robust results in the present study.

Implications

The present lack of association between Muslim individuals and terrorism may reflect a trend toward a more realistic picture of terrorism in the USA, given nearly two-thirds of terror attacks that occurred in the USA in 2017 were tied to "racist, anti-Muslim, homophobic, anti-Semitic, fascist, anti-government or xenophobic motivations", while only approximately 10% were linked to Islamic extremists (Romero, 2018). Furthermore, the lack of association between mass violence and severe mental illness may also reflect a

collective shifting of public mindset to be more aligned with reality. Importantly, less than 5% of crimes in the USA involve perpetrators with mental illness and people with severe mental illness are actually over 10 times more likely to be a victim of violent crime compared to the general public (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Alternately, as previously indicated, current findings may represent a more ephemeral mindset based on the media coverage surrounding the 2017 Las Vegas shooting at the time of data collection. Although unintentional, this study uniquely captured people's assumptions regarding motives for a mass shooting amid a novel national debate in the media about biased news coverage and associations between religion, ethnicity, terrorism and mental illness. Our unanticipated findings of people refraining from these expected connections were further mirrored to an extent by Dolliver and Kearns' (2019) findings from that same time period. Perhaps, then, present results indicate that narratives dispersed by the media can potentially impact public perceptions, and when these discussions about assumed motives are happening publicly, people may be less likely to jump to uninformed, biased conclusions.

Limitations and future directions

The results of this study should be further considered within the context of the study's limitations. The most salient limitation is in regard to the generalizability of the data given the convenience sample. The sample in this study was largely comprising young, Caucasian women who self-identified with the Republican party and various organized religions, which is not reflective of the general US population. Notably, only political affiliation was shown to correlate with the dependent variable of terrorism as an assumed motive and thus was statistically controlled for in the present study. Still, future studies may choose to include a more diverse sample that reflects the varied demographic composition of the USA.

Additionally, some criticisms have been posed regarding vignette studies, particularly that they do not create a comparable context as would be experienced in the real world (Lohrke *et al.*, 2010). However, vignette studies remain one of the most optimal ways to protect internal and external validity while also isolating independent variables (for a discussion see Aguinis and Bradley, 2014). Furthermore, given the moderator of interest in the present study was news media, which may often be in a print medium, the "breaking news" vignettes were deemed a realistic and externally valid method for manipulating the independent variable. Other realistic experimental vignette methodologies which could be used in future studies include fabricated news videos or cell phone alerts.

While current findings suggest previous effects of associating Muslim perpetrators with terrorism and non-Muslim perpetrators with severe mental illness may not be robust, further research will be beneficial in parsing apart the nature of this trend and helping determine whether these unique findings are in fact an ephemeral byproduct of a novel national discussion or the beginning of a deeper trend toward reduction in stigmas against Arab-Muslim individuals and people with mental illness.

Conclusion

Given the well-established biases in American society against Arab-Muslim individuals and individuals with mental illness, as well as the potential role news media has in purporting such biases, the current study sought to examine the relationship between assumptions regarding the motive for a mass shooting and marginalized group association, as well as the potential influence of media consumption. Findings were unexpected in that they failed to replicate such biases. It is possible these null results were influenced by notable unanticipated contextual factors directly relevant to the present study (i.e. media coverage of the 2017 Las Vegas shooting and subsequent national debate regarding what constitutes terrorism), which occurred during data collection. The results of this study may indicate mindsets shifted in regard to these biases, possibly because of the content of such media coverage, although it is unknown how enduring this shift may be. At the very least, results emphasize the importance of considering how real-world events and factors impact empirical data collection.

Figure A1.

Figure A2.

Details

Subject

Islam;
Media coverage;
Terrorism;
Mass media effects;
Muslims;
Consumption;
Mass media violence;
Mental disorders;

	Violence;	
	Habits;	
	News media;	
	Illnesses;	
	Ethnicity;	
	Marginality;	
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	Minority groups;	
	Mass murders;	
	Gun violence;	
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