

# A simple intervention enduringly reduces anti-Muslim sentiment

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Emile Bruneau is director of the Peace and Conflict Neuroscience Lab at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. Credit: University of Pennsylvania

In the United States and Europe Muslims are often collectively blamed for extremist violence by individual Muslims, like Rizwan Farook and

Tashfeen Malik in San Bernardino, or the three coordinated attacks from members of the Islamic State in Paris in 2015. The same doesn't hold, however, when the terrorist committing the act is a white Christian, like Dylann Roof's attacks in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Very few people hold all white Christians responsible.

Emile Bruneau, who runs the Peace and Conflict Neuroscience Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, wanted to understand why collective blame—holding an entire population responsible for the acts of a single person belonging to that group—happens and how challenging it might be to change. He and colleagues from Northwestern University and the University of Granada found that by using a simple, one-minute [intervention](#), they could reduce anti-Muslim sentiment on the spot. What's more, the effect held when tested again a month, and a year later, findings the researchers published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

"The human brain has a set of biases, and many of these biases lie across in-group and out-group lines. If you see another group as an out-group, you judge them differently than you do your own," says Bruneau, a research associate and lecturer at the Annenberg School for Communication. "Here we wanted to look at the tendency for Europeans to blame all Muslims for an act of violence committed by an individual Muslim extremist, but to not blame all white Europeans for an act of extremism committed by a white European."

Bruneau, Northwestern's Nour Kteily, and others had conducted comparable work with populations in the U.S. Now, they turned their attention to Spain, where similar biases have been documented and where anti-Muslim sentiment worsened after two attacks there, one linked to Al Qaeda in 2004 that killed 194 people, and another in 2017 linked to ISIS that killed 16 people and wounded more than 100.

For the work, the researchers used a 100-point scale, with 0 indicating

the participants did not place any blame on the collective group in question and 100 meaning they placed blame entirely on that group. They then randomly separated several hundred participants, all of whom were white, into a control cohort and an experimental one.

During an initial experimental encounter, one 30 days later, and a third one a year out, those in the control group were asked to rate on that 100-point scale the level of blame they placed on all Muslims for one person's extreme actions. On average, these participants, who never completed an intervention, responded with scores around 40 across all three time points.

For the experimental group, participants went through what the researchers dubbed a "Collective Blame Hypocrisy" intervention at the initial encounter. First, participants read three descriptions of violence committed by white Europeans like Anders Breivik, a right-wing extremist who went on a shooting rampage, killing 77 people in Norway in 2011. After each example, participants rated how responsible they felt white Europeans were as a group, and how responsible they personally were, for those attacks.

Next, they read a description of the 2015 Islamic State–led violence in Paris, accompanied by the biography of a Muslim woman named Fatima Wahid who owned a bakery there. How responsible were Fatima and others like her, participants were asked, for the violence they'd just read about? "The Spaniards who went through the simple exercise replied with a 10 on the 100-point scale," Bruneau says. "That's a fourfold difference from the control group." Responses to questions about participants' anti-Muslim sentiments (which included those assessing support for allowing Muslim refugees into Spain and for anti-Muslim policies such as closing down mosques in Spain) also improved for those who did the intervention.

That difference in perception remained steady even a year out—the finding Bruneau says he is most excited by. "A one-minute, logical activity shook the collective blame of Muslims enough that anti-Muslim sentiments were less than the control group a full year later," he says.

Though the researchers have more to learn about exactly why the intervention is effective, they have some conjectures. One is that people don't like to be hypocritical and so they adjust their collective blame of other groups after reflecting on the fact that they don't blame themselves or their own group for the behavior of individual members. "This activity reveals to people an inconsistency that I think they're generally unaware of," Bruneau says. "Once they're aware of it, a very easy way to resolve it is to decrease how much you blame Muslims."

Consistent with the researchers' reasoning, they found that the intervention's effects were strongest among individuals highest in a psychological trait called "preference for consistency." That is, those who most seek to avoid hypocritical inconsistency were most likely to reduce their collective blame of Muslims after reflecting on their lack of collective blame on white Europeans for similar acts.

"To me, these beliefs are like a house of cards: If you can knock out the tendency to blame a whole group for the actions of one person, people start questioning other things they've been told about Muslims," says Bruneau. "Once that card has been popped out and people realize, 'I hear again and again the negative things one Muslim does, but I never hear the incredible, positive things they do as a group,' then the questions start accelerating and people start building their own views."

The intervention applies to other groups and settings, too. Ongoing work is looking at inner-city drug use and the blame placed on African-American communities, as well as the relationship between Colombian people and a rebel group called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of

Colombia.

"I got into this research because I wanted to find interventions that reduce marginalization, hostility, conflict, and violence," Bruneau says.

"I want us, as a community, to spend our time and resources on the most efficient programs, to identify and build interventions that are effective at reducing racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and to critically evaluate the interventions to see which work."

**More information:** Emile G. Bruneau et al. A collective blame hypocrisy intervention enduringly reduces hostility towards Muslims, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2019). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-019-0747-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0747-7)

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