

Responding to extremist attacks: For Muslim leaders, 'It's damned if you do, damned if you don't'

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Muslim leaders face a perilous task when asked to publicly respond to violent attacks carried out by Muslim extremists.

Expressing [empathy](#) can satisfy non-Muslims, but accepting group responsibility can cultivate a perception of collective guilt, according to a newly published University of Michigan study.

Researchers used three experiments—two real incidents and one fictional incident involving extremist attacks—to examine how empathy and responsibility within Muslim leaders' media-based responses affected [response](#) satisfaction of non-Muslim audiences.

Leaders in [minority groups](#), who must strategically fight for justice and equality without triggering bias or prejudice from the [dominant group](#), are frequently asked to publicly respond to transgressions—such as [terrorist attacks](#)—of fellow group members.

Despite the fact that such acts are perpetrated by individuals, people make inferences about the group as a whole, which can be problematic for Muslims who are often viewed as a threatening outgroup in the United States, said Daniel Lane, a doctoral student in the U-M Department of Communication Studies and the study's lead author.

"Muslim Americans are presented with the unique challenge of responding to the acts of individual extremists in ways that address the psychological needs of the majority group, without further damaging their own group's reputation or perpetuating perceptions of group culpability," he said.

They can express empathy to victims—a way to

highlight the peaceful nature of Islam—but that sometimes doesn't change the perceptions of non-Muslim Americans, said Muniba Saleem, assistant professor of communication studies and a faculty associate at U-M's Institute for Social Research.

In the first experiment, an online survey was done several weeks after Muslim extremists carried out a series of bombings in Brussels in 2016. A sample of 472 participants viewed an online news article—which noted the group claiming responsibility, ISIS—with a response about the attacks from a Muslim American leader. The response was manipulated in terms of empathy (empathy expressed vs. no empathy expressed) and responsibility (responsibility accepted vs. responsibility denied).

The findings indicated that expressing empathy and accepting responsibility increased satisfaction with the Muslim leader's response, motivated by genuine sympathy for victims. But by accepting responsibility and feelings of guilt, it could pose problems and [negative stereotypes](#) with later consequences, the researchers said.

The second experiment focused on the proximity to respondents—a shooting perpetrated by a Muslim American at an Orlando night club in 2016. The sample included 333 participants who disclosed how much trust they had in Muslim Americans.

Expressions of empathy led to more satisfactory and trustworthy responses but, again, statements accepting responsibility increased the perceptions that Muslims felt collectively guilt for the attack.

Finally, a fictional extremist attack purportedly carried out in Oslo, Norway, was highlighted in the third experiment, which used a sample of 397 people. Empathy indirectly led to more satisfactory

and trustworthy responses, in part mediated by a decrease in perceptions that Muslim leaders were motivated by external pressure, Lane said.

"These results demonstrate that by increasing perceptions of collective guilt, statements that accept responsibility can backfire, and increase the [perception](#) that Muslim Americans as a group are to blame for terrorist acts," he said.

Overall, the researchers—which also includes Masi Noor, a social psychologist at Keele University in England—say while expressing empathy for victims after an extremist attack may alleviate negative responses from non-Muslims, the effects pertaining to accepting or denying group responsibility are mixed.

The findings appeared in the April issue of the journal *Media Psychology*.

More information: Daniel S. Lane et al. Damned if you do, damned if you don't: Effects of empathy and responsibility in Muslim leaders' mediated responses to extremist attacks, *Media Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2019.1584570](https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2019.1584570)

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