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Damned if you do, damned if you don't: Effects of empathy and responsibility in Muslim leaders' mediated responses to extremist attacks

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ABSTRACT

Muslim American leaders are often called upon to publicly respond to violent attacks carried out by Muslim extremists. Yet it is unclear what types of responses are most likely to satisfy non-Muslim Americans and ultimately improve attitudes toward Muslim Americans as a group. In three experiments, we examined how expressions of *empathy* and *responsibility* within Muslim leaders' mediated responses to extremism affect response satisfaction. We did so immediately after real terrorism incidents carried out internationally (Study 1) and domestically (Study 2), as well as within a controlled fictional incident (Study 3). Across studies, expressing (vs. not expressing) empathy decreased the perception that the issued statement was motivated by external pressure, which was associated with (a) increased response satisfaction and trust in Muslim Americans and (b) decreased perceptions that Muslim Americans were collectively responsible for the incident. In contrast, accepting (vs. denying) responsibility increased the perception that the response was issued out of a sense of collective guilt, which, in Study 3, led to (a) decreased response satisfaction and trust in Muslims and (b) increased Muslim collective responsibility. These findings illustrate the perilous task facing group leaders who use the media to publicly respond to actions of extremist ingroup members.

"As we witness the rise of radical Islam all across the globe, and thousands of innocent non-Muslims are being terrorized for their faith, I can't help but wonder, where are the Muslim leaders?" (Fox News, Hannity, 8/12/14, as cited in Sandmeyer & Leung, 2014)

Muslim American leaders are often criticized for failing to publicly speak out against attacks perpetrated by Muslim extremists (e.g., Sandmeyer & Leung, 2014), despite evidence that such attacks have been widely condemned by the Muslim American community (Hashmi, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2009). Many prominent Muslim Americans have used the mass media to respond to

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extremist attacks perpetrated by individual Muslims (e.g., bombings in Brussels, Belgium, shootings in Orlando, Florida), to offer condolences to the victims, and to distance their faith from the actions of the perpetrators (see Hashmi, 2017). Yet, there is concern among some Muslim leaders that taking group responsibility for the acts of individual extremists only serves to advance the false narrative that all Muslims are responsible for terrorism (Sarsour, 2014). Indeed, 35% of respondents in a recent public opinion survey believe that there is at least some support for extremism among Muslim Americans (Pew Research Center, 2017a). Similarly, many Americans think that US Muslims are not doing enough to oppose extremism in their own communities (Cox & Jones, 2015), a sentiment that was echoed by prominent political candidates in the 2016 US presidential election (Mangla, 2016).

Leaders of minority groups are frequently called upon to publicly respond to the transgressions (e.g., terrorist attacks) of fellow group members, who deploy a group identity as a rationale for their personal actions (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). Though these acts are often perpetrated by individuals, the salience of their group identity leads people to make inferences about the group as a whole, particularly when that group is a minority (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003; von Sikorski, Schmuck, Matthes, & Binder, 2017). This is problematic for Muslims, who are already viewed as a threatening outgroup in the United States and throughout Western Europe (Kalkan, Layman, & Uslaner, 2009; Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2010). 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.

Accordingly, Muslim American leaders have routinely expressed empathy for the victims of extremist acts via the mass media. Such public statements have attempted to highlight the peaceful nature of Islam and demonstrate the Muslim American community's genuine care for victims of terrorism (Hashmi, 2017). However, the degree to which Muslim leaders accept group responsibility for extremist incidents or ideology in their public statements has varied. Some Muslim American organizations suggest that extremist attacks are a result of extreme ideology, for which the Muslim American community must take some responsibility (e.g., Gjelten, 2015); others explicitly deny group responsibility and insist that extremists do not represent Islam or Muslims (Hashmi, 2017). Despite the prevalence of these mediated statements, there is little empirical work examining how they are perceived by the non-Muslim American majority. This is surprising, given that expressions of empathy and responsibility are two key theoretical dimensions of productive intergroup communication (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008) and that perceptions of Muslim Americans are profoundly influenced by mass media portrayals (Nisbet, Ostman, & Shanahan, 2009; Saleem, Yang, & Ramasubramanian, 2016).

This article works to build this area of the literature, by experimentally testing how Muslim leaders' mediated responses to acts of violent extremism influence the attitudes of non-Muslim American audiences. Across three studies, we examined how expressions of empathy and responsibility within such statements affected perceptions of the speaker and ultimately influenced the efficacy of the message. These studies add to previous research in at least three ways. First, we examined intergroup relations between Muslim and non-Muslim Americans, which have ongoing implications for American society. Given the powerful role that the media plays in shaping public attitudes toward Muslim Americans (Saleem et al., 2016), it is important to clarify what strategies Muslim leaders might use to positively frame negative news about their group and to improve relations with their fellow Americans. Second, despite demands for Muslims to accept some group responsibility for extremist acts, we found evidence that by accepting responsibility, Muslim leaders may increase the perception that they are acting out of a sense of collective guilt and ultimately increase the extent to which their group is blamed for acts of extremism. This poses a dilemma for Muslim leaders who may face negative consequences whether they accept or deny responsibility for extremism. Finally, we examined these effects immediately after real international and domestic terrorist attacks, when the events were still psychologically salient, as well as within a fictional event that allowed for better control of confounding factors. By studying diverse contexts, we make both theoretical and practical contributions to the study of this intergroup phenomenon.

Framing the Muslim American response to extremism

Framing theory has been used to explain how media representations of minorities influence the attitudes and behaviors of the public (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Iyengar, 1990). Frames present audiences with specific versions of social reality that can determine which attributes of groups become salient (Scheufele, 1999). Work on framing of Muslims in the media has tended to focus either on the how journalists and elites build frames (e.g., Alsultany, 2012) or on how individuals psychologically process frames (e.g., Nisbet et al., 2009). Less attention has been paid to how Muslim leaders might positively influence the framing of their group and subsequently make specific features of news coverage salient for audiences—a process Scheufele (1999) termed "frame setting"(p. 116)

The possibility that Muslims might be able to engage in frame setting is significant, given that representations of Muslims in American media are largely negative (Alsultany, 2012; Powell, 2011). For example, extremist acts perpetrated by Muslims are likely to receive 357% more media coverage than acts perpetrated by non-Muslims (Kearns, Betus, & Lemieux, 2017). This is troublesome, as exposure to negative portrayls of Muslims can increase prejudice and support for public policies harming Muslims (Nisbet et al.,

2009; Saleem, Prot, Anderson, & Lemieux, 2017; Saleem et al., 2016). In particular, news coverage that fails to differentiate between extermist acts perpatrated by individual Muslims and Muslims as a group can cultivate anti-Muslim attitudes (von Sikorski et al., 2017). Thus, Muslims have an incentive to seek frame setting strategies that satisfy non-Muslims.

Although there is no evidence that the Muslim American community wields substantial influence over the way it is portrayed in the media, journalists, politicians, and the public clearly demand that it respond to incidences of violent extremism. Journalists frequently reach out to organizations like the Council on American-Islamic Relations for responses after attacks (Hashmi, 2017), providing leaders with an opportunity to influence how their group's role in such incidents is framed. The emotions and attitudes that Muslim leaders express within mediated responses to extremism have the potential to make favorable impressions of their group more accessible in the minds of the audience and ultimately increase positive attitudes (Scheufele, 1999). The question for Muslim leaders then becomes: What kind of responses are most likely to satisfy non-Muslim Americans, without reinforcing negative attitudes toward Muslim Americans as a group?

Crafting satisfactory responses: expressions of empathy and responsibility

Previous research has typically conceptualized statements made in the wake of transgressions as apologies, which are aimed at improving public opinion of a group or organization (e.g., Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Apologies are frequently issued through the mass media, as in the cases of corporations addressing public anger after a crisis (Lee & Chung, 2012) or world leaders using televised speeches to make amends for historical wrongdoing (Edwards, 2010). Our study does not examine apologies per se, but this literature offers clues to which qualities contribute to satisfactory responses to extremism.

Research has shown that attitudes toward Muslims are shaped by their status as a threatening cultural outgroup (Kalkan et al., 2009; Velasco González et al., 2010). Therefore, Muslim American responses to extremism are likely to be evaluated by non-Muslims in intergroup terms. Previous research has indicated that intergroup reconciliation depends upon the ability of groups in conflict to communicate two sentiments: (a) empathy for the outgroup and (b) acceptance of responsibility for the transgression (Lee & Chung, 2012; Leonard, Mackie, & Smith, 2011; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation argues that conflict leaves groups' identities impaired. Successful reconciliation depends upon each party addressing the socioemotional needs of the other (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). For victims, conflict leads to a loss of perceived control and power. The victimized group desires the rival group

to accept responsibility for the transgression, to restore their sense of power. In contrast, perpetrators experience a threat to their moral image and are motivated to restore that image. By expressing empathy for the perpetrator regarding the circumstances under which the transgression occurred, victims can help restore the perpetrator's moral image (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). Accordingly, we next review literature on both expression of empathy and acceptance of responsibility.

Expressions of empathy

Empathy is the cognitive or affective experience of apprehending another person's mental or emotional state (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In intergroup conflict, empathy often serves to acknowledge the pain and suffering experienced by the rival group (Batson & Ahmad, 2009). By expressing empathy for victims of a transgression, perpetrating groups may seek to demonstrate their moral rectitude (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). As a result, expressions of empathy often lead to forgiveness and increased willingness to reconcile (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). Empathetic expressions can also serve to humanize rival groups (Gubler, Halperin, & Hirschberger, 2015). This possibility may be particularly important for Muslims Americans, who are often dehumanized by their fellow Americans (Kteily, Hodson, & Bruneau, 2016). In sum, Muslim leaders' empathy for the victims of extremism may be especially effective in improving non-Muslims' attitudes in the wake of an attack. Thus, we expect that statements in which Muslim leaders express empathy for the victims of extremist attacks will be perceived as *more* satisfactory than non-empathetic statements (H1).

Acceptance of responsibility

The ability of groups to accept responsibility for wrongdoing has also been identified as a core component of reconciliation. In fact, Tavuchis (1991) argued that accepting blame is the essence of an intergroup apology, because it places an agreed-upon account of the conflict into the public record. As we have noted, public acceptance of responsibility from the perpetrating group is necessary to restore the victimized group's sense of power (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Accepting responsibility can not only improve attitudes toward the transgressor (Bradford & Garrett, 1995), but can also increases willingness to forgive on both sides (Čehajić-Clancy, Effron, Halperin, Liberman, & Ross, 2011; Darby & Schlenker, 1989).

Previous studies have only tested the effect of accepting responsibility in comparison to omitting responsibility (i.e., saying nothing regarding who is responsible; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). However, Muslim leaders often explicitly deny responsibility and distance Islam and Muslims from acts of terrorism (Hashmi, 2017). Research on news differentiation suggests that news stories that differentiate between the extremist behavior of an

individual and the behavior of their group can reduce negative attitudes toward that group (von Sikorski et al., 2017). Muslim leaders can achieve this differentiation by explicitly denying group responsibility for attacks carried about by Muslim extremists. Denying responsibility in these cases is also strategic for Muslims, as it maintains their group's positive distinctiveness (Brewer, 1999).

Despite the theoretical value of denying responsibility, such denials have often been viewed unfavorably by those in the non-Muslim majority, who demand a public response in the aftermath of extremist attacks. For example, former President Barack Obama argued that Muslims "have a responsibility to reject extremist ideologies that are trying to penetrate within Muslim communities" (Salinas, 2016). The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation suggests that denials of responsibility may do little to address the socioemotional needs of non-Muslims (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Thus, we expect that statements from Muslim leaders accepting responsibility for extremist attacks will be perceived as more satisfactory than statements denying responsibility (H2).

The mediating role of perceived motivations

What psychological mechanisms might facilitate the effects of expressions of empathy and responsibility hypothesized here? Based on past research, we expect that perceptions of Muslim leaders' motivations for responding to extremism will ultimately influence satisfaction with the response itself (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Perceptions of motivations underlying reconciliation efforts are especially critical in intergroup scenarios, as individuals are more likely to be threatened by, and distrust, outgroup members (Brewer, 1999). Moreover, unlike interpersonal apologies, intergroup apologies are often made in a public medium, which can further add to suspicions that they have simply been made to alleviate public pressure (Hewstone et al., 2004). Unless groups can establish a basic level of trust that all parties are acting in good faith, reconciliation may be unlikely (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). In this context, not only is there a lack of trust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Lipka, 2015), but Muslim leaders' responses after extremist attacks are often met with cynicism (e.g., Feldman, 2015; Sandmeyer & Leung, 2014). The effectiveness of such statements may be dependent upon their ability to positively influence perceptions of underlying motivations (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Based on previous research, we consider three specific motivations that may mediate the effects of empathy and responsibility on response satisfaction.

Motivated by genuine sympathy

Research suggests that groups can be suspicious of the authenticity of apologies made by outgroups (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). It is, therefore, essential that transgressing outgroups express sentiments that are perceived as genuinely sympathetic to the experiences of victimized groups (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). To that end, expressions of empathy may be particularly helpful in convincing non-Muslims that Muslim leaders are, in fact, motivated by genuine sympathy. We note that, although empathy and sympathy are conceptually overlapping, whether or not expression of empathy can lead individuals to perceive the motivation behind such expression as genuinely sympathetic is an empirical question.[1] Theoretically, Muslim American leaders' acknowledgement of the suffering of victims should not only serve to humanize their collective ingroup (Gubler et al., 2015), but also increase the common shared victimhood status with fellow non-Muslim Americans (Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013). This, in turn, is likely to add to the perception that leaders are speaking out because they are genuinely sympathetic to the plight of the victims as fellow human beings. Thus, we expect that empathetic statements from Muslim leaders are more likely to be perceived as motivated by genuine sympathy and care for the victims than nonempathetic statements (H3).

On the other hand, denying responsibility can destabilize emotional harmony (L'Abate, 2011) and may signal a lack of genuine feeling for the victim. Muslim leaders who explicitly deny collective responsibly for an attack may be perceived as more concerned about the implications for their own group than for the victims of the attack. This cynical perspective is especially likely, given the distrust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Lipka, 2015). We therefore hypothesize that statements denying responsibility are less likely to be perceived as motivated by genuine sympathy than statements accepting responsibility (H4).

Ultimately, the perception that a statement is motivated by genuine sympathy is likely to influence participants' overall satisfaction with the response. This is consistent with research showing that for an apology to be effective, it must be perceived as being motivated by genuine concern and sympathy (Blatz & Philpot, 2010). Similarly, apologies from groups that are viewed as incapable of expressing genuine sympathy tend to be ineffective (Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012). Accordingly, we expect that the more a Muslim leader's response to extremism is perceived as motived by genuine sympathy for the victims, the more satisfactory it will be perceived (H5).

Motivated by external pressure

As mentioned, sometimes apologies are perceived to be a group's response to external pressure or threat to their public image (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Such attributions are especially likely to be made

of groups who suffer from poor reputations and whose apologies, therefore, prove less satisfactory (Darby & Schlenker, 1989). This is relevant to Muslims, who are viewed by many Americans as violent, religiously extreme, and incapable of expressing uniquely human emotions (Pew Research Center, 2017b; Wohl et al., 2012). Given this poor reputation, Muslim leaders may be viewed as self-serving in their efforts to respond to acts of extremism, unless they explicitly signal otherwise. Expressing empathy may be one way in which Muslim leaders can counteract their group's existing poor reputation. Accordingly, we examine the hypothesis that for Muslim leaders responding to extremism, empathetic statements are less likely to be perceived as motivated by external pressure than nonempathetic statements (H6). Conversely, denying responsibility can cultivate the perception that the apologizer is being deceitful (Bradford & Garrett, 1995) and self-interested (e.g., Benoit, 1995). We therefore expect that statements denying responsibility are more likely to be perceived as motivated by external pressure than statements accepting responsibility (H7).

Generally, apologies that appear to be insincere or issued for instrumental reasons are received less favorably and result in less conciliatory behavior (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). If the goal of an apology is to convince the victim that the perpetrator genuinely desires to meet their socioemotional needs (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), perceptions of ulterior motives are likely to be undermining. Thus, we hypothesize that the more a Muslim leader's response to extremism is perceived as motivated by external pressure, the less satisfactory it will be perceived (H8).

Motivated by collective guilt

Finally, it is important to consider that by issuing a response to an extremist incident, Muslim leaders may be perceived to be acting out of a sense of collective guilt. Indeed, research finds that acceptance of responsibility for a transgression can increase perceptions of collective guilt (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). Even individuals who are not directly responsible for a transgression can be perceived as "guilty by association" simply for sharing ingroup membership with the transgressor (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998, p. 884). Thus, we expect that statements accepting responsibility for an extremist attack will be more likely to be perceived as motivated by collective guilt than those denying responsibility (H9). It is unclear from the literature how expressions of empathy might influence perceptions of collective guilt. Therefore, we pose a research question: Are empathetic statements more likely to be perceived as motivated by collective guilt than non-empathetic statements (RQ1)?

Although groups who experience collective guilt may be more likely to apologize (McGarty et al., 2005), it is unclear whether being perceived as guilty benefits groups in the long run (Mackie & Smith, 2004). Perceptions of

collective guilt may increase suspicion that a group is, in fact, guilty. Muslims are already viewed as aggressive and religiously extreme by many Americans and are depicted as such in American media (Lipka, 2015; Saleem et al., 2017). Consequently, Muslim leaders may be especially likely to be viewed as guilty by association and held responsible for violent attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam. Thus, we expect that the more a Muslim leader's response is perceived as motived by collective guilt, the less satisfactory it will be perceived (H10).

Theoretical model

Thus far, we have hypothesized relationships between expressions of empathy and responsibility in a Muslim leader's statement and (a) perceived motivations for issuing the statement and (b) satisfaction with the statement. Putting these predictions together, we propose a theoretical mediation model (Figure A1; Supplemental Appendix A). We hypothesize that the relationships between empathy and responsibility, and response satisfaction will be mediated by perceptions that the response is motivated by (a) genuine sympathy for the victims (H11), (b) external pressure (H12), or (c) collective guilt (H13). Because these perceived motivations are likely to operate simultaneously, we propose a parallel mediation model to test their unique mediating effects.

Study 1 overview

The reviewed literature suggests that Muslim leaders have the potential to favorably influence the framing of their group in the media by responding to acts of violent extremism in a way that addresses the socioemotional needs of the non-Muslim public (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). To test the predictions outlined herein, we conducted an online experiment several weeks after Muslim extremists carried out a series of bombings in Brussels Belgium on March 22, 2016. We selected this incident as a high-profile example of violent extremism, which received international news coverage and elicited a wide array of responses from the Muslim American community (Hashmi, 2017). Participants viewed an online news article, which contained a response to the recent attacks from a Muslim American leader. By manipulating whether the leader's statement expressed empathy versus no empathy and accepted versus denied responsibility, we were able to test the effects of response type within our proposed model.

Study 1 method

Participants

Four-hundred-and-ninety-one Americans were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk for a brief survey regarding their opinions of recent global and national events. Participants who either answered an attention check question incorrectly, identified as Muslim, or who provided incomplete answers were removed from the sample (*n*s = 10, 3, 6 respectively), resulting in a final sample of 472[2] (M_{age}, 38.26, SD_{age} = 11.91; 54.03% Male). The majority of the sample self-identified as White (79.45%) and Christian (47.25%). See Table A1 (Supplemental Appendix A) for full demographic characteristics. On a seven-point scale range from 1 (*strongly liberal*) to 7 (*strongly conservative*), participants were, on average, slightly liberal (M = 3.32, SD = 1.84).

Experimental manipulation

After completing the aforementioned measures, participants viewed one of four versions of an online news article, which provided a brief description of two suicide bombings at an airport and in a subway station in Brussels, Belgium (adapted from Sanchez, 2015). The date and location of the incident was provided, along with the name of the group claiming responsibility (ISIS). The article also featured a statement made by a Muslim American leader at a news conference. This statement was the same across conditions, except for a paragraph that was manipulated to vary the Muslim leader's expression of empathy (empathy expressed vs. no empathy expressed) and acceptance of responsibility (responsibility accepted vs. responsibility denied). The experimentally manipulated text was adapted from Nadler and Liviatan (2006) (see Supplemental Appendix B).

Post-experimental measures

After viewing the experimentally manipulated news article, participants answered questions assessing their perceptions of the Muslim leader's response, the motivations of the leader for issuing the response and their overall satisfaction with the response. All items used a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Perceived empathy and responsibility

For manipulation checks, participants rated the extent to which the speaker in the featured news article (a) "expressed empathy toward the victims," (b) "felt the suffering of the victims," and (c) "accepted responsibility for the suffering of the victims" (adapted from Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). The first two items assessed perceived empathy, M = 3.98, SD = .87, r = .68, and the third item was used to assess perceived responsibility, M = 2.63, SD = 1.31.

Response motivations

Five items assessed participants' perceptions of the Muslim leader's motivations for issuing the response (adapted from Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Two items—(a) "because of sympathy for the victims" and (b) "to support the victims"—were combined into a mean index of *motivated by genuine sympathy*, $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.03$, $r = .85$. Two items—(a) "to avoid criticism from other groups" and (b) "due to concern for public image"—were combined into an index of *motivated by external pressure*, $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.10$, $r = .77$. Finally, a single item—"because of guilt felt by this community"—was used to assess *motivated by collective guilt*, $M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.13$.[3]

Response satisfaction

Response satisfaction was assessed by asking participants if the statement was (a) "an adequate response to the incident" and (b) "not a good enough response to the incident" (reverse coded; adapted from Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Items were combined into a mean index of response satisfaction, $M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.08$, $r = .78$.

Study 1 results and discussion

Main analyses[4]

Zero-order correlations between variables (Table A2)[5] and means for all outcome variables by condition (Table A3) are provided in Supplemental Appendix A. Preliminary analyses found that the interaction between empathy and responsibility manipulations was nonsignificant for all outcomes. Subsequent analyses omitted the interaction term.

Manipulation checks

Manipulation of empathy successfully affected perceptions of empathy ($M_{empathy} = 4.15$,$SD = .79$, $M_{no\ empathy} = 3.82$,$SD = .92$), $F(1, 469) = 17.48$, $p = .0001$, $\eta 2 = .04$, partial $\eta 2 = .04$, and manipulation of responsibility successfully affected perceptions of responsibility ($M_{resp.\ accepted} = 3.29$,$SD = 1.28$, $M_{resp.\ denied} = 1.99$,$SD = .98$), $F(1, 469) = 152.64$, $p = .0001$, $\eta 2 = .25$, partial $\eta 2 = .25$.

Response satisfaction

Manipulations of both empathy and responsibility significantly affected response satisfaction, Fs$(1, 469) = 7.13$; 4.28, ps $= .01$;$.04$, $\eta 2$s $= .01$, partial $\eta 2$s $= .01$, supporting H1 and H2. Empathetic statements were rated more satisfactory ($M = 3.77$,$SD = 1.01$) than nonempathetic statements ($M = 3.51$,$SD = 1.13$). Similarly, statements accepting responsibility were rated more satisfactory ($M = 3.74$,$SD = 1.05$) than those denying responsibility ($M = 3.54$,$SD = 1.11$).

Motivated by genuine sympathy

The perception that the response was motivated by genuine sympathy for the victims was significantly affected by manipulations of both empathy and responsibility, *F*s(1, 469) = 5.05; 7.51, *p*s = .03; .001, *η2*s = .01;.02, partial *η2*s = .01;.02, supporting H3 and H4. Empathetic statements were perceived as more genuine (*M* = 3.86,*SD* = 1.03) than nonempathetic statements (*M* = 3.65,*SD* = 1.02). Similarly, statements accepting responsibility were perceived as more genuine (*M* = 3.88,*SD* = .93) than those denying responsibility (*M* = 3.63,*SD* = 1.10).

Motivated by external pressure

Manipulations of both empathy and responsibility significantly affected perceptions that the message was motivated by external pressure, *F*s(1, 469) = 6.00; 4.50, *p*s = .01;.03, *η2*s = .01, partial *η2*s = .01, supporting H6 and H7. Specifically, nonempathetic statements were perceived as being motivated by external pressure (*M* = 3.64,*SD* = 1.06), more so than empathetic statements (*M* = 3.40,*SD* = 1.14). Statements denying responsibility were perceived as motivated by external pressure (*M* = 3.63,*SD* = 1.12) more so than statements accepting responsibility (*M* = 3.41,*SD* = 1.08).

Motivated by collective guilt

Manipulation of responsibility, but not of empathy, significantly influenced perceptions of guilt, *F*(1, 469) = 17.26, *p* = .0001, *η2* = .04, partial *η2* = .04. Specifically, acceptance of responsibility led to greater perceptions that the response was motivated by collective guilt (*M* = 3.18,*SD* = 1.06) compared to denial of responsibility (*M* = 2.75,*SD* = 1.15). These findings support H9, but show no effect of empathy on collective guilt motivations (RQ1).

Mediation analyses

Finally, we examined the possibility that expressions of empathy and responsibility might indirectly affect response satisfaction through the influence of the three perceived motivations (genuine sympathy, external pressure, and collective guilt). A parallel mediation analysis allowed us to calculate the indirect effects of empathy and responsibility through each mediator while controlling for the other mediators. This analytic strategy is recommended when dealing with highly correlated mediators (Hayes, 2013). All causal inferences we draw based upon mediation analyses rely first and foremost on the theoretical relationships we have outlined here (see Hayes, 2013 for a detailed discussion of mediation analysis). Mediation analyses were conducted using the R package *mediation*, which estimates average causal mediation effects (indirect effects) and nonparametric bootstrapped 95%

confidence intervals (CI), using ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression models (Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai, 2014).

To test the parallel mediation model, experimental condition was entered as two dummy variables; empathy manipulation (reference = no empathy expressed) and responsibility manipulation (reference = responsibility denied) and specified as the independent variable.[6] The three motivation variables were specified as mediators; response satisfaction was specified as the dependent variable. Results reported in the following are derived from OLS path analyses and 95% CI using 5,000 bootstrapped samples.[7]

Results of path analyses are summarized in Figure 1. Expressing (vs. not expressing) empathy had a significant positive indirect effect on response satisfaction through genuine motives (*PE* = .122, 95% CI [.016, .230])[8] and external motives (*PE* = .044, 95% CI [.008, .091]), but not through collective guilt motives (*PE* = −.001, 95% CI [−.011, .008]). Accepting (vs. denying) responsibility also had a significant positive indirect effect on response satisfaction through genuine motives (*PE* = .148, 95% CI [.040, .263]) and external motives (*PE* = .038, 95% CI [.003, .083]), but not through collective guilt motives (*PE* = −.005, 95% CI [−.037, .024]).

These findings indicate that both expressing empathy and accepting responsibility independently increased satisfaction with the Muslim leaders' response by increasing the perception that the response was motivated by genuine sympathy for the victims and decreasing the perception that the response was motivated by external pressure, thereby providing support for H5, H8, H11, and H12. These results suggest that, from the perspective of Muslim leaders, there are advantages to expressing empathy (vs. not expressing empathy) and accepting responsibility (vs. denying responsibility).

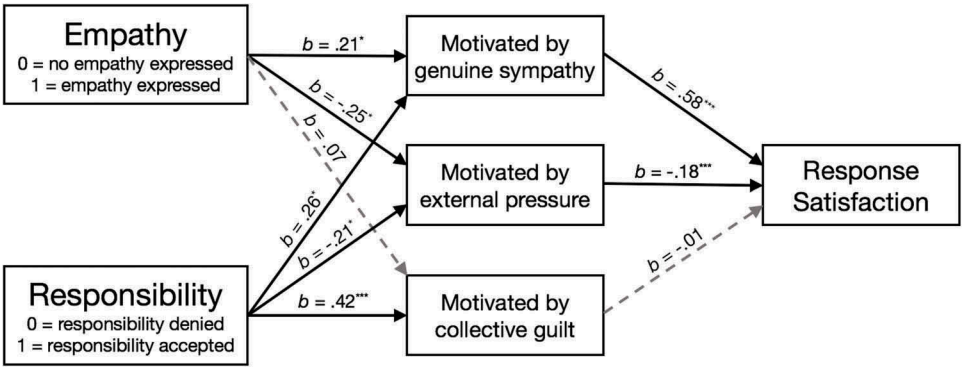


Figure 1. Study 1 path analyses.
Note. Coefficients are unstandardized beta coefficients. $n = 472$.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

It is important to note that there was a positive effect of accepting responsibility on perceived collective guilt motives. Despite this finding, there was ultimately no indirect influence of the responsibility manipulation on response satisfaction through the collective guilt motivation (H10 & H13 not supported). Although we did not find evidence that the perception of collective guilt functioned as a mediator (as predicted), our results do suggest a potential downside to accepting responsibility. It is possible that by increasing the perception that their group felt guilty, Muslim leaders could have activated negative stereotypes with downstream consequences. It is important to note that Study 1 examined an extremist attack carried out by non-American Muslims outside of the United States. Study 2 attempted to test the same set of relationships in a domestic context, in order to examine the replicability and generalizability of these findings.

Overview of study 2

Study 1 provided evidence that expressing empathy and accepting responsibility are two strategies Muslim leaders may employ to more effectively respond to acts of terrorism perpetrated by Muslim extremists. Study 2 sought to extend these results in two ways. First, Study 2 examined the same set of relationships in a domestic context to determine if the location of the incident, due to its proximity to the respondents, yielded different effects. An identical experimental paradigm was used, except the target incident was a shooting perpetrated by a Muslim American at a night club in Orlando, Florida in 2016 (see Supplemental Appendix A for stimuli detail).

Second, in Study 2 we moved beyond assessing response satisfaction to determine if the mediated statement affected the extent to which participants trust Muslims as a group. Trust between groups is one of the fundamental building blocks of positive intergroup relations (Brewer, 1999). Research suggests that for an apology to improve relations, the victimized group needs to trust that the apology is an authentic reflection of the outgroup's attitudes (Blatz & Philpot, 2010). Given that Muslims are viewed negatively by a large portion of the American public (Lipka, 2015), an important goal of responses to extremism should be to promote the perception that Muslims as a collective group are trustworthy. Theoretically, the same types of responses that led to higher response satisfaction in Study 1 should increase trust in Muslim leaders in Study 2. Yet given that existing research offers no firm basis for making such predictions, we pose the following research question: Is there an indirect effect of expressions of empathy and responsibility on trust in Muslim leaders, through the three perceived motivations (RQ2)?

Methods

Participants

Three-hundred-and-forty-five Americans were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants who either answered an attention check question incorrectly, or identified as Muslim were removed from the sample (*n*s = 9 & 3 respectively), resulting in a final sample of 333 (M_{age}, 39.75, SD_{age} = 13.02; 49.25% men). This sample did not significantly differ from the sample used in Study 1 in terms of ethnicity, religious affiliation, or political identification (all *p*s > .2).[9]

Measures

The same measures from Study 1 were used, including perceived speaker empathy (M = 4.10, SD = .86, r = .71), perceived speaker responsibility (M = 2.54, SD = 1.32), motivated by genuine sympathy (M = 3.88, SD = .99, r = .90), motivated by external pressure (M = 3.48, SD = 1.07, r = .70), motivated by collective guilt (M = 2.94, SD = 1.16), and response satisfaction (M = 3.82, SD = 1.02, r = .78).

In addition, participants' trust in Muslims was assessed using three items measured on the same 5-point scale: (a) "I trust that the Muslim American community is feeling the emotions they expressed;" (b) "I believe that the Muslim American community feels what they say they are feeling;" and (c) "I am skeptical that the Muslim American community is feeling what they say they are feeling about this incident" (reverse-coded). All items were combined into a mean-index of *trust in Muslims* (M = 3.76, SD = 1.01, Cronbach's α = .93)

Study 2 results and discussion

Main analysis[4]

See Supplemental Appendix A for zero-order correlations between variables (Table A4) and means for all outcome variables by condition (Table A5).

Manipulation checks

Manipulation of empathy successfully affected ratings of empathy expressed ($M_{empathy}$ = 4.31,SD = .94, $M_{no\ empathy}$ = 3.89,SD = .71), F(1, 330) = 22.33, p = .0001, $\eta 2$ = 0.06, partial $\eta 2$ = 0.06, and manipulation of responsibility successfully affected ratings of responsibility expressed ($M_{resp\ accepted}$ = 3.27,SD = .89 $M_{resp\ denied}$ = 1.83,SD = 1.29), F(1, 330) = 144.4, p = .0001, $\eta 2$ = .3, partial $\eta 2$ = .3.

Response satisfaction and trust in Muslims

Neither response satisfaction nor trust in Muslims were significantly affected by manipulations of either empathy or responsibility, $Fs_{Response\ Satisfaction}(1, 330) = 2.87; .25, ps = .09;.62, \eta 2s = .01;0$, partial $\eta 2s = .01;0$, $Fs_{Trust\ in\ Muslims}(1, 330) = 2.83; .93, ps = .09;.33, \eta 2s = .01;0$, partial $\eta 2s = .01;0$ (H1, H2 not supported).

Motivated by genuine sympathy

Perceptions of the response being motivated by genuine sympathy were significantly affected by manipulation of empathy, $F(1, 330) = 7.39\ p = .01, \eta 2 = .02$, partial $\eta 2 = .02$, but not responsibility, $F(1, 330) = .83, p = 0.36$, supporting H3, but not H4. Empathetic statements were perceived as more genuine ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.00$) than non-empathetic statements ($M = 3.74$, $SD = .96$).

Motivated by external pressure

The perception that the message was motivated by external pressure was significantly affected by manipulation of empathy, $F(1, 330) = 5.87, p = .02$, $\eta 2 = .02$, partial $\eta 2 = .02$, but not by manipulation of responsibility, $F(1, 330) = .39, p = .53$, partial $\eta 2 = 0$, supporting H6, but not H7. Nonempathetic statements were perceived as being motivated by external pressure ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.13$), more so than empathetic statements ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .89$).

Motivated by collective guilt

The perception that the message was motivated by collective guilt was significantly affected by manipulations of both empathy and responsibility, $Fs(1, 330) = 5.09; 10.1, ps = .02; .002, \eta 2 = .02; .03$, partial $\eta 2 = .01; .03$, supporting H9 and answering RQ1. Nonempathetic statements led to greater perceptions of collective guilt ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.18$) than empathetic statements ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.12$). Statements accepting responsibility led to greater perceptions of collective guilt ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.20$) than those denying responsibility ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.08$).

Mediation analyses[10]

Results of path analyses for all outcomes are summarized in Figure 2.

Response satisfaction

Expressing (vs. not expressing) empathy led to a significant positive indirect effect on response satisfaction through genuine sympathy motives ($PE = .184$, 95% CI [.047, .326]), but not through external pressure motives ($PE = .019$, 95% CI [−.004, .060]), or collective guilt motives ($PE = .020$, 95% CI [−.003, .059]). There was no indirect effect of the responsibility manipulation on response satisfaction through any of the three hypothesized mediators (H11, H12 and H13).

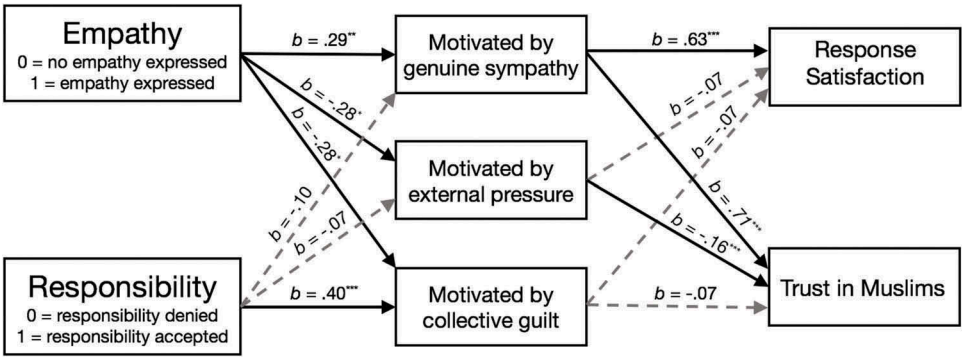


Figure 2. Study 2 path analyses.
Note. Coefficients are unstandardized beta coefficients. $N = 333$.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Trust in Muslims

Expressing (vs. not expressing) empathy led to a significant positive indirect effect on trust in Muslims through genuine sympathy motives (*PE* = .209, 95% CI [.065, .363], CI do not cross zero), and external pressure motives (*PE* = .045, 95% CI [.007, .094]), but not collective guilt motives (*PE* = .005, 95% CI [−.014, .030], CI cross zero). There was no indirect effect of the responsibility manipulation on trust in Muslims through any of the three hypothesized mediators (RQ2).

In sum, the results of Study 2 confirm that expression of empathy can ultimately lead to more satisfactory and trustworthy responses. Consistent with Study 1, the effect of empathy on response satisfaction occurred indirectly by increasing the perception that the response was motivated by genuine sympathy for the victims. However, unlike in Study 1, external pressure motives did not play a mediating role for response satisfaction. The effect of empathy on trust in Muslims occurred indirectly by both increasing perceptions of genuine sympathy and by decreasing perceptions of external pressure.

In terms of our manipulation of responsibility, Study 2 largely failed to find the same effects as those found in Study 1. Accepting responsibility did not influence perceptions that the response was motivated by genuine sympathy or external pressure. However, consistent with Study 1, accepting responsibility increased perceptions that the response was motivated by collective guilt. These findings provide further evidence that by accepting responsibility, leaders may be perpetuating the perception that their group is guilty, while doing little to satisfy the socioemotional needs of non-Muslim Americans.

Taken together, the results of Study 1 and 2 suggest that the effects under study are quite context dependent. This is unsurprising, given that research on

intergroup apologies has found that the success of an apology varies widely based on characteristics of the offense in question and relationships between and within groups (Blatz & Philpot, 2010). The nature of the extremist attack, profile of the perpetrator and the tone of media coverage are likely significant factors that shape how participants in our studies processed these statements. For example, the Brussels attacks examined in Study 1 were perpetrated by a group of Belgian nationals, but the Orlando shooting was carried out by a lone American citizen. Similarly, each attack had its own media narrative, which may have biased our participants' perceptions of the incident prior to the studies. Given the complexity of these contextual differences, Study 3 attempted to examine the effect of Muslim leaders' responses to extremism in a more tightly controlled experimental setting.

Overview of study 3

There were two main goals of Study 3. First, to resolve the inconsistencies observed between Studies 1 and 2, we tested our hypotheses in an artificial context that would eliminate potential confounds associated with event familiarity, salience, and media coverage. Participants read about a fictional extremist attack purportedly carried out in Oslo Norway, which was selected for its similarity to the location used in Study 1 (Brussels, Belgium). The description of this attack was closely modeled on the Brussels attack featured in Study 1 (see Supplemental Appendix B). We further addressed limitations associated with sample representativeness by recruiting participants from Research Now and ensuring equal participation across political orientation. The second goal was to test whether expressions of empathy and responsibility ultimately influence the extent to which Muslim Americans as a group are held responsible for individual acts of extremism. In some sense, the most proximal purpose of Muslim leaders' responses to extremism is to differentiate the actions of individual group members from the actions of the group (von Sikorski et al., 2017). The degree to which non-Muslim participants hold Muslims collectively responsible for acts of terrorism reflects the extent of this differentiation. How responsibility is assigned for terrorism has important consequences for Muslim Americans. The perception that Muslims are collectively responsible for extremism is positively associated with support for harsher civil restrictions for Muslim Americans (Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006). Therefore, in Study 3 we asked: Is there an indirect effect of expressions of empathy and responsibility on attributions of Muslim group responsibility, through the three perceived motivations (RQ3)?

Methods

Participants

Four-hundred-and-forty-six Americans were recruited by Research Now. Quotas were set for political affiliation to ensure equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans. Participants who answered an attention check question incorrectly, identified as Muslim or provided incomplete responses were removed from the sample (*n*s = 38, 1 & 10 respectively), resulting in a final sample of 397 (M_{age}, 59.49, SD_{age} = 12.68; 50.88% Male). The sample was majority White (91.44%) and Christian (70.78%). Participants were, on average, slightly conservative (M = 4.26, SD = 1.95).8

Measures

The same measures from previous studies were used, including perceived speaker empathy (M = 3.88, SD = .91, r = .77), perceived speaker responsibility (M = 2.53, SD = 1.12), motivated by genuine sympathy (M = 3.79, SD = .93, r = .78), motivated by external pressure (M = 3.53, SD = .92, r = .64), motivated by collective guilt (M = 2.84, SD = 1.08), response satisfaction (M = 3.47, SD = 1.01, r = .72), and trust in Muslims (M = 3.57, SD = .98, α = .91).

Attribution of responsibility

Perceptions that all Muslim Americans were responsible for the Oslo attacks was measured on a slider scale (anchored at 50), from 0 (*not at all responsible*) to 100 (*completely responsible; M* = 25.67, *SD* = 26.51)

Study 3 results and discussion

Main analysis[4]

See Supplemental Appendix A for zero-order correlations between variables (Table A6) and means for all outcome variables by condition (Table A7).

Manipulation checks

Manipulation of empathy successfully affected perceptions of empathy expressed ($M_{empathy}$ = 4.01, SD = .93, $M_{no\ empathy}$ = 3.76, SD = .89), F(1, 394) = 7.96, p = .005, $\eta 2$ = .02, partial $\eta 2$ = .02, and manipulation of responsibility successfully affected perceptions of responsibility expressed ($M_{resp.\ accepted}$ = 2.95, SD = .98 $M_{resp.\ denied}$ = 2.10, SD = 1.09), F(1, 394) = 66.25, p = .0001, $\eta 2$ = .14, partial $\eta 2$ = .14.

Response satisfaction

Response satisfaction was significantly affected by manipulation of empathy, $F(1, 394) = 9.57$, $p = .002$, $\eta 2 = .02$, partial $\eta 2 = .02$, but not manipulation of responsibility, $F(1, 394) = .01$, $p = .92$ (H1 & H2). Empathetic statements were more satisfactory ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.00$) than nonempathetic statements ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.00$) (H1 & H2).

Trust

Trust in Muslim leaders was significantly affected by manipulation of empathy, $F(1, 394) = 3.92$, $p = .05$, $\eta 2 = .01$, partial $\eta 2 = .01$, but not responsibility, $F(1, 394) = .01$, $p = .93$ (H15). Empathetic statements led to greater trust in Muslims ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .97$), compared to nonempathetic statements ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .98$) (RQ1).

Muslim Americans are responsible

Perceptions that all Muslim Americans were responsible for the Oslo attacks were not significantly affected by manipulations of either empathy or responsibility, $Fs(1,391) = .15$, $ps > .70$ (RQ2).

Motivated by genuine sympathy

Perceptions that the response was motivated by genuine sympathy for the victims were not significantly affected by manipulations of empathy or responsibility, $Fs(1, 394) = 1.96$; .34 $ps = .16$; .56 (H3 & H4).

Motivated by external pressure

Perceptions that the message was motivated by external pressure were significantly affected by manipulation of empathy, $F(1, 394) = 5.82$, $p = .02$, $\eta 2 = .01$, partial $\eta 2 = .01$, but not responsibility, $F(1, 394) = .84$, $p = .36$ (H6 and H7). Nonempathetic statements were perceived as being motivated by external pressure ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .99$), more so than empathetic statements ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .84$).

Motivated by collective guilt

The perception that the message was motivated by collective guilt was significantly affected by manipulation of responsibility, $F(1, 394) = 19.16$, $p = .0001$, $\eta 2 = .05$, partial $\eta 2 = .05$ (H10), but not of empathy, $F(1, 394) = .09$, $p = .76$ (H9 & RQ1). Accepting responsibility led to greater perceptions of collective guilt ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.11$) than denying responsibility ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.00$).

Mediation analyses[11]

Results of path analyses for all outcomes are summarized in Figure 3.

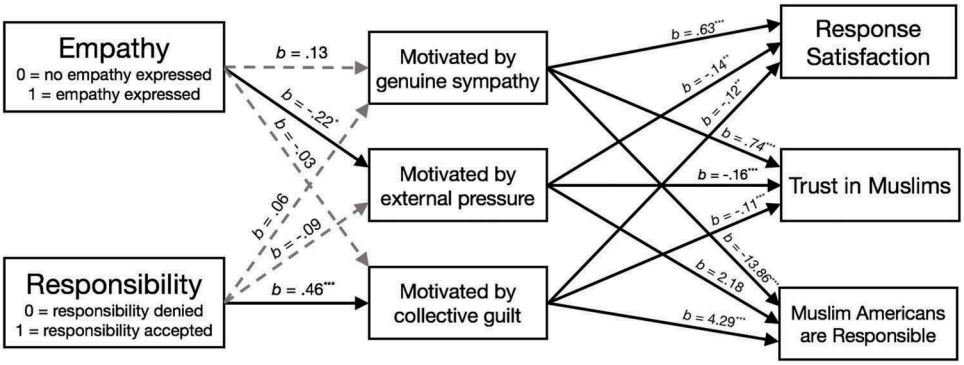


Figure 3. Study 3 path analyses.
Note. Coefficients are unstandardized beta coefficients. n = 394.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Response satisfaction

Expressing (vs. not expressing) empathy led to a significant positive indirect effect on response satisfaction through external pressure motives (*PE* = .030, 95% CI [.002, .073]), but not genuine sympathy motives (*PE* = .083, 95% CI [−.036, .201]), or collective guilt motives (*PE* = .003, 95% CI [−.025, .034]). Accepting (vs. denying) responsibility led to a significant negative indirect effect on response satisfaction through collective guilt motives (*PE* = −.057, 95% CI [−.110, −.015]), but not through genuine sympathy motives (*PE* = .037, 95% CI [−.082, .152]), or external pressure motives (*PE* = .012, 95% CI [−.015, .041]) (H11, H12 and H13).

Trust in Muslims

Expressing (vs. not expressing) empathy had a significant positive indirect effect on trust in Muslims through external pressure motives (*PE* = .035, 95% CI [.006, .074]), but not genuine sympathy motives (*PE* = .098, 95% CI [−.039, .235]), or collective guilt motives (*PE* = .003, 95% CI [−.021, .028]). Accepting (vs. denying) responsibility had a significant negative indirect effect on trust in Muslims through collective guilt motives (*PE* = −.049, 95% CI [−.090, −.016]), but not through genuine sympathy motives (*PE* = .044, 95% CI [−.090, .180]), or external pressure motives (*PE* = .014, 95% CI [−.016, .046]) (RQ2).

Muslim Americans responsible

Accepting (vs. denying) responsibility had a significant positive indirect effect on perceptions that Muslim Americans were collectively responsible for the terrorist act, through collective guilt motives (*PE* = 1.976, 95% CI [.804, 3.467]), but not through genuine sympathy (*PE* = −.823, 95% CI [−3.408, 1.686]), or external pressure motives (*PE* = −.186, 95% CI [−.809, .259]). There was no significant

indirect effect of the empathy manipulation on perceived Muslim American responsibility through any of the hypothesized mediators (RQ3).

In sum, Study 3 tested our predictions in an experimental paradigm that controlled for several contextual factors likely to influence Americans' attitudes toward extremist attacks. As in previous studies, empathy indirectly led to more satisfactory and trustworthy responses. This effect was mediated by a decrease in perceptions that Muslim leaders were motivated by external pressure. We did not find a similar mediating influence of other perceived motivations when examining empathy.

Notably, when compared to denying responsibility, accepting responsibility did not directly or indirectly increase response satisfaction or trust in Muslims. Instead, accepting responsibility indirectly led to less satisfactory and trustworthy responses, by increasing the perception of collective guilt. Further, we found that this increase in collective guilt was positively associated with the degree to which participants held Muslim Americans as a group responsible for the fictional Oslo attack. These results demonstrate that by increasing perceptions of collective guilt, statements that accept (vs. deny) responsibility can backfire, and increase the perception that Muslim Americans as a group are to blame for terrorist acts.

Overview of study results

To better evaluate the collective findings from our three studies, we combined all three data sets and conducted ANCOVAs for all the dependent variables that were measured in multiple studies. We accounted for the differences in studies by including event (Brussels, Orlando, or Oslo) as a covariate. Results comparing effects from the combined studies to effects found in individual studies are presented in Table A8 (Supplemental Appendix A). Again, interstudy differences confirm that the effects we examine appear context-dependent. Yet, several cross-study consistencies emerged. Across combined and individual studies, statements expressing empathy (compared to statements that did not express empathy) decreased the perception that the statement was motivated by external pressure (partial $\eta 2$s = .02), and increased response satisfaction (partial $\eta 2$s = .01 – .02). Statements accepting responsibility (in comparison to statements denying responsibility) increased the perception of collective guilt (partial $\eta 2$s = .03-.05).

General discussion

This research examined how the framing of Muslim leaders' mediated responses to acts of extremism influence the attitudes of non-Muslim Americans. Guided by research on intergroup apologies, we tested how expressions of empathy and responsibility within such statements affected

perceptions of the speaker's motivations and ultimately influenced the efficacy of the message. Consistent with the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), we find that expressions of empathy and responsibility by group leaders can influence outgroup attitudes in important ways.

First, in examining consistencies between our three studies, it becomes clear that expressing empathy may be an effective strategy for Muslim leaders who must satisfy public demands to respond to extremist acts carried out by fellow Muslims. Empathy is generally considered a crucial component of successful intergroup reconciliation (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006), but in our studies its specific function appears to have been to counteract pre-existing perceptions of Muslims as untrustworthy or incapable of experiencing uniquely human emotions (Kteily et al., 2016). Across studies we found that expressing empathy reduced the perception that the response was motivated by external pressure, which in some cases resulted in increased satisfaction with the response and trust in Muslim Americans as a group. This finding is consistent with research showing that (a) groups in conflict are likely to distrust each other's motives (Brewer & Roccas, 2001) and (b) victims tend to be highly suspicious of apologies from outgroups (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Because apologies by outgroups are perceived to be motivated by ulterior motives, their effectiveness in reconciliation efforts is often mixed (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). Our findings suggest that by expressing empathy, Muslim leaders can help ameliorate such suspicions and better satisfy the non-Muslim public.

It is important to note that the effects of empathy may be contextual and vary depending on the specific groups involved in conflict or the nature of the conflict (Batson & Ahmad, 2009). For example, Nadler and Liviatan (2006) found that in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, empathetic apologies (vs. nonempathetic apologies) increased willingness to reconcile among participants who expressed high outgroup trust. However, this effect was reversed among participants who expressed low outgroup trust, with empathetic apologies leading to decreased willingness to reconcile. Future work should examine the contextual nature of the empathy effects we observe.

Despite the theoretical importance of taking responsibility in intergroup apologies, we find little evidence that there is a benefit for leaders who accept, instead of deny, group responsibility for extremist acts. Strikingly, in Studies 2 and 3, we found that statements that explicitly denied responsibility were perceived as equally satisfactory and trustworthy as those that accepted responsibility. These findings run counter to Shnabel and Nadler's (2008) contention that acceptance of responsibility is crucial for addressing the socioemotional needs of the victim. Instead, we found that accepting (vs. denying) responsibility consistently increased the perception that Muslim leaders were responding out of a sense of collective guilt. The results of Study 3 hint that this perception can lead individuals to not only view

a response as less satisfactory and trustworthy, but to hold Muslims as more collectively responsible for an extremist attack. This effect is even more remarkable, given that the extremist attack used in Study 3 was (a) fictional and (b) carried out by non-American Muslims. In the absence of any factual evidence that Muslim Americans were responsible for the Oslo attack, participants assigned blame for the incident based on their perception that the Muslim community *appeared* to feel guilty.

Though there is public and political pressure for Muslim Americans to accept responsibility for terrorist acts perpetrated by Muslim individuals (Sandmeyer & Leung, 2014), our findings suggest that doing so may be more detrimental than denying responsibility. In fact, there may be a potential upside to denying responsibility. Muslim leaders who deny responsibility may be better able to differentiate their group from the actions of extremist group members (von Sikorski et al., 2017). Further, research shows that refusing to accept responsibility can provide perpetrators with benefits such as increased self-esteem (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013) and may avoid further exacerbating conflict (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). Okimoto et al. (2013) suggested that the psychological upside of refusing to apologize may explain why many groups seek to deny responsibility. Ultimately, more research is needed before any strong claims about the upside of denying responsibility can be made.

Our studies examined three dependent variables—response satisfaction, trust, and attributions of responsibility—that reflect important dimensions of public opinion toward Muslim leaders and their community in the wake of an extremist attack. It is likely that the way non-Muslim Americans think about these individual extremist events will shape their broader stereotypes of Muslims and influence their views on public policy affecting the Muslim American community (Saleem et al., 2017). Although it is beyond the scope of this research to examine these more global attitudes and behaviors, we speculate that Muslim leader responses that inspire greater trust and reduce perceived group responsibility are likely to improve treatment of Muslims as a group.

Finally, we tested effects across international and domestic extremist incidents. We are hesitant to draw conclusions from the limited number of incidents we examine, but it does appear that the key consistencies across studies cited previously held whether the perpetrator was non-American or American. Theoretically, we might expect weaker effects for the domestic incident in Study 2, because non-Muslim respondents share a national (i.e., American) identity with the perpetrator. However, our results do not demonstrate a clear pattern in this regard. One explanation is that Muslims are considered a cultural, rather than a racial or geopolitical, outgroup (Kalkan et al., 2009). Therefore, participants in our studies may have focused more on the *Muslim* component of the perpetrator's identity. Future work should more closely examine the degree to which cross-cutting identities moderate the effects we find.

Limitations and future directions

As is evident in the varied effects across our three studies, experimentally testing mediated responses to extremist attacks is methodologically challenging. Our goal was to assess reactions to Muslim leaders' statements in the immediate aftermath of real international and domestic extremist incidents. Although Studies 1 and 2 achieve high external validity in this regard, their results are undoubtedly influenced by a host of external factors that are beyond experimental control. To address this concern, Study 3 tested the same messages in a more controlled, albeit artificial, context. As a result, we have attempted to draw conclusions based on the consistencies between studies, while acknowledging that each study is limited in its own way. Some of the interstudy inconsistencies may be due to the complex relationship between empathy and responsibility. For example, Nadler and Liviatan (2006) found that manipulations of responsibility actually influenced perceptions of empathy. Although we find no substantial evidence of interactive effects in our studies, future research should more closely examine the interplay between these two constructs. Relatedly, our studies test only one way of expressing both empathy and responsibility. Although our manipulation checks indicated that our manipulations were successful, testing a wider variety of statements is needed to assess the generalizability of our findings.

It is also important to note that our studies are limited by the lack of a control condition, in which both responsibility and empathy are omitted entirely. This was a decision we made to remain as consistent as possible with past study designs and to maintain validity.[12] Specifically, the lack of a condition that omits responsibility means that our findings regarding acceptance of responsibility are relative to explicit denial of responsibility. Although testing omission of responsibility is an important next step for this research, we maintain that it is unrealistic to expect that Muslim leaders will make public statements about extremism that omit discussion of group responsibility entirely (see Hashmi, 2017). We therefore consider the responsibility manipulation used in our studies as testing a dimension of Muslim responses to extremism that exists in the real world. Future studies should include a *responsibility omitted* condition to further clarify the tradeoffs involved in denying versus accepting responsibility for extremism. Ultimately, it is important to acknowledge that we examine only two discrete ways of either accepting or denying responsibility. There may be other strategies for addressing issues of responsibility that do not entail exclusively attributing responsibility to either a group or a individual. Although our manipulations of responsibility were designed to maximize external validity, future work should examine other ways of attributing responsibility.

We note that the effect sizes we find are small. This is expected, given that our experimental manipulation not only involves exposure to a single message, but also conflicts with established negative depictions of Muslims. The potential for a single message to enact change in this context is limited (Arendt, 2013). However, repeated exposure to such messages is likely to have larger aggregate effects. It is also important to acknowledge that there are number of messages factors (e.g., text vs. video), and source factors (e.g., news outlet) that may attenuate the effects we find.

Consistent with previous research on intergroup apologies, our findings suggest that the three perceived motivations we examine (external pressure, genuine sympathy, and collective guilt) can play an important role in how non-Muslim Americans process responses to extremism. Although these motivations were selected based on previous research and ecological validity, there are likely other motivations that play a mediating role. Future work should attempt to more inductively examine how non-Muslim Americans perceive the motivations of the Muslim American community. Relatedly, future studies should strengthen our measurement of motivations by using more measures to construct motivation variables. This is particularly important in the case of perceived collective guilt motives, which is only measured by a single item in our studies.

The dependent variables we examine assess attitudes toward American Muslims in the context of specific extremist attacks. As we have argued, attitudes about individual incidents are likely to influence more global attitudes toward Muslims Americans, but our studies have limited generalizability in this regard. In addition, the outcomes we examine may be causally related. Longitudinal data should be used to test whether response satisfaction, itself, influences attitudes toward Muslims Americans more broadly.

Finally, a promising next step for this research is to examine factors that might moderate the effects we observe. By assessing moderating variables that tap into sociopolitical attitudes, group identification and media use, we might be able to provide helpful insight into how our model applies to different segments of the non-Muslim American population. This presents fertile ground for future research.

Conclusion

Our findings should provide encouragement for group leaders who wish to influence their group's framing in the media following an extremist attack. For Muslim Americans, demonstrating empathy for victims appears to lead to the best intergroup outcomes. On the other hand, our results offer less clear guidance in terms of accepting responsibility. Although we demonstrate that accepting responsibility can perpetuate the perception that Muslims are collectively responsible for extremism, it is possible that denials of

responsibility may nevertheless be held up by some politicians, journalists, or elites as evidence of complicity. For groups such as Muslims Americans who are viewed negatively by the American public, deciding whether to accept or deny responsibility for extremism remains a perilous decision.

Notes

1. It is important to note that *empathy* and *sympathy* are terms that have been used by some scholars to describe the same construct. Although our goal is to empirically examine the relationship between expressions of empathy and perceptions of sympathetic motivations, our intent is not to imply that empathy and sympathy are easily distinguishable conceptually.
2. Power analyses ($\alpha = .05$, $f^2 = .2$) found achieved power levels ($1- \beta$) of .99–.95 across all three reported studies.
3. An exploratory factor analysis of the motivation items supported a two-factor solution. Items pertaining to genuine sympathy loaded on the first factor (loadings > .9) and items pertaining to external pressure loaded on the second factor (loadings > .7). The collective guilt item did not load on to any factors and was thus analyzed independently.
4. Across all studies, participants in each condition did not significantly differ in age, gender, political identification, or identification as an American (all *ps* < .1). See Supplemental Appendix A for additional details.
5. Given the high intercorrelations, we first performed a MANOVA, testing the effects of empathy and responsibility on all outcome variables. There was a significant effect of both empathy and responsibility *Fs*(4, 466) = 2.49; 6.40, *ps* = .04; .0001, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.98$; 0.95, indicating univariate follow-up analyses were appropriate. The same analysis was done in subsequent studies justifying the use of univariate follow-up analyses in all three studies. See Supplemental Appendix A for additional details.
6. No significant interactive effects were found in the ANOVA models so interaction terms were not included in tests of mediation for the purposes of model simplification.
7. All mediation analyses were reconducted in a path analysis framework, which yielded similar results. Mediation analyses are reported here for simplicity of presentation.
8. Indirect effects are considered statistically significant if their 95% CI do not cross zero.
9. See Table A1 in the Supplemental Appendix A for full demographic characteristics.
10. Although there are no direct effects of experimental manipulation on response satisfaction and trust in Muslims, Hayes (2013) argued that tests of mediation are still warranted in the absence of direct effects. The same analytic procedures for mediation analyses from Study 1 were used in Study 2.
11. Analytic procedures for mediation analyses from previous studies were used.
12. We note that attempts were made across all three studies to include different forms of control conditions. In a pure control condition that omitted both responsibility and empathy, the actual quoted text from the Muslim leader was omitted entirely. Unfortunately, this made measures related to the Muslim leader's response uninterpretable. For example, asking participants if the response was motivated by external pressure was meaningless, because they had not read any actual response. Ultimately, we decided to exclude this condition prior to our analyses. We tried to implement a *no responsibility* condition in Studies 2 and 3, by removing any language relating to responsibility. Unfortunately, in doing so, we created conditions in which the quote from the Muslim leader was substantially shorter than in other conditions. In addition,

in Study 2 there were sampling errors in this condition. Given these shortcomings, we also excluded these conditions prior to our analyses. As we have noted, future research should more properly employ control conditions.

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