

‘Terrorist’ or ‘Mentally Ill’: Motivated Biases Rooted in Partisanship Shape Attributions about Violent Actors

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Following Omar Mateen’s killing of people in the Pulse night club, a local imam attempted to emphasize Omar’s mental health problems (see TMP, 2016, Guardian, 2016; and Breitbart, 2016, for different perspectives on terrorist vs. mental illness attributions to Mateen’s violence). Elsewhere, media commentators, such as Anthea Butler or Glenn Greenwald, have accused mainstream media of being reticent to describe White perpetrators, like Dylann Roof who caused the Charleston massacre on the African American congregation, as terrorists (Washington Post, 2015; Intercept, 2016). Sometimes the motive behind these violent acts is obvious. However, often it is ambiguous. Such ambiguity may then allow room for different motivated interpretations. These distinctions matter: a violent actor labelled a terrorist is likely to be condemned and punished to a significantly greater extent than the same actor designated as being mentally ill, because the latter is assumed to have reduced control and understanding of the consequences of their actions. To test what determines the ascription of the terrorist vs. mentally ill motives, we followed the logic of the *motivated reasoning perspective*, which suggests that because perceivers are invested in their social contexts, they are likely to filter information in a biased, self- or ingroup-serving manner to arrive at conclusions that favour their valued positions (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983; Kunda, 1990). **Prediction.** Specifically, we predicted that the ascription of terrorism vs. mental illness motives is predicated on motivated bias stemming from divergent range of partisanship.

Studies. To examine this prediction, we report studies that were conducted within two real-life events across consequential and meaningful settings: the killing of British M.P. (and ‘Remain’ supporter) Jo Cox by Thomas Mair in the days immediately preceding the Brexit vote (Study 1), and the suicide bombing by a Syrian refugee in Ansbach, Germany in 2016, amidst a heated public debate about how to handle the refugee crisis (Study 2). Finally, Study 3 experimentally assessed the psychological and practical consequences of the terrorism vs. mental illness motives in the U.S.