# Claims of responsibility and the "is it terrorism?" question.

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In the movie *Die Hard*, Hans Gruber, the fictional mastermind of a plot to steal millions from the Nakatomi Corporation, has a problem. His team is struggling to break into the Nakatomi Corporation's vault and time is running out. The Los Angeles Police department and FBI are surrounding Nakatomi Plaza, where Gruber, his team, and company employees who are being held hostage are located. Gruber and his men need a miracle to steal the Nakatomi Corporation's riches and escape the authorities.

Thinking quickly, Gruber tells police that he is the leader of a terrorist organization. He demands the release of comrades who are being held in prisons around the world. Gruber promises to release his hostages if his demands are met and to kill his hostages if they are not.

Movie audiences know that Gruber is lying. He and his men are capable of murder, but they are thieves, not terrorists. Nevertheless, the authority figures in the drama do not recognize the deception. Mistaking him for a terrorist, the FBI responds to Gruber's provocation by cutting power to Nakatomi Plaza, disabling the security system protecting the vault. This error gives Gruber and his team what they really want: Access to the Nakatomi Corporation's riches.

Building on work by Brown 2017 and Huff and Kertzer 2018, we argue that one of the functions of credit claims is to reveal when an event is an act of terrorism. Gruber's fictional proclamation, in other words, reveals something about some real claims of responsibility for acts of violence.

When either the causes or the intentions behind violent events are unclear, claims of responsibility encourage audiences to identify incidents as terrorism.

An implication of this idea about credit claims is as follows. When either the causes or the motivations behind violence are unclear, claims of responsibility can stimulate emotional and political reactions that are normally thought to flow from the savagery of events. Even the meaning of death and destruction, however, is contextual. People respond to unintentional violence differently than intentional violence even when the death toll is high.

We test this argument about the function of credit claims using a simple experiment involving a hypothetical explosion in Vancouver, British Columbia responsible for the deaths of at least six people. In one condition, participants learned that the "New Sons of Freedom" claimed responsibility for the incident. In the other condition, participants were not informed about a credit claim for the incident.

The results suggest that people are more inclined to classify an explosion as terrorism after hearing about a claim than they are if a claim is not issued. The respondents in our study who learned of the claim of responsibility were also more inclined to express different forms of anger after the attack and to support "hawkish" (Gadarian 2010) counterterrorism measures that might trade liberty for security.

Credit claims are thought to be about recognition for groups and their political demands, but this research suggests that claims of responsibility are also designed to teach audiences that they are the targets of terror. This conclusion is not always obvious in a research tradition that implicitly assumes the functions of credit claims are known.

## Credit claiming: the puzzle

Much of what we know about terrorism suggests that public claims of responsibility for acts of violence should be commonplace. Terrorism is a form of violent communication (Schmid and de Graaf 1982, Kydd and Walter 2002), perpetrated by people and groups who depend on publicity for success. The messages violence deliver, however, are simplistic. Attacks are incapable of communicating more complex messages than, "be afraid" (Cordes 1988).

Often, terrorists have to issue written or verbal messages in order to identify themselves and their demands to their intended audiences (Bauer, et al. 2017). Without these supporting messages, the perpetrators of terrorism are liable to be mistaken for others; their demands misunderstood. Claims of responsibility address the inherent inarticulateness of violence.

Terrorists, though, seem determined to defy social scientific expectations. Instead of taking credit for acts of terrorism frequently, like

terrorists of an earlier era did (Cordes, et al. 1985), modern perpetrators are more likely to stay quiet than publicly announce their responsibility for acts of terrorism. Since 1997, only about 20% of attacks have been claimed by perpetrators (Min 2013, Kearns 2021).

The question is why? Why are credit claims rare instead of ubiquitous? Why do some attacks get claimed, while others do not? Why has the propensity to take credit for acts of terrorism declined?

Scholarly efforts to answer these questions mostly focus on the kinds of publicity claims of responsibility produce. Some say credit claims generate bad publicity that perpetrators prefer to avoid. Abrahms and Conrad (2017), for example, suggest that perpetrators are disinclined to issue credit claims for attacks that harm civilians because civilians are illegitimate targets of violence. Groups that target civilians harden their adversaries' attitudes against them, making it more difficult to gain concessions from attacked populations. Bruce Hoffman (1997) argues that claims of responsibility reveal too much about perpetrators to governments. Credit claimers make themselves vulnerable to damaging retaliatory strikes by governments that they could otherwise avoid by keeping quiet.

Others argue that there are benefits associated with taking credit for acts of terrorism. Aaron Hoffman (2010) argues that competition among terrorist organizations encourages credit claiming, as groups use claims of responsibility to distinguish themselves from others. Crenshaw and Lafree

(2017) argue that claims of responsibility enable groups to signal strength. Kearns (2021) suggests that the benefits of credit taking outweigh the costs contingent upon other factors.

Differences aside between those in the bad and good publicity camps, there are significant areas of agreement about credit taking for acts of terrorism. Consistent with the literature's rationalist underpinnings, claims of responsibility are seen as declarations that are issued in anticipation of their intended effects on audiences. Perpetrators attach their names to attacks in order to communicate things to audiences that violence cannot communicate on its own.

Scholars tend to agree that attaching names to attacks is for the purposes of recognition as either an end in itself (because the willingness to reveal one's identity shows strength) (Crenshaw and LaFree 2017) or as a prelude to either issuing demands (Bauer, et al. 2017) or recruiting supporters (Hoffman 2010). For Abrahms and Conrad (2017) and B. Hoffman (1997), the information claims of responsibility reveal about whodunnit is the essential weakness of these announcements. Indeed, a desire to use terrorism without negative consequences may be why perpetrators issue false claims of responsibility (Kearns, et al. 2014).

For A. Hoffman (2010), the recognition credit claims produce are key to reaping rewards from potential supporters of terrorist organizations. Rapoport (1997) sees credit claims as part of the way some groups issue

demands. The desire for recognition also seems to be behind the high rate of claiming responsibility for suicide attacks (Pape 2003). The groups that use this tactic rely on claims of responsibility in order to recognize publicly the enormous sacrifices of their operatives.

As Joseph Brown's (2017) work on credit claiming implies, however, this consensus about recognition overlooks other functions claims of responsibility play in terrorist campaigns. In interviews with members of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), Brown finds that credit claims also serve four additional functions: 1) as a method of coordinating the activities of loosely connected operatives; 2) a way of constituting ELF as an imagined community; 3) a technique for recruiting new members; and 4) as a mechanism for enforcing operational standards for terrorist activity.

Relatively recent events suggest that these "inwardly focused" functions of credit taking that Brown details are complemented by at least one other "outwardly focused" function: telling audiences when they are the targets of terrorism. Whether it was the Las Vegas mass shooting incident, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, or the mystery illnesses suffered by diplomats stationed in Cuba, the absence of credit claims made it difficult for experts to determine whether terrorism was at issue. In the case of flight MH370, the absence of a claim of responsibility is cited as evidence against the idea that terrorists took the plane down (Calder 2015).

A study of media coverage by Davis (2013) suggests that these patterns are general. Articles covering unclaimed acts of violence used more tentative language and considered a range of possible explanations for the events. The coverage of claimed attacks, in contrast, had far less ambiguity with respect to who the suspects were, what they were after, or how governments might respond. In short, the role claims of responsibility play in identifying acts of terrorism is part of the public discussion of terrorist activity, but not part of the study of credit claims.

**Credit claims and the "is it terrorism?" question**

One reason credit claims have not been thought of as terrorism signaling devices in studies of credit claiming is that researchers assume that audiences know when they are being targeted by terrorists. This idea plays a central role in the costly signaling tradition, where the assumption is that acts of terrorism communicate clear messages about the intentions, resolve, and trustworthiness of perpetrators (Kydd and Walter 2002, Min 2013).

This assumption also plays a role in the empirical literature on credit taking. The very question that frames work in this area -- why are some acts of terrorism claimed while others are not? -- takes the task of identifying terrorism for granted. The challenge in this research is determining whether claims of responsibility were issued or not and whether there were competing claims. The job of identifying acts of terrorism is a task left for

those who create and manage incident databases, like ITRERATE and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

In reality, identifying whether an incident was terrorism or not can be challenging. Individual level factors, like the amount and type of media people consume and their own racial identifies, can cloud judgments (Dolliver and Kearns 2019). Assessments of this question by the public are also sensitive to changes in the details of events. People are more likely to identify violent events as instances of terrorism when those events involve tactics, like bombings and hostage takings. The clarity of the political motives underlying attacks matter too (Huff and Kertzer 2018) as does the level of coordination among perpetrators Avdan and Webb (2018).

The difficulties of identifying acts of terrorism is not experienced just by the public. Experts also have trouble identifying instances of terrorism. Crenshaw and LaFree (2017) report that it is difficult for trained researchers working on the GTD to distinguish between criminal acts and terrorist attacks. 16% of the incidents listed in the GTD are classified under the "doubtterror" heading, a designation that implies there are reasons to question whether the events are actually terrorism, but insufficient evidence to make a conclusive determination one way or another.

Claiming responsibility for violence is one way terrorists tell audiences that they are the targets of terrorism. Hou, Gaibulloev, and Sandler (2020), for example, use claims of responsibility to identify the

groups that should be included in their database of terrorist organizations. This is justified. Claims of responsibility reveal the (1) intentionality behind violent events and the (2) desire of perpetrators to influence people other than the immediate victims. Both of these elements help distinguish terrorism from other sources of violence.

## Intentionality

Not all acts of violence are the product of intentional action. Dust explosions in grain elevators, for example, can occur without the deliberate encouragement of people. For this reason, dust explosions would not normally be considered acts of terrorism. Nevertheless, investigations may be necessary before authorities can discount terrorism as the cause dust explosions. The differences between an unintended dust explosion and an intended one can be too subtle for people to discern without careful study. The sources of fires, environmental damage, even lethal vehicular events all pose the same challenge dust explosions do: they could be the product of intentional efforts by terrorists, but they can also occur for other reasons.

Perpetrators of terrorism have to pass this intentionality threshold to realize their goals. Audiences that are unaware they are the targets of terror cannot be provoked, intimidated, worn down, or outbid by attacks. Unintentional violence cannot trigger the intensity of the responses intentional violence does. Claims of responsibility confirm when violent

events are intended to hurt.

## Political purpose

Claims of responsibility also help perpetrators convince audiences that they want to influence audiences other than the immediate victims of their attacks. Claims of responsibility reveal the desire of perpetrators to have the effects of their attacks to reverberate widely. When claims are not issued, the motives of attackers are harder to discern and the, "is it terrorism?" question gets harder to answer conclusively (Crenshaw and LaFree 2017).

As Huff and Kertzer (2018) demonstrate, the motivations of attackers play an important role in the inclination to classify violent events as terrorism. This makes sense. Terrorism, after all, is a kind of political violence.

It is not clear from either Huff and Kertzer's work or other work on the classification of terrorism, however, whether claims of responsibility convince people they are witnessing terrorism. Claims of responsibility have not been incorporated into the experimental designs created to study the "is it terrorism?" question.

There also has been little effort to demonstrate the effects of credit claims beyond the possibility that they help convince people when terrorism occurs. If it is true that credit claims help distinguish terrorism

from other forms of violence, then it also stands to reason that credit claims

can trigger emotional and political reactions, like anger and fear (Huddy, et

al. 2002, Gadarian 2010), and the willingness to trade liberty for security

(Davis and Silver 2004) that are characteristically caused by acts of

terrorism. These effects are normally thought of as a product of terrorism's

brutality (Breckenridge, et al. 2010), but such a claim assumes that violent

events are clearly terrorism. When this is at issue, claims of responsibility

can produce these results.

## A scenario experiment

We examined the internal validity of this theory of credit claiming

using a one-factor experimental design. Specifically, we examined three

hypotheses:

H1: People are more inclined to classify acts of violence as terrorism
when those acts are accompanied by claims of responsibility than when no
claim is issued.

H2: Acts of violence that are accompanied by claims of responsibility
can cause people to experience negative emotions, such as anger and fear,
more intensely than acts of violence that are not accompanied by claims of
responsibility.

H3: Acts of violence that are accompanied by claims of responsibility
can cause people to favor more hawkish counterterrorism responses, such
as increased funding for security services and more intrusive surveillance
by governments, than acts of violence that are not claimed.

Utilizing an experimental protocol to examine these hypotheses

permits us to observe and assess what studies of credit taking usually take for granted: the impacts these announcements have on audiences. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to connect claims of responsibility for acts of terrorism to public reactions using a more traditional research design, which relies on incident databases, like the GTD. The most obvious problem is that these databases are disconnected from reliable data about the reactions people have to claimed and unclaimed terrorist incidents.

Observational data on claims of responsibility for acts of terrorism may suffer as well from subtle biases that make it difficult to draw reliable correlations between credit claims and assessments of terrorist activity. If we are right that violent events are often classified as terrorism because someone issued a claim a responsibility, then incident databases and news reports underrepresent the very cases that this argument requires for proper testing: those violent events that are difficult to classify as terrorism.

Our experimental approach does not suffer from these weaknesses. Real-time assessments of people's reactions to the kinds of reports about terrorism people see in the news are relatively straightforward. In addition, the kinds of attacks that might not make it into incident databases are easy to simulate. If credit claims do not convince people to classify the violent events they consider in this experiment, it is unlikely that claims of responsibility ever produce that effect.

210 Canadian residents, recruited through Mechanical Turk, agreed to participate in this study after responding to a recruitment message advertising a study regarding "reactions to news from Vancouver, British Columbia." The study had research ethics board approval and was conducted online using Qualtrics. Participants accessed the study via electronic link, but were not permitted to begin the protocol without first reviewing and agreeing to a consent to participate document. In order to complete the study, participants also had to pass a ReCAPTCHA test in order to demonstrate that they were not using a robot to answer questions.

We sought Canadian residents for this study in part because the scenario we developed centered on an explosion in Vancouver. Previous research suggests that acts of terrorism are meaningful to people to the extent they connect to those attacks in some way. Attacks in a person's country of residence is usually sufficient to get their attention Avdan and Webb 2019.

We also sought Canadian residents in order to balance the use of US residents in political science research. Work on the reactions people have to terrorism rely heavily on conclusions drawn from studies that use US citizens, raising questions about the generalizability of the results. Starting with a sample of Canadian residents enables us to make a small contribution toward the goal of expanding on the narrow database of respondents used

in other studies.

Our recruits tended to be male. 122 of our participants self-identified as men, 76 self-identified as women, and 3 self-identified as non-binary. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 73 years of age (mean = 35.3 years) and leaned left in their political orientations. The median respondent assigned themselves a score of 4 or lower on a ten point ideology scale that ran from liberal (score of 1) to conservative (score of 10).

## Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions that were identical in every way except one. Those in the baseline condition were asked to read a hypothetical news story about an explosion in a grain elevator in Vancouver. Those in the treatment condition were asked to read the same story, with one detail added. In the treatment condition, participants were told that "the new Sons of Liberty" took responsibility for the explosion. The scenarios were presented to participants as they might appear in newspapers. The text of the article participants read, with the experimental manipulation, appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Experimental scenario, with manipulation in square brackets

**Blast at Vancouver Harbor Kills 6 and Destroys Grain Terminal [; New Sons of Freedom Claim Responsibility]**

Vancouver, B.C. (AP)—At least six people were killed and an undetermined number missing tonight after an explosion ripped through a giant dockside grain elevator on the shore of the Vancouver Harbor, authorities said. [The New Sons of Freedom claimed responsibility for the blast.]

Fires broke out after the explosion, threatening chemical industries terminals lining the busy harbor.

Small blazes continued to burn into the night, but after the major fires were brought under control firefighters from nearby locales began searching for bodies.

"We are certain we will find others dead but we don't know how many," said Darin Thurston, information officer for the Vancouver Fire Department.

The explosion hurled steel and concrete over a broad area. A spokesperson for the Western Grain Elevator Association estimated the damage at $100 million.

After reading the news article, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions. First and foremost, participants were asked to say the degree to which they agreed with the following statement: "The explosion described in the article was an act of terrorism." The extent to which claims of responsibility stoked specific negative emotions, like anger, fear, and sadness, was assessed using items from the discrete emotions questionnaire Harmon-Jones, et al. 2016.

Participants were also asked a series of questions about their policy preferences in light of the article they read. These include questions about

funding for security agencies in Canada (e.g., RCMP) as well as support for federal actions that "infringe on the privacy rights of ordinary citizens in order to prevent events like the one you read about from happening again."

## Analysis

We analyzed responses to these questions using t-tests. Our results suggest that claims of responsibility do assist in convincing people that acts of violence are instances of terrorism (see Figure 1). On average, respondents in the baseline condition (i.e., no credit claim condition) reported that they "somewhat disagree[d]" with the idea that the explosion depicted in the news article was an act of terrorism. In contrast, the average response of participants in the treatment condition indicated that they "agree[d]" with the notion that the explosion was an act of terrorism. This difference in responses is statistically significant ($t(198) = -11.09$, $p < .001$).

The claim of responsibility issued in our experiment also appears to be responsible for an increase in different forms of anger. Participants who were told about the claim of responsibility reported increased levels of anger ($t(199) = -4.36$, $p<.001$) and rage ($t(199) = -4.41$, $p<.001$) than participants who were not told about the claim of responsibility. Those who read about the claim of responsibility also reported being madder than those who did not read about it ($t(198) = -3.27$, $p<.001$).

Figure 1: The effects of claims of responsibility on the willingness to classify violence as terrorism



t(198) = -11.09, p<.001
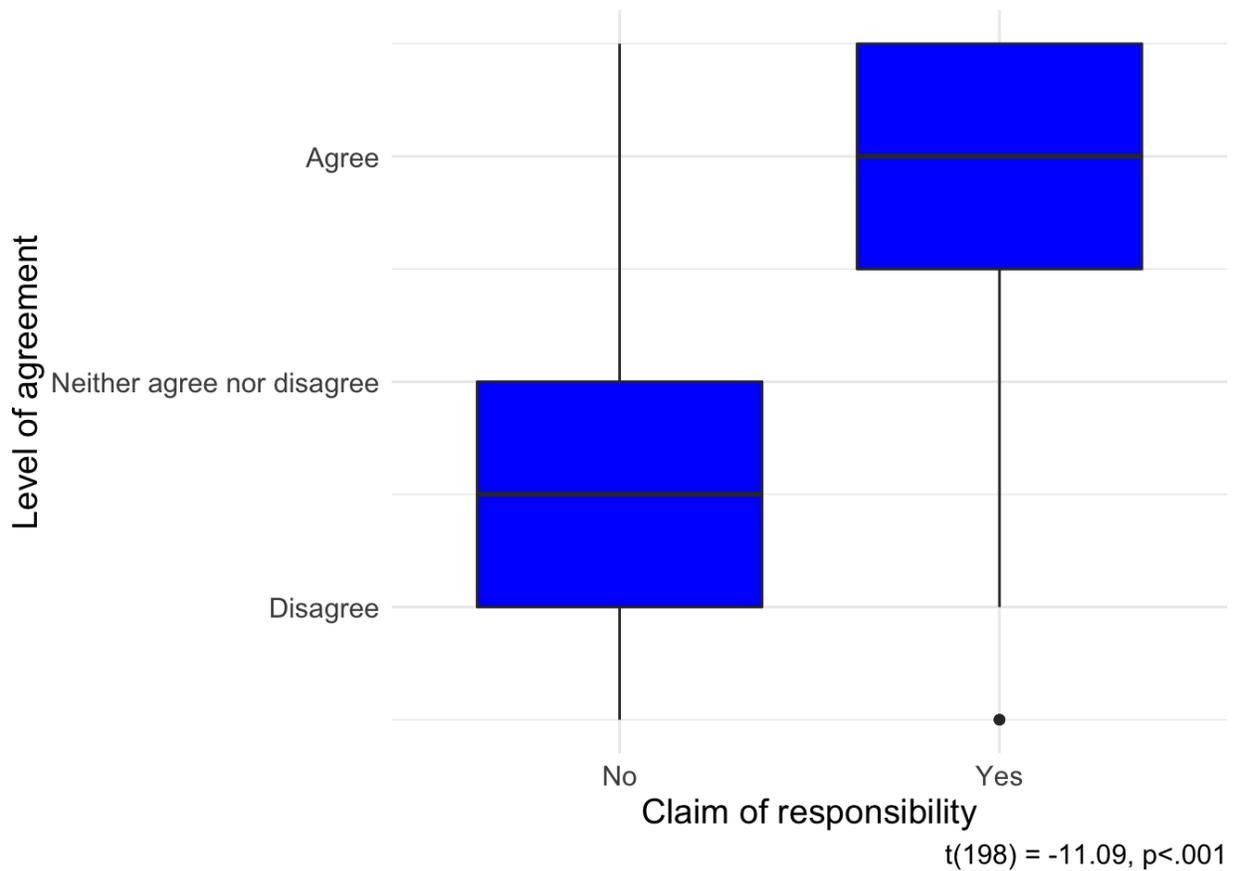
There was a surprising reduction in average reported levels of anxiety between those in the credit claiming and non-credit claiming conditions (t(199) = 2.52, p=.01; see Figure 3). Otherwise, we found no other significant effects of credit taking on the other emotions we asked about (dread, sadness, terror, scared, grief, worry).

Figure 2: The effects of claims of responsibility on feelings of anger
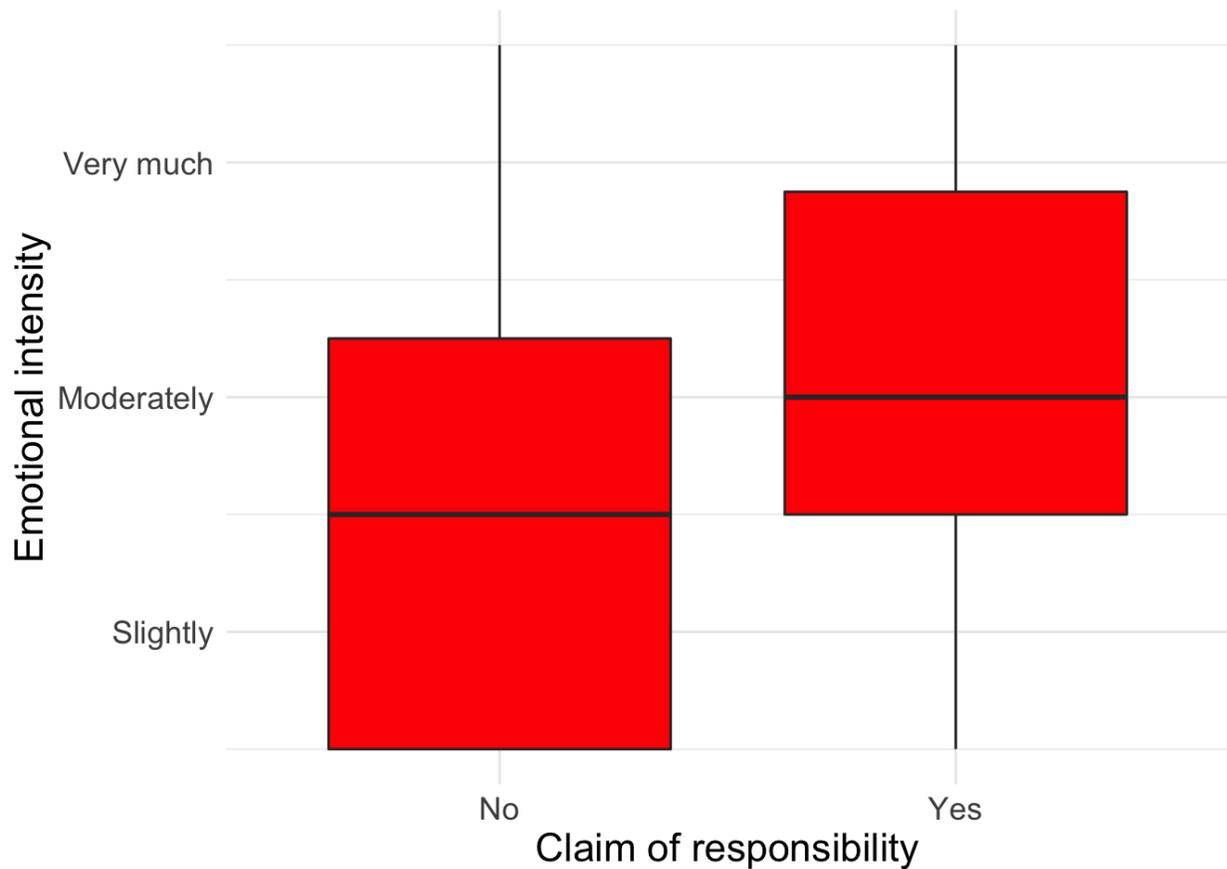


Exposure to the claim of responsibility also influenced the policy positions participants proclaimed. Those who read about the claim of responsibility for the explosion were more noncommittal when answering whether the Canadian government should trade liberty for security ("Neither agree nor disagree" was the average answer in this condition) than those who did not read about the claim ("Somewhat disagree" was the average answer in this condition). The difference in means between the two groups is statistically significant (t(199) = -3.03, p=.003).

Figure 3: Credit claims influence the willingness to trade liberty for security
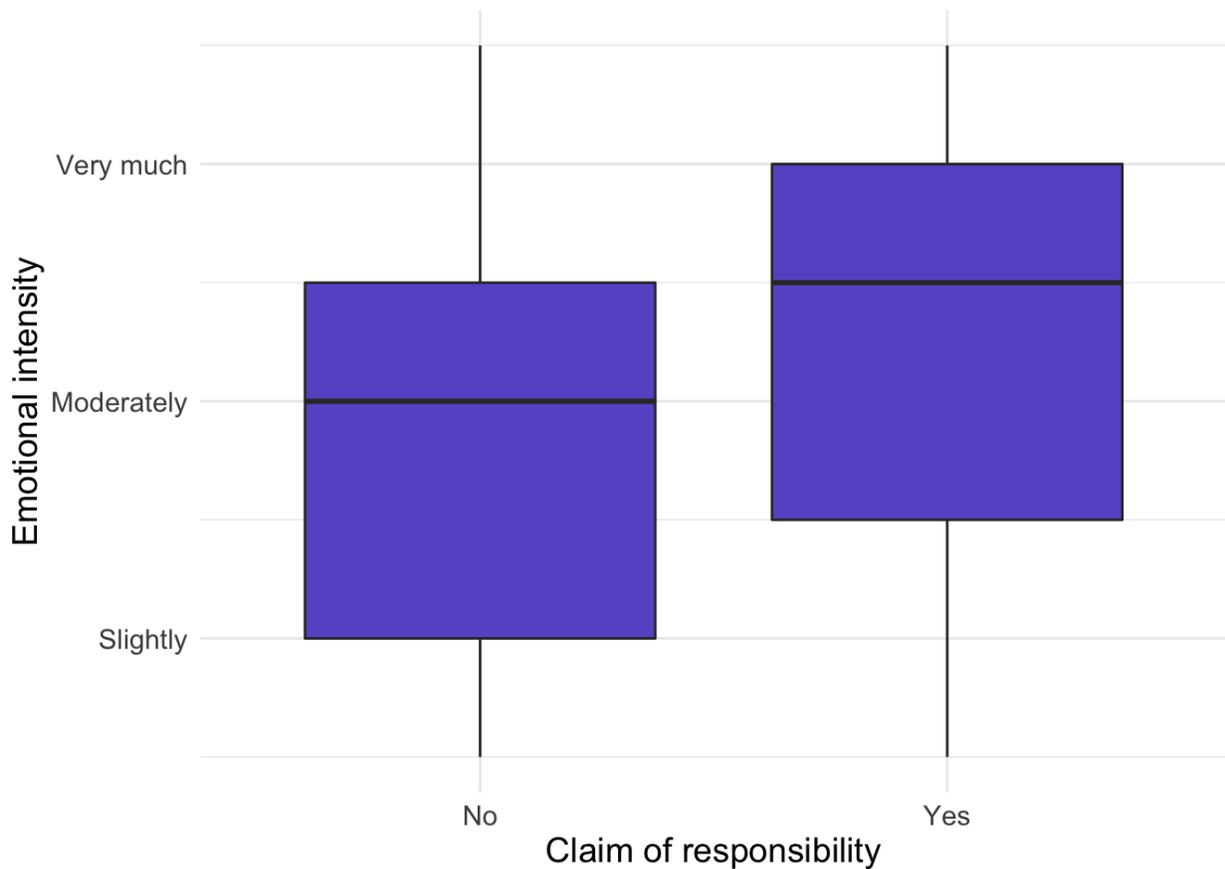


Exposure to the credit claim also made participants somewhat more supportive of increased funding for homeland security in Canada (t(148)=-3.34, p=.001).[1] There were no other differences across the two experimental groups in support for funding increases to Canadian security services, such as the RCMP.

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[1] Fewer respondents answered this question because we withheld it from the first 50 respondents. We promised our research ethics board that our study would last no more than 10 minutes on average and so we only included these questions once we saw that adding them would not make this study longer than 10 minutes.

**Discussion**

The results provide support for the idea that, under some circumstances, claims of responsibility function as a signaling device to audiences that they are the targets of terror. Those who exposed to a report that mentioned a claim of responsibility were significantly more inclined to classify the explosion they read about as terrorism than those who did not know about the claim.

An implication of this finding is that claims of responsibility are also capable, under similar circumstances, of unlocking the emotional and political reactions to terrorism that concern academics and policymakers. We found significantly higher levels of anger in those who read about the claim of responsibility than those who did not. We also found greater support for the adoption of security measures that impinge on liberty and for the funding of Canadian homeland security among those who knew about the claim of responsibility.

Interestingly, our results pointed to lower levels of anxiety among those who knew about the credit claim than those who did not. There is speculation in the literature on credit claims that anonymous attacks are more unsettling than authored ones (Cordes 1988). This result is consistent with that view, but it is unclear at this point whether this result will persist in subsequent tests. For now, it is probably best to treat this finding as one to investigate further.

The same cautious attitude is also worth applying to the other results of this experiment. The scenario we presented participants is specialized. Explosions in grain elevators happen and they do raise fears that terrorists are at work, but situations like this are unusual. Grain elevators are not the first targets of terror -- even in Canada.

It would be a mistake, however, to think about this study in terms of how realistically it represents real world violence. What can be generalized from the results reported here are the implications for theory produced by the application of controlled variation in the laboratory (Falk and Heckman 2009). The size of the effects we observed are unlikely to generalize outside the laboratory. Neither the scenario nor the participants are representative of the real world. Instead, what matters is the demonstration that, consistent with theoretical expectations, credit claims can reveal that violent events are terrorism. This isn't a result that could be replicated outside of the laboratory, given the nature of available data on terrorist activity or the manner in which it is produced.

## Conclusion

Hans Gruber loses in the end. He underestimates the scrappy ingenuity and fierce determination of John McClane, a police officer from New York City who happened to be visiting Nakatomi Plaza when Gruber

took it over. McClane is the one barrier to robbing the Nakatomi Corporation that Gruber and his team cannot overcome.

While *Die Hard* is really about McClane's Herculean efforts to prevent Gruber from succeeding, it offers an important lesson about the act of claiming responsibility for violent events. By claiming responsibility for the hijacking and portraying himself as a terrorist, Hans Gruber gets closer to robbing the Nakatomi Corporation than he otherwise would have. The claim convinced authorities that they had to deal with the threat Gruber posed differently. The FBI got involved. Counterterrorism measures were implemented that made it easier, rather than harder, for Gruber and his team to realize their goals.

Such is the power of the claim of responsibility. The violence that terrorists use isn't always clear-cut. It has to be identified as terrorism in order to get a response. Issuing a claim of responsibility is one way terrorists provide the information audiences need.

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