

## **Social Identity and Group Emotion: Media Effects and Support for Military Intervention**

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This study examines how news coverage of terrorist threats affects emotions that then shape support for antiterrorism policies, presidential approval, and attitudes toward Muslims. Using a national sample, news stories were experimentally manipulated to emphasize terrorist threats (high/low) and depictions of U.S. military strength (high/low). Results show that group-based anger—when people thought about themselves as Americans—mediated the relationships between threat coverage and antiterrorism policies, whereas group-based fear did not. On the other hand, group-based fear mediated the relationship between threat coverage and negative attitudes toward Muslims, whereas group-based anger did not. When people thought about themselves as individuals, neither anger nor fear mediated these relationships.

*Keywords: social identity, group emotion, discrete emotions, media effects, experiment*

Media scholars have long debated the mechanisms underlying media effects and the ways that researchers can extend current models (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). We argue that insight into media effects can be gleaned by identifying precise effects and special circumstances under which particular audiences might be vulnerable to media influence. One such circumstance is the atmosphere of amplified threat perception in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. For example, since the terrorist attacks against America on September 11, 2001, researchers have made important gains in understanding the role of news media as a vehicle by which terrorist threats reach the nation (Davis & Silver, 2004; Gadarian, 2010). Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, and Garland (2004), for instance, found that in the weeks following the 9/11 attacks, national identity was the dominant theme in news coverage and united Americans around the goal of waging a war on terror against a common enemy. More recently, following the beheading of American James Foley in August 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged as one of the greatest perceived threats to Americans, and by the end of 2014, ISIS had gone

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from a group that few Americans had heard of to a group that 95% of Americans viewed as a threat (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Media coverage of terrorism is important in this context because Americans are disproportionately reliant on news media for foreign policy information (Baum & Groeling, 2010), and ISIS has been a prominent fixture in news coverage since 2014–2015, when it was voted the top news story by editors at the Associated Press (Crary, 2015). Fischer, Haslam, and Smith (2010) explained that news media are responsible for interpreting terrorist events for the public by “first making salient a given social identity and then drawing attention to the way in which a given act is a threat to that identity” (p. 148). Accordingly, we argue that when news coverage activates social identity (e.g., American national identity), people are more likely to support group-based responses (e.g., U.S. military action), compared with times when individual identity is activated (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004).

The present study extends media research by examining emotional responses of audiences to threat coverage (Sadler, Lineberger, Correll, & Park, 2005) and the subsequent consequences of these emotions on policy preferences (Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006). While scholars have made important progress in explaining the antecedents and consequences of emotion (Nabi, 2003), relatively little attention has been given to the study of group-level emotions (for an exception, see Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2017). Mackie, Smith, and Ray (2008), for instance, argued that “the murder of an ingroup member because of his or her group membership evokes fear or anger in other group members, despite the fact that they remain physically unharmed” (p. 1871).

The model developed here adds a layer of precision to previous studies by comparing group-level and individual-level emotions together in the same study. We follow Mackie and colleagues in bringing together parallel lines of research about social identity (Tajfel, 1982) and emotion (Lazarus, 1991). Adding to their approach, we weave together insights from media research and terrorism studies that offer complementary explanations about how Americans experience national threats. For example, Hallin and Gitlin (1993) explained that news media invite Americans to experience national threats with “collective empathy” (p. 418), resulting in community solidarity. Following the 9/11 attacks, political leaders and news media ramped up their use of patriotic discourse (Coe, Domke, Graham, John, & Pickard, 2004), and Americans reported high levels of discrete emotions, including anger and fear (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Scholars of terrorism point out that the primary goal of terrorism is to use victims of violence as instruments to instill fear in the public at large (Stohl, 2008). Extrapolating from literature on social identity, it is likely that when group membership is activated, emotions are experienced as group-level phenomena, and this is expected to be particularly pronounced in the context of terrorism (Primoratz, 1990).

The present study relies on a national sample of U.S. adults and examines the effects of news coverage by experimentally manipulating depictions of terrorist threat and U.S. military strength in news stories. This project makes three contributions to the understanding of media effects. First, we show that news coverage about terrorist threats can induce people to understand their subjective emotional experiences according to social identity rather than individual identity. Second, we find that group-level

emotions, and not individual-level emotions, can affect attitudes toward outgroups who are not the source of the threat. Third, we demonstrate that group anger and group fear have unique causes and consequences.

### **Theoretical Integration**

The theoretical integration links together streams of research across media and social psychology, arguing that group-level emotions mediate the relationships between news coverage of terrorist threats and policy preferences. First, we discuss the process of social identity activation. Second, we explain the role of news media as a conduit of terrorist threats to the public. Third, we review current perspectives on emotion and conclude that intergroup emotions theory (IET) is the best theoretical approach for the present study. We argue that coverage of terrorism activates social identity and elicits group-level emotions, and these emotions in turn lead to support for military policies.

### ***Social Identity***

Social identity theory (SIT) posits that identifying with a group at the collective level, rather than the personal level, is predicated on positive social comparison, with the goal of increasing self-esteem (Tajfel, 1982). Identifying with a group requires emotionally charged knowledge that members are part of a group, and when the sense of self is linked to a group, members see themselves as interchangeable with fellow group members (Tajfel, 1982). Turner and Oronato (2010) note that the social identity perspective has always included an emotional component: Social identity is "a person's definition of self in terms of some social group membership with the associated valued connotations and emotional significance (e.g., self-definition as 'us women' or 'we Americans')" (p. 320). Turner (1985) describes the process of social identification as occurring in three steps. First, based on the salience of social identity, individuals categorize themselves as belonging to an ingroup and others as belonging to an outgroup. Second, individuals acknowledge or become aware of the prototypical behaviors or norms of the groups in question and that these norms are distinct from each other. Finally, group members internalize the stereotypical thoughts and behaviors of the ingroup.

Building on SIT, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) advanced self-categorization theory (SCT), arguing that identities are always in flux and that people will change identities based on cognitive and situational aspects. Turner et al. (1987) explain that the self-stereotyping and depersonalization process does not result in a loss of identity, but rather a change in self-concept from personal to social. According to Turner et al. (1987), the first assumption of SCT is that "the self may be understood at least in part as a cognitive structure" and that "the self-concept may be defined as the set of cognitive representations of self available to a person" (p. 44). The result of both SIT and SCT is that members simultaneously maximize ingroup similarities and maximize intergroup differences, thereby encouraging stereotypic thinking and behavior. The implication is that when people think about themselves as Americans, they are more likely to support U.S. military action compared with when they think about themselves as individuals.

### ***Media and Social Identity***

The activation of social identity is central to media research because national symbols often enter public discourse through political leaders and news media (Domke, Graham, Coe, John, & Coopman, 2006).

In fact, contemporary nation-building takes place institutionally, via mass communication and education systems that give rise to a national consciousness—what Anderson (2006) referred to as an “imagined community” (p. 46). Domke (2004) explained this by noting that many national reporters are Americans and produce content through the subjective lens of American national identity. Audiences, therefore, engage in an internalization process facilitated by news media in which group members adopt the group’s attitude as their own. Price (1989) argued that when news media emphasize intergroup conflict, “recipients of the message are cued to think of themselves and others in relation to the issue primarily as members of those groups rather than as isolated persons” (p. 203).

Likewise, terrorism scholars have long viewed the relationship between terrorists and the media as symbiotic (Weimann & Winn, 1994), observing that the most important audience of terrorist threats is not the immediate victims, but the broader indirect members of the public (Primoratz, 1990). Altheide (2006), for example, argued that through mediated terrorism, victimhood is infused with emotion, and all group members become indirect victims. Terrorists use media to gain sympathy from potential recruits while simultaneously using coverage of attacks as a coercion tactic to gain leverage in political battles (Nacos, 2007). Thus, Schwenkenbecher (2012) defines terrorism as using violence or threat of violence against a group of direct victims to induce fear among a broader indirect audience to achieve political goals. The process of terrorism, therefore, consists of a threat or act of violence → emotional response to threat or act → social effects following threat or act (Stohl, 2008). Consequently, group members are more inclined to behave according to group membership than individual identity.

### ***Emotion***

Social scientists often employ one of two models when studying emotion: (a) neural processing (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) or (b) appraisal (Nabi, 1999). Research shows that autonomic physiological responses occur before cognition (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996), though the classic explanation views appraisals as cognitive interpretations that precede emotions (Lazarus, 1991; C. A. Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Our view is that these approaches are complementary rather than competing, with neural models explaining the preconscious temporal sequence that drives information processing and decision making, and appraisal models explaining the conscious experience of group emotions that predict group-based actions. Brader and Marcus (2013) explain that “subjective feeling states result from a sequential series of appraisals that have both ‘upstream’ (preconscious) and ‘downstream’ (conscious) aspects” (p. 6). We agree with their assessment, and the current study distinguishes between these approaches by focusing on differences between individual-level and group-level emotions.

### ***Neural Models***

Scholars adopting the neural model define emotion as a “physiological and mental disposition triggered by the brain in response to the perceived significance of a situation or object for an individual’s goals” (Brader, 2006, p. 51). Of the social scientific theories adhering to this approach, the most theoretically nuanced is affective intelligence theory (AIT). Marcus et al. (2000) argue that the brain is governed by two systems: disposition and surveillance. The disposition system manages levels of enthusiasm based on assessments of learned, rehearsed, and accepted behavior and thought patterns. When plans are being

executed successfully, enthusiasm is likely to follow; when plans appear to be failing, enthusiasm decreases. By comparison, the surveillance system manages levels of anxiety based on assessments of novelty or threat. When anxiety is low, motivation for higher order cognition is low, and when anxiety is high, because of threat or novel stimuli, people are motivated to reevaluate alternatives. AIT emphasizes the sequence of information processing with an eye toward information seeking and vote intention.

### *Appraisal Models*

Appraisal theorists view appraisals as antecedents to emotions, or cognitive interpretations of situations that map onto discrete emotions and consist of both conscious and automatic aspects (Leventhal & Scherer, 1987). For instance, control and uncertainty appraisals can help people differentiate between negative emotions, such as fear and anger, with high control and certainty eliciting anger, and low control and uncertainty fostering fear (Frijda, 1986). In the context of a threatening environment, appraisals operate on two levels (Lazarus, 1991). Primary appraisals are evaluations that establish relevance or involvement related to a threat. Secondary appraisals involve coping responses, or perceptions of the ability of threatened persons to alleviate the threat. In the case of negative emotions, appraisals are thought to be elicited by various types of harm or threat. When motivational relevance is high and coping potential is low, fear increases (C. A. Smith & Lazarus, 1993). On the other hand, high control and high certainty are associated with anger (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). From this view, emotional responses are functional because they induce people to respond to threats in various ways, such as avoiding or confronting the source of the threat.

### *Intergroup Emotions Theory*

Blending insights from identity and appraisal theories, E. R. Smith and colleagues proposed IET, arguing that when social identities are activated, events are experienced according to social identity, and the corresponding emotions are experienced as group-level phenomena (E. R. Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Theories of group emotion are intuitively compelling when considering, for instance, the collective feeling of pride experienced by a nation's citizenry when its athletes achieve World Cup success (Mackie et al., 2004). Taking on a social identity is a process of depersonalization wherein group members see themselves as interchangeable with their fellow group members, making it possible for them to experience emotions on their behalf.

IET posits that when social identity is salient, group identity becomes relevant to one's self-concept, which in turn leads to information being appraised in terms of group well-being (Mackie et al., 2004). Primary appraisals are theorized to operate the same way in the context of group emotions as they do with individual emotions. If a threat involves the group, then group emotions will follow. Secondary appraisals for group emotions assess the ability of the group to cope with a threat, often by avoiding or attacking (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). In other words, primary appraisals establish group relevance, and social identification is necessary for members to experience emotions at the group level. Secondary appraisals depend on how certain group members are that their group will succeed/fail and depend on perceptions of control over the outcome of an intergroup conflict. From an appraisal perspective, anger and fear diverge based on the level of perceived control over a threatening situation (Feldman, Huddy, & Cassese, 2012). When the threat

comes from a group that is perceived to be strong, group fear is likely to follow; when a threat is viewed as weak, the perception that the group has the ability to control the outcome of the situation increases, and group anger will follow (E. R. Smith et al., 2007).

Differences between group emotions are important because studies have demonstrated that group fear is associated with decreased support for military action (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005), while group anger is associated with increased support for military action (Sadler et al., 2005). Huddy (2013) explained the relationships between perceptions of threat, group strength, emotion, and action tendencies in the following way: "members of stronger groups can afford to feel angry at an opponent because they are more certain that retaliatory action against their weaker opponent will succeed" (p. 12). This is also consistent with Nabi's (2003) cognitive functional model, which explains that emotions are common examples of media effects because elements of news stories can activate specific emotions, and these emotions can then color how future information is processed. Mackie et al. (2000) argued that particular emotions are associated with particular action tendencies for group behavior, with group anger reflecting a motivation to harm an outgroup, and group fear reflecting a tendency to avoid an outgroup. In the context of terrorist threat, for example, Musgrove and McGarty (2008) found that group members were more likely to respond with anger when they had confidence that their group would be successful against a threat, rather than when they perceived their group as incapable of withstanding a threat.

The preceding explanations about how people experience terrorist threats are consistent with multiple theoretical approaches. Priming research, for instance, suggests that it is reasonable to expect portrayals of group threats conveyed via news media to activate social identity when message elements, such as national symbols, overlap with mental constructs (Higgins, 1996). For example, Althaus and Kim (2006) found that media built associative links between identity and support for war. Similarly, Mueller (1970) argued that unexpected international events can result in a temporary boost in public support for the president when the group rallies around its leader. More recently, Mueller (2007) argued that support for military policies increases as threats about terrorism are internalized in the public consciousness, owing largely to emotional involvement. Finding that a host of theoretical approaches have consistent accounts of how people experience terrorism bolsters our confidence that the group-level emotion explanation is a logical next step in understanding media effects related to threat coverage.

### **The Present Study**

Given that IET rests on the assumption that group emotions are distinct from individual emotions, we begin by testing hypotheses aimed at the first principles of group emotion. First, it is expected that respondents will report higher levels of group emotions than individual emotions. Because our experiment focuses on terrorist threats, and terrorist threats are thought to operate on the collective level (Stohl, 2008), we expect group emotions to be more pronounced than individual emotions.

*H1: Respondents will report higher levels of group emotions than individual emotions.*

Next, we examine the relationships between threat perceptions and emotions. It is expected that when a group member is harmed, fellow group members can feel anger or fear on behalf of the injured group member even when other members are not fearful or angry about their personal well-being (Mackie et al., 2008). For instance, following a terror attack, it makes sense for people to feel a general sense of unease, while not feeling personally fearful about, say, going to work. Accordingly, we expect threat perception in news stories to predict group emotions.

*H2: Terrorist threat perception will be positively related to group emotions.*

We also manipulate perceptions of *group strength*, what emotion researchers call coping ability (Lazarus, 1991). As discussed earlier, threat to the group fits with the concept of primary appraisals, and coping ability maps onto the concept of secondary appraisals. For example, Mackie et al. (2000) manipulated the perceived strength of groups in news stories related to threats to gay rights and found that when group members perceived their ingroup as strong (likely to win a political battle), they reported increased levels of anger toward the outgroup (anti-gay rights group). When ingroup members (Americans) are threatened from an outgroup (ISIS), group fear or group anger could be aroused. When the likelihood of military success is low, group fear could follow. On the other hand, when the likelihood of military success is high, group anger could be aroused. Yet, it is unclear whether the relationship between threat perception and group strength is additive or interactive because research on emotion is often observational (Feldman et al., 2012), and experiments in this area have not manipulated both primary and secondary appraisals together in the same study.

In the current study, among participants in the high-threat-perception condition, those also in the high-strength-perception condition are likely to experience group anger toward a weak outgroup (Mackie et al., 2004). Conversely, among participants in the high-threat condition, those also in the low-strength condition are likely to experience group fear (Sadler et al., 2005). In the low-threat condition, though, it is unclear whether perceptions of group strength will kick in to determine which emotions are elicited. Thus, we pose the following research question.

*RQ1: Will perceptions of terrorist threat and group strength interact to predict group emotions?*

The next pair of hypotheses examine the effects of emotions and action tendencies directed at ISIS. Although studies have shown that group anger is positively related to generic action tendencies against the source of the threat, past research rarely considers support for actual foreign policies. Musgrove and McGarty (2008) found that group anger predicted confronting terrorists, while group fear was positively related to avoiding terrorists. It is unclear whether these patterns will hold up when examined in a realistic context. We examine two variables that the United States actually took, or debated taking, against ISIS.

*H3a: Group anger will mediate the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and support for airstrikes against ISIS, such that the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and group anger will be positive, and the relationship between group anger and support for airstrikes against ISIS will be positive.*

*H4a: Group anger will mediate the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and support for sending troops against ISIS, such that the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and group anger will be positive, and the relationship between group anger and support for sending troops against ISIS will be positive.*

Scholars have observed differences between fear and anger related to terrorism, and we pose two hypotheses regarding the relationship between group fear and military action. Huddy et al. (2005) observed that anxiety about terrorists was negatively related to military action. They explained that anxiety was related to uncertainty, and when anxiety was high, people tended to view military action as risky, and support waned. Likewise, Lerner and Keltner (2001) found that fearful people tended to be risk averse.

*H3b: Group fear will mediate the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and support for airstrikes against ISIS, such that the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and group fear will be positive, and the relationship between group fear and support for airstrikes against ISIS will be negative.*

*H4b: Group fear will mediate the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and support for sending troops against ISIS, such that the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and group fear will be positive, and the relationship between group fear and support for sending troops against ISIS will be negative.*

The final hypotheses examine group attitudes. Huddy et al. (2005) observed that anger was positively related to presidential approval, whereas fear was negatively related to it. Conversely, Skitka et al. (2006) found that group fear predicted support for deportation of Arab Americans, Muslims, and first-generation immigrants, whereas group anger did not. Building on this, we expect group anger to be associated with presidential approval and group fear to be associated with modern racism toward Muslims.

*H5: Group anger will mediate the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and presidential approval, such that the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and group anger will be positive, and the relationship between group anger and presidential approval will be positive.*

*H6: Group fear will mediate the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and modern racism toward Muslims, such that the relationship between perception of terrorist threat and group fear will be positive, and the relationship between group fear and modern racism toward Muslims will be positive.*

The logic of IET is that perception of group threat is necessary to establish group relevance and that perception of group strength determines which emotion is evoked (Mackie et al., 2004), yet we know of no study that manipulated perceptions of threat and depictions of group strength simultaneously. We manipulate both to examine whether the hypothesized mediated relationships are conditioned by group strength.

*RQ2: Will the mediated relationships between threat perception and outcome variables be moderated by group strength?*

### **Method**

We relied on a Qualtrics online sample and matched U.S. census data on three variables: (a) sex, (b) age, and (c) education. Qualtrics surveys have been used in social science research as a cost-effective way to gather nonstudent samples that produce similar results to full random probability sampling (Hillygus, Jackson, & Young, 2014; Weeks, 2015). Participants were recruited by Qualtrics to complete a 15-minute "Media and Social Issues" survey. Data were collected between January 25 and 28, 2016. A total of 17 respondents were excluded because of nonvariance of responses and a survey completion time of under 5 minutes, and one additional respondent was excluded for stating that he was not a U.S. citizen ( $N = 499$ ).

### **Procedure**

To recapitulate, the experimental treatments were designed to correspond to primary and secondary appraisals (C. A. Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Primary appraisals are linked to group relevance and are manipulated via threat perceptions. Secondary appraisals are associated with coping responses and are manipulated by varying perceptions of group strength. After consenting to participate, respondents completed a short battery of questions about politics and national identity and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 2 (*threat perception: high/low*)  $\times$  2 (*group strength: high/low*). Terrorist threat was coded as *high* = 1 ( $n = 242$ ), *low* = 0 ( $n = 257$ ). Group strength was coded as *high* = 1 ( $n = 242$ ), *low* = 0 ( $n = 257$ ). In each condition, participants read two news stories and then completed questions about emotion, antiterrorism policies, and attitudinal measures.

After reading the stories, respondents answered two manipulation check questions. Using a 4-point scale, respondents were asked one manipulation check question related to threat: "The articles downplayed threat to U.S. national security from ISIS." The two conditions emphasizing high threat ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) resulted in higher levels of threat perception than the two emphasizing low threat ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(497) = 2.84$ ,  $p < .01$ . Using a 4-point scale, respondents were asked one manipulation check question related to group strength: "The articles suggested the U.S. military efforts against ISIS are succeeding." The conditions emphasizing high strength ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) resulted in higher levels of military success perception than the two emphasizing low strength ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $t(497) = -2.24$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### **Treatment**

Articles were adapted from actual news stories and edited to be equivalent with respect to the number of paragraphs, sentences, and images. Participants in the high threat/high strength condition, for example, read two news stories that emphasized ISIS's threat to the United States and America's military strength. One headline read, "U.S. Success: Islamic State Loses Strength in Iraq and Syria; F.B.I. Warn of San Bernardino-Like Attack." In the low threat/low strength condition, for example, participants read two stories that highlighted the safety of Americans and ingroup weakness. One headline read, "U.S. Fail: Islamic

State Gains Strength in Iraq and Syria; F.B.I. Director Says Americans Safe.” See Figure 1. Images included depictions of American soldiers holding an American flag, and the San Bernardino shooters.



**Figure 1. Examples of high threat/high strength and low threat/low strength.**

### Measures

Demographic variables included: (a) sex (female = 1, 52%; male = 0, 48%), (b) age in years ( $M = 46.47$ ,  $SD = 16.62$ ), and (c) education ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). Education was assessed using a 5-point scale ranging from *some high school* to *graduate or professional degree*. Both ideology ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ) and party identification ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) ranged from 1 to 7, with high numbers indicating conservative and Republican, respectively. The nationalism scale consisted of five statements, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; Federico, Golec, & Dial, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Federico et al. (2005) reported Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.75$ , though our measure reached Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.59$ . Removing two questions produced  $\alpha = 0.72$ , and the average of this scale was used in the analyses ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). The need for cognition scale consisted of 18 items, ranging from 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic of me*) to 10 (*extremely characteristic of me*; Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984),  $\alpha = 0.88$ , and was averaged ( $M = 5.54$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ).

### Group Emotions

The prompt for group emotions was taken from E. R. Smith et al. (2007) and asked, "When you think about yourself as an American, to what extent do you feel the following emotion?" Using a scale that ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), *group anger* was measured using the following terms: *anger*, *furious*, *mad*, *hostile*, and *outraged*, and produced  $\alpha = 0.94$ . The average of these responses was used ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). *Group fear* used the same prompt and the following terms: *fearful*, *worried*,

<sup>2</sup> Federico's scale is preferable to others (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999) because it was applied to U.S.–Iraq relations and addressed threat, media, and policy.

*anxious, afraid, and scared*, and produced  $\alpha = 0.93$ . The average was used ( $M = 4.51, SD = 1.73$ ). Group emotions appeared before individual emotions, and the items within each set were randomized.

#### *Individual Emotions*

Following E. R. Smith et al. (2007), the prompt read, "When you think about yourself as an individual, to what extent are you actually experiencing the following emotion?" The same assessment terms asked for group-level emotions were also asked for individual-level emotions,  $\alpha = 0.96$  for both anger and fear. Again, individual anger ( $M = 3.75, SD = 1.92$ ) and individual fear ( $M = 3.54, SD = 1.77$ ) were averaged.

#### *Policies*

Policies were designed to assess preference toward confronting the source of the threat. We asked about support for airstrikes against ISIS using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 4 (*strongly favor*;  $M = 3.15, SD = 0.96$ ). Using the same scale, we also asked about support for sending troops against ISIS ( $M = 2.63, SD = 0.89$ ).<sup>3</sup>

#### *Group Attitudes*

Presidential approval was assessed by asking whether respondents approved (0 = 46%) or disapproved (1 = 54%) of the way Barack Obama was handling his job. Modern racism toward Muslims consisted of five items taken from Wohl and Branscombe (2009), ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and produced  $\alpha = 0.75$ . The average of the five questions ( $M = 4.08, SD = 1.33$ ) was used.

### **Analytic Procedure**

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted to examine the best fit for the models under consideration. We report root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), comparative fit index (CFI), and the Tucker Lewis index (TLI). H1 was tested using a *t* test, remaining hypotheses and research questions were tested using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, and we relied on the PROCESS macro in SPSS to estimate direct and indirect effects (Hayes, 2015). PROCESS generates an index of moderated mediation, which quantifies whether the indirect effect of *X* on *Y* through various mediators, *M*, varies at different levels of an exogenous moderator, *W*.

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<sup>3</sup> Policy questions were adapted from Pew Research Center (2014).

## Results

Measure validation began with a CFA and showed that standardized factor loadings were significant and above 0.84 for each of the four emotions: (a) group anger, (b) group fear, (c) individual anger, and (d) individual fear. The global fit indices for the CFA suggested that the four-factor model was an excellent fit:  $\chi^2(164) = 533.19$ , RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.04, CFI = 0.97, and TLI = 0.96 (Beaujean, 2014). Repeating the analysis with the two-factor model (group emotions and individual emotions) resulted in weaker global fit indices,  $\chi^2(169) = 4,071.29$ , RMSEA = 0.21, SRMR = 0.17, CFI = 0.66, and TLI = 0.62. A comparison of these two models showed the first to be a significantly better fit,  $\chi^2(5) = 3538.10$ ,  $p < .001$  (Hayduk, Cummings, Boadu, Pazderka-Robinson, & Boulianne, 2007), suggesting that the four-factor model purported by our theoretical approach also matches the empirical data best. As a final check, we also compared the four-factor model to another two-factor model (individual/group fear and individual/group anger) and found similar results as above,  $\chi^2(169) = 4,266.29$ , RMSEA = 0.22, SRMR = 0.16, CFI = 0.65, and TLI = 0.60. A comparison of the four-factor model to this two-factor model showed the former to be a significantly better fit,  $\chi^2(5) = 3,733.10$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### ***Differences Between Group and Individual Emotions***

Next, we examined whether differences existed between group-level and individual-level emotions. In support of H1, respondents reported higher scores on group emotions than individual emotions. Paired-samples *t* tests showed that group fear ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) was higher than individual fear ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) among all participants,  $t(498) = 14.98$ ,  $p < .001$ . Likewise, group anger ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) was higher than individual anger ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.92$ ) among all participants,  $t(498) = 22.06$ ,  $p < .001$ .

These findings suggest that group emotions are distinct from individual emotions. The CFAs showed sufficient differences in each metric, suggesting that group anger, group fear, individual anger, and individual fear should be modeled as discrete emotions. Next, we observed that respondents reported higher levels of group emotions than individual emotions, which makes sense given our argument that terrorist threats are thought to operate at the group level. Although we did not conduct a formal test of identity priming, these findings are consistent with the idea that when respondents' self-concepts overlap with cognitive structures about their ingroup, then media messages about the ingroup should be expected to activate social identity (Higgins, 1996).

### ***Regression Models***

A series of hierarchical regression analyses was undertaken to examine the predictors of emotions. Along with covariates, the first step included threat and group strength. To test RQ1, the second step contained the interaction term. Supporting H2, threat perception in news stories was positively related to group emotions. The regression model showed that threat perception was positively related to group anger,  $b = 0.25$  (0.12),  $p < .05$ , and group fear,  $b = 0.42$  (0.15),  $p < .01$ . Additionally, threat was unrelated to individual anger,  $b = 0.23$  (0.17),  $p = .18$ , and individual fear,  $b = 0.21$  (0.15),  $p = .17$ . Addressing RQ1, the interaction only reached significance when predicting group fear,  $b = 0.62$  (0.29),  $p < .05$ . See Table 1. Decomposing the simple slopes showed that when strength was high, threat

predicted group fear,  $b = 0.73$  (0.21),  $p < .001$ , and did not predict group fear when strength was low,  $b = 0.12$  (0.20)  $p = .52$ .

**Table 1. Predicting Group Emotions, Antiterrorism Policies, and Group Attitudes.**

Predictor	Group	Group	Ind Anger	Ind Fear	Airstrikes	Troops	President	Modern
	Anger	Fear					Approval	Racism
	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
Constant	2.81***	2.64***	2.53***	3.48***	.77**	.62*	-3.59***	2.02***
Age	.01***	-.00	.00	-.01*	.01***	.01	.01*	.00
Female	.02	.97***	-.06	.75***	-.16*	-.10	.42	-.05
Education	.08	.07	-.04	.01	.01	-.04	-.02	-.12*
Ideology	.06	.03	.04	-.02	-.04	-.01	.30***	.11*
Party ID	.06	.01	-.03	.01	.05	.06*	.54***	.18***
Need for Cog	.07	-.08	-.09	-.19***	.07*	.14	-.15	-.09*
Nationalism	.21***	.28***	.37***	.28***	.13***	.20***	.09	.19***
Threat	.25*	.42**	.23	.21	.02	-.02	-.07	-.04
Strength	-.05	-.06	-.00	.03	.08	.10	-.11	-
Thrt × Stg	.15	.62*	.05	.32	-	-	-	-
Group	-	-	-	-	.22***	.13**	.23*	.03
Anger								
Group Fear	-	-	-	-	-.02	-.02	-.05	.10*
Ind Anger	-	-	-	-	-.04	-.05	-.07	.14**
Ind Fear	-	-	-	-	-.02	-.09*	-.19	-.10
$R^2$	.12***	.15***	.08***	.14***	.26***	.18***	-	.29***
Cox & Snell $R^2$							.29***	
$N$	499	499	498	499	498	499	499	499

Note. Cells contain unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Ind = individual; Cog = cognition; Thrt × Stg = threat × strength.

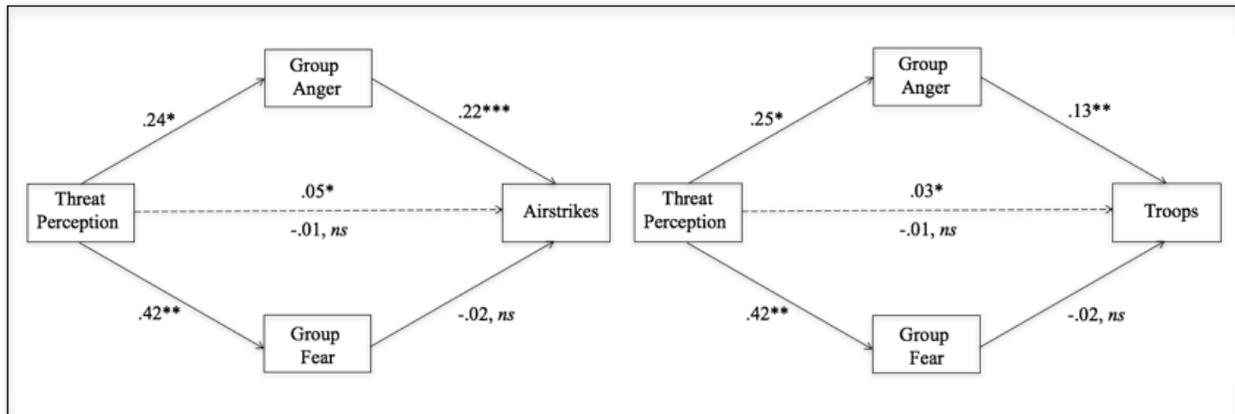
\*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .

### Mediation Models

H3a and H4a predicted that group anger would mediate the relationships between perception of terrorist threat and support for military action and were supported. The indirect effect of threat perception on airstrikes through group anger was significant,  $b = 0.05$  (0.03), CI [0.004, 0.115]. Likewise, the indirect effect of threat perception on sending troops through group anger was significant,  $b = 0.03$  (0.02), CI [0.005, 0.079]. See Figure 2.

H3b and H4b predicted that group fear would mediate the relationships between perception of terrorist threat and support for military action and were not supported. As threat and group strength

interacted to predict group fear, these hypotheses were examined simultaneously with RQ2 to test whether the indirect effect changed at different levels of group strength. The index of moderated mediation did not reach significance for airstrikes,  $b = 0.03$  (0.05), 95% CI [-0.062, 0.143], or sending troops,  $b = 0.02$  (0.03), 95% CI [-0.036, 0.096], and Figure 2 shows the results of the basic mediation models with group fear. Neither individual emotion mediated these relationships.



**Figure 2. Mediation models included four emotion variables, using 95% CI bootstrapped with 10,000 samples. Indirect effects of individual fear ( $b = 0.02$ , ns) and individual anger ( $b = -0.01$ , ns) on troops, and individual fear ( $b = -0.00$ , ns) and individual anger ( $b = -0.01$ , ns) on airstrikes are not pictured. \*\*\* $p < .001$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \* $p < .05$ .**

The final pair of hypotheses examined the relationships between group anger and presidential approval, and group fear and modern racism toward Muslims, respectively. In support of H5, group anger mediated the relationship between threat perception and presidential approval,  $b = 0.06$  (0.04), CI [0.002, 0.163]. The indirect effect through group fear did not vary by group strength, as the index of moderated-mediation did not reach significance  $b = -0.03$  (0.07), CI [-0.231, 0.085]. Neither individual emotion mediated this relationship.

Addressing H6 and RQ2 simultaneously showed that the mediated relationship between threat perception and modern racism toward Muslims through group fear varied at different levels of group strength, as the index of moderated-mediation reached significance,  $b = 0.06$  (0.04), CI [0.003, 0.192].<sup>4</sup> When strength was low, the indirect effect was not significant,  $b = 0.01$  (0.03), 95% CI [-0.023, 0.082], and when group strength was high, the indirect effect was significant,  $b = 0.07$  (0.04), CI [0.005, 0.185]. The indirect effect through group anger was not significant,  $b = 0.01$  (0.02), CI [-0.015, 0.056]. Neither individual emotion mediated this relationship.

<sup>4</sup> PROCESS does not include the moderator (strength) in the second half of the regression model when predicting modern racism. Rerunning the analysis with strength included did not change the results and did not predict modern racism,  $b = 0.02$  (0.14),  $p = 0.90$ .

## **Discussion**

We argued that coverage of terrorism activated social identities and led people to understand terrorism as Americans rather than individuals. We found that when participants thought about themselves as Americans, group anger mediated the relationships between threat coverage and support for U.S. military action and presidential approval. Group fear, on the other hand, mediated the relationship between threat coverage and modern racism toward Muslims. When participants thought about themselves as individuals, neither anger nor fear mediated these relationships. One advantage of the present study is that the experimental treatments were designed to elicit group-level emotions from respondents and not individual-level emotions. Including both group and individual emotions in the mediation models was important because, as with any regression model, omitting variables that could be related to outcome variables may introduce bias (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010).

### ***Group Emotions and Individual Emotions***

We argued that because terrorism uses violence against a small group of direct victims to incite fear and anger among a large group of indirect victims, terrorist threats should be considered group-oriented phenomena. As E. R. Smith et al. (2007) put it, "if people give essentially the same reports when asked about their individual-level emotions and their emotions as members of a group such as Americans, it would be difficult to argue that group emotions are truly a distinct phenomenon" (p. 432). Although social psychologists have found evidence of group emotions (Mackie et al., 2004), most studies do not include group-level and individual-level emotions together in the same study. The novel contribution of the current study is that it explains the unique contribution of group emotions in a realistic context of sustained media coverage about a new terrorist threat. These findings add to recent work showing that emotions can mediate the relationships between news and outgroup attitudes (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2017), as we found that outgroup animosity extended beyond terrorists to Muslims broadly. This is also consistent with the idea that prejudice can vary as a function of threat posed by an outgroup toward an ingroup, rather than operating as a constant or crystallized attitude.

### ***Group Anger and Group Fear***

Next, we found that group anger and group fear operated in unique ways, with group anger mediating the relationships between threat coverage and military action, and group fear mediating the relationship between threat coverage and modern racism. These results support IET by showing that when group and individual emotions are included in the same models, they have unique consequences on policy preferences. Somewhat surprisingly, much of the research in the area of emotion has examined general action tendencies (Musgrove & McGarty, 2008) rather than actual policy options. We showed that group emotions are one mechanism by which coverage of terrorism is related to realistic policies.

## **Conclusion**

It is well established in political communication literature that during times of international conflict, national identity and threat are common features of coverage (Nacos, 2007). Our findings built on this

research by showing that news coverage of threat and identity can lead people to view events through the lens of American national identity (Althaus & Kim, 2006). Altheide (2006), for instance, notes that when terrorist attacks occur, victimhood becomes a collective experience, and the nations' citizens see themselves in each other. Moreover, identity scholars have argued that the self-concept consists of a cognitive representation developed on the basis of salient aspects of the situation (Turner et al., 1987)—and, in the case of terrorism, the most salient aspects are national identity and threat. This study linked these perspectives together and showed that media coverage of terrorism can arouse group-based emotions and support for group-based responses, such as modern racism and military policies.

One difficulty for scholars working at the intersection of emotion and identity is explaining how emotion can exist at the social level. In other words, if emotion is a physiological response in the brain (LeDoux, 1996), how can it be a group-level response? Our explanation is that individual emotions are not contradictory to group emotions. Individuals experience a physiological response when they are presented with a threat directly, and these preconscious threat appraisals drive decision-making processes. Processing social identity threat appraisals via news media can result in people experiencing emotions on behalf of fellow group members (Mackie et al., 2000). The present study demonstrated that group emotions can be experienced indirectly and socially via news media.

### **Limitations**

This study was not without limitations. First, we opted to use the *New York Times* as the sole news source in the manipulations. Relying on the *Times*, however, may have somewhat muted the effects of coverage compared with news outlets that are associated with supporting hawkish policies. Second, we did not include positive emotions in this study. We made this decision because the main goal was to distinguish between group and individual emotions, and it is unlikely that terrorist threats would elicit positive emotions among Americans.

Studying the dissemination of threat perceptions via mass media is vital to understanding public opinion formation about foreign policies. On one hand, the goal was to provide insight into media effects of terrorism coverage. On the other hand, and perhaps more important, the meta-theoretical goal was to showcase the unique contribution of communication research as a meeting place for scholars whose research informs areas beyond their home disciplines. We, therefore, hope to provide scholars steeped principally in one discipline a jumping-off point for exploring areas of overlap provided by communication.

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