Social Geometry and the 'Terrorism' Label

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A rotulação de notícias de violência varia. O mesmo ato de violência pode ser rotulado como "terrorismo", "tiroteio", ou "fúria". Apesar das teorias e pesquisas sobre a relação entre mídia e terrorismo, ainda não está claro quando as agências de notícias rotularão a violência como "terrorismo" e com que frequência o rótulo será usado. Concentrando-me principalmente na rotulação do "terrorismo", em **Geometria social e o selo do "terrorismo"** utilizo a estratégia da "geometria social" para desenvolver sete proposições que explicam e preveem parcialmente a rotulação moral da violência. Esses princípios aumentam nossa compreensão da rotulação do "terrorismo", mas também esclarecem a questão mais ampla de como o desvio é definido.

Palavras-chave: desvio, rotulagem de notícias, controle social, geometria social, terrorismo

The news labeling of violence varies. The same act of violence may be labeled "terrorism", a "shooting", or a "rampage". Despite theory and research on the relationship between the media and terrorism, it is still unclear when news outlets will label violence "terrorism" and how frequently the label will be used. Focusing primarily on "terrorism" labeling, I use the strategy of "social geometry" to develop seven propositions that partially explain and predict the moral news labeling of violence. These principles increase our understanding of "terrorism" labeling, but also illuminate the broader issue of how deviance is defined.

Keywords: deviance, news labeling, social control, social geometry, terrorism

Introduction[1]

Scholars have long been interested in the relationship between terrorism and the news media. Indeed, research has focused on, among other things, terrorists' strategic use of the media (see, e.g., WEIMANN, 2005), the psychological impacts of terrorism news coverage (see, e.g., SLONE, 2000), the news framing of terrorism (see, e.g., NORRIS, KERN, and JUST, 2003), and the quantity of terrorism reporting (see, e.g., KEARNS, BETUS, and LEMIEUX, 2019). For example, a recent study on the quantity of terrorism reporting finds that terrorist attacks in the United States involving Muslim perpetrators receive 357% more news coverage than similar attacks by non-Muslim perpetrators (*Ibid.*). While this literature has contributed to a better understanding of the relationship between terrorism and the media, it is still unclear when news outlets will label violence "terrorism".

Determining whether an act of violence is "terrorism" is not easy. After all, there is no consensus definition of terrorism. Not surprisingly, there is often much confusion and debate about labeling in the aftermath of significant violence. For example, the day after the 2015 attack

by Dylann Roof at a Charleston, South Carolina church the *New York Times* ran an article titled "Many Ask, Why Not Call Church Shooting Terrorism?" (GLADSTONE, 06/18/2015). This leads to the central question, *when are the labels "terrorism" and "terrorists" used to describe violence and its perpetrators*? And once these labels are used, *what explains their frequency*? To be clear, some have offered explanations (see section titled "Exploring the 'Terrorism' Label"). However, a logically consistent set of theoretical propositions that explain and predict the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling is lacking.

The literature on social control will not provide a great deal of help answering these questions. Theory and research on deviant labels are underdeveloped. Sociologists who study social control, as a form of conflict management (see CAMPBELL and MANNING, 2019), have largely neglected the topic of the distribution of deviant labels in favor of developing theory intended to explain variation in responses to deviance. One notable exception to the lack of scholarship on deviant labels is prior work on "mental illness" labeling (HORWITZ, 1982). However, "terrorism" is a different type of deviant label and demands a different explanation.

In short, I address two gaps related to "terrorism" labeling and social control in this paper. First, regarding the "terrorism" label, no prior theory has developed a logically consistent set of simple, testable, and general propositions that explain and predict the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling by the news media in response to violence. Second, regarding social control, there has been a major emphasis on investigating the responses to deviance at the expense of explaining how deviance is defined.

To fill these gaps, I offer seven tentative propositions that partially explain and predict moral news labeling in response to violence. Four of these propositions predict "terrorism" labeling, two focus on positive and neutral labeling, and one helps to address the evolution of moral labeling. They are as follows:

1. "Terrorism" labeling varies directly with the relational distance between the perpetrator(s) and target(s).
2. "Terrorism" labeling is greater in response to attacks perpetrated against more conventional targets than against less conventional targets.
3. "Terrorism" labeling is greater in response to attacks perpetrated against more organized targets than against less organized targets.
4. "Terrorism" labeling increases with the social closeness of news outlets to the target(s) and social distance from the perpetrator(s).
5. Positive news labeling increases with the social closeness of news outlets to the perpetrator(s) and social distance from the target(s).

6. Neutral news labeling is a direct function of the isosceles triangulation of social closeness between the three participants.

7. Variation in moral news labeling is a direct function of social diversity.

To help me develop these formulations, I employed the strategy of "social geometry" invented by Donald Black (see BLACK, 1995; CAMPBELL and MANNING, 2019). Before discussing the evidence in favor of these propositions, I want to reconceptualize news labeling as a form of social control and provide an overview of social geometry. In order to do that, I must first discuss variation in news labeling and prior explanations of the "terrorism" label.

Exploring the 'Terrorism' Label

The news labels used to describe violence vary. The same act of violence may be labeled "terrorism", a "shooting", or a "rampage". Perpetrators are often deemed "terrorists", "bombers", "killers", "madmen", or "crazed gunmen". Consider the following examples:

- The *Wall Street Journal* reports that Dylann Roof, the perpetrator of the 2015 "killings" of nine individuals in Charleston, South Carolina's historically black Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, is a "'loner'" (BAUERLEIN, LEVITZ, and KAMP, 06/18/2015).
- The *New York Times* quotes New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton calling the 2014 attack, by "hatchet-wielding" Zale Thompson, against four New York City police officers a "'terrorist act'" (SCHWIRTZ and RASHBAUM, 10/24/2014).
- Scott Shane (04/16/2013) from the *New York Times* writes that the "bombing of the Boston Marathon" by Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev marks "the end of more than a decade in which the United States experienced strikingly few terrorist attacks".
- The editorial board of *USA Today* (06/12/2009) calls James Wenneker von Brunn, the perpetrator of the 2009 attack at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., "a deranged…anti-Semitic gunman".

What explains this variation in news labeling? And specifically, what explains the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling? A survey of the literature produces five major explanations. First, variation in "terrorism" labeling results from a lack of consensus over the definition of the term (NACOS, 2007 [2002]).[2] Second, the news media adopts the "terrorism" label in response to

violence only after it has been used by legitimate news sources like the state (BUDDENBAUM, 1991; DOBKIN, 1992). Third, the news labeling of violence, including "terrorism" labeling, is a function of the cultural and ideological beliefs of the evaluators, be they journalists (see PICARD, 1993) or editors (MARTIN and DRAZNIN, 1991). Fourth, recent attacks, as opposed to past instances, serve to influence the type of violence the news media considers "terrorism" for a period of several years (JENKINS, 2003). Finally, disparate studies demonstrate that attributes of terrorism, such as the nationality of the target(s), influence how it is labeled (see, e.g., WEIMANN, 1985; SIMMONS and LOWRY, 1990).

While each explanation has contributed to our understanding of "terrorism" labeling, they are all limited in that they do not provide a logically consistent set of simple, testable, and general propositions that explain and predict the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling in response to violence. To help me fill this gap in the literature and develop such propositions (see HOMANS, 1967), I reconceptualize news labeling as a form of social control.

News Labeling as Social Control

Deviance is immoral behavior and social control is the definition of, and response to, deviance (BLACK, 2010 [1976]). The news media often engages in social control. Specifically, news outlets engage in defining or labeling deviant behavior. A good example is "terrorism" labeling. News outlets may describe violence as "terrorism" and its perpetrators as "terrorists." "Terrorism" and "terrorists" are negative labels – they declare attacks and their perpetrators morally wrong. "Terrorism's" negative connotation is demonstrated by people's reluctance to describe themselves as "terrorists". For example, while members of Hamas embrace the labels "fighter" and "mujahedeen", they see the actions of the Israeli government as "terrorism" (SPECKHARD, 2012).

"Terrorism" and "terrorist" are not the only negative labels. "War" is arguably more negative than "terrorism". On September 12, 2001 President George W. Bush said the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon the day before were "more than acts of terror. They were acts of war" (NEW YORK TIMES, 09/13/2001). "Genocide" is another negative label and often occurs in response to downward mass violence – by more powerful actors, such as the state, against less powerful groups. As a result, "terrorism" does not always represent an increase in severity relative to other labels. It is one of many negative labels used to describe violence.

Negative labels are not the only labels that are reported in response to violence. News outlets also report positive and neutral labels (see WEIMANN, 1985). While positive news labels (e.g.,

"liberation") express social approval in response to violence, neutral news labels, in their purest form, make no moral judgment. However, in less pure forms, neutral labels express mild moral evaluations. For example, the news media may label an act of violence a "shooting", a "bombing", or a "killing". Neutral framing also includes therapeutic labels, which often define perpetrators as mentally ill through words such as "crazy", "sick", and "depressed". Each of the three categories of moral news labeling – positive, neutral, and negative – rest on a continuum varying from praise to condemnation. In this paper, my primary focus is negative labeling. However, I concentrate on the "terrorism" label and tend to leave other negative labels, such as "genocide", for future analysis. Consistent with Black's theory of social control (see CAMPBELL and MANNING, 2019), I use the strategy of social geometry to help me partially explain the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling in response to violence.

Explaining the 'Terrorism' Label

Donald Black argues that each form of social control has a corresponding social geometry. Suicide, gossip, avoidance, and all other forms of social control, including "terrorism" labeling, is isomorphic with its geometric configuration. The theoretical goal is to identify each behavior's geometry. By doing so, we are stating the social conditions under which that behavior occurs. Afterwards, the geometry can be subject to empirical testing to assess its validity.

To identify a behavior's geometry is to find its location, direction, and distance along the five dimensions of social space. The *vertical* dimension is comprised of wealth and its distribution; the *horizontal* dimension is comprised of intimacy, integration, and interdependence; the *symbolic* dimension is comprised of culture; the *corporate* dimension is comprised of organization; and the *normative* dimension is comprised of social control. For example, feuding found among modern street gangs occurs laterally across moderate distances in the horizontal dimension, at moderate elevations in the corporate dimension, and at a vertical location significantly below third-party settlement agents (COONEY, 1998). If this geometry begins to change, the associated violence will also start to look different. For instance, holding all else constant, lowering the location of gang violence along the corporate dimension – in other words, changing the disputants from moderately organized groups to individuals – decreases the probability that the violence will be reciprocal.

Since this explanatory strategy was first introduced in Black's (2010 [1976]) theory of law, sociologists have employed geometric logic to explain different forms of social control, such as terrorism, lynching, rioting, vigilantism (SENECHAL DE LA ROCHE, 1996), genocide (CAMPBELL, 2015), domestic violence (BLACK, 2018), suicide (MANNING, 2012), and therapy

(TUCKER, 1999), while others have analyzed the social control of specific behavior such as suicide (*Idem*, 2015) and homicide (COONEY, 2009). While this literature has expanded our understanding of social control, most of it only explores the response to deviance and neglects the labeling of deviance itself. One notable exception is work on "mental illness" labeling by Horwitz (1982). Drawing on a wide array of data, Horwitz argues that geometric logic can explain and predict when someone is considered "mentally ill". For example, the tendency to label someone "mentally ill" is a direct function of the cultural distance between the labeler and labeled. In other words, all else constant, as the labeler and labeled become more culturally heterogeneous the probability of being labeled "mentally ill" increases. Horwitz's research is important because it helps identify the social principles conducive to therapeutic labeling. But because the "terrorism" label is a different type of deviant label, identifying its geometry helps move beyond therapeutic labeling and expand our understanding on how deviance is defined.

With that said, how does social geometry explain the "terrorism" label? The likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling in response to violence is partially a function of each attack's geometric configuration in social space. By examining the social statuses of all the participants involved in each violent attack and the relations among them, we can begin to uncover geometric patterns conducive to the "terrorism" label. When trying to identify the geometry of the "terrorism" label it is important to ask, was the attack between intimates, such as family members, or between citizens of different countries? Was the attack perpetrated by immigrants, members of the ethnic minority, or social outcasts? Were the targets members of the ethnic majority or minority? Were they active members of their community or social hermits? Was the attack directed against an organization of some kind, such as a corporation or state? What about the social characteristics of third parties, such as the news outlets reporting on the attack, and their relations to the principals?

It is important to recognize that social geometry does not explain all the variance in "terrorism" labeling. The nature of the violence also matters. For example, "terrorism" labeling is likely to increase as the number of casualties increase. Furthermore, some tactics are more likely to elicit "terrorism" labeling than others. Bombings are more associated with "terrorism" labeling than shootings (HUFF and KERTZER, 2018). Violence that targets everyone of a certain group, be it based on religion, nationality, or ethnicity, also seems to have a greater chance of being described as "terrorism" than more selective violence. While the "terrorism" label is likely to vary based upon the nature of the attack, I do not explore this variable here because there is a lack of data on the topic. Nevertheless, my propositions assume that the nature of violence is held constant.

To help me develop my propositions and identify the social geometry conducive to the "terrorism" label, I draw mostly from recent research on portrayals of violence and terrorism in the

news media. I pay particular attention to acts of mass violence. The nature of small-scale violence, such as assault, homicide, and suicide, differs in too many respects from the nature of mass violence. It makes little sense to compare, for example, the labeling of intimate partner violence to the labeling of ethnic cleansing. Again, it is essential that we keep the nature of violence constant. While empirical reality makes this difficult, I try to approximate uniformity across cases when possible by focusing my analysis on mass violence. Additionally, because there are gaps in this literature, my formulations are only provisional – subject to future elaboration and qualification. Nevertheless, as Baele *et al.* write, prior research on terrorism and the news media makes "clear that the 'terrorist' label has a variable geometry" (BAELE *et al.*, 2019, p. 523). Now we must identify it.

The Geometry of the 'Terrorism' Label

"Terrorism" labeling occurs across time and place. However, regardless of when and where "terrorism" is reported it is likely to have the same underlying sociological features. I argue that the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling by the news media in response to violence is greatest when (1) there is a high degree of relational distance between the perpetrator(s) and target(s), (2) the attack is perpetrated against more conventional targets, (3) the attack is perpetrated against more organized targets, and (4) the news outlet reporting on the attack is socially close to the target(s) and socially distant from the perpetrator(s). Now consider the evidence.

Relational Distance

Relational distance is the degree to which people participate in each other's lives (BLACK, 2010 [1976]). Relational distance can be measured by "the scope, frequency, and length of interaction between people, the age of their relationship, and the nature and number of links between them in a social network" (*Ibid.*, p. 41). I argue that as the level of intimacy between the perpetrator(s) and target(s) decreases the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling increases. Stated more formally: *"Terrorism" labeling varies directly with the relational distance between the perpetrator(s) and target(s).*

A certain degree of relational distance is usually necessary for violence to be labeled "terrorism". As a result, "terrorism" is rarely reported in response to intimate violence. This is often true for family rampage killings or familicide – the killing of multiple family members. For example, just after midnight on January 1, 2019, a Thai man, Sucheep Sornsung, killed six members of his family, including his two young children, at a New Year's Eve party. In response, *The Daily*

Telegraph (01/01/2019) labeled the incident a "mass shooting" and the perpetrator a "gunman". The same logic applies to gang violence, school shootings, and workplace shootings. Despite often resulting in high death tolls, gang violence is rarely labeled "terrorism" because of the closeness of the disputants. Members of rival gangs are often acquaintances or residents of the same street, neighborhood, or city. Similarly, mass shootings that occur between students and co-workers are rarely labeled "terrorism" because of the intimacy between the parties.

At first glance, the absence of clear political motive among the perpetrators of familicide, gang violence, and school and workplace shootings seem to account for the lack of "terrorism" labeling. However, some experts believe that motive is not an essential component of terrorism and determining if an attack is terrorism is easier when ignoring psychological mindsets (BLACK, 2004; see also WEINBERG, PEDAHZUR, and HIRSCH-HOEFLER, 2004). After all, observing mental states is exceedingly difficult. That is not to say that the perpetrator's motivation is irrelevant in influencing the labeling of violence. There is a higher probability of the public defining behavior as "terrorism" when the perpetrator's motive is hatred, policy change, or governmental overthrow compared to a personal grievance (HUFF and KERTZER, 2018). Furthermore, in instances where perpetrators leave behind writings outlining their beliefs or pledge loyalty to already defined "terrorist" groups, motivation may have a significant impact on labeling. As a result, social geometry is probably most powerful predicting "terrorism" labeling in cases when motive is unclear.

Research provides additional evidence that supports my provisional formulation on the negative association between intimacy and "terrorism" labeling. As Pete Simi writes,

> the media…in the United States are far more likely to refer to violent incidents linked to "international" groups as terrorist than violent incidents linked to domestic radicals…In terms of Middle Eastern terrorists, there is strong consensus about the danger they pose…Although white supremacists are highly stigmatized…they are not necessarily viewed as a significant terrorist threat…Instead the consensus regarding white supremacists typically involves characterizing them as…"incompetent," and "disorganized" (SIMI, 2010, p. 254).

Simi continues by writing that the media often believes domestic terrorism groups are little more than dysfunctional "'boisterous loudmouths'" (*Ibid.*, p. 266). For example, in the early 2000s while the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a group of clandestine cells known for their use of arson to discourage environmentally destructive practices, was deemed a major domestic terrorism threat by the FBI (AMSTER, 2006; JOOSSE, 2012), the news media often trivialized the group, and in one case described ELF adherent Craig Marshall as a "'tree-hugger'" (JOOSSE, 2012, p. 82). Similarly, Turk argues that when "terrorism" is used by the public it

is far more likely to refer to incidents associated with agents and supporters of presumably foreign-based…organizations…than with the violence of home-grown militants acting in the name of such groups as the Animal Liberation Front (TURK, 2004, pp. 272-273).

An analysis of over 1,600 news stories on terrorism in the United States between 2001 and 2010 finds that negative news reporting increases with relational distance (POWELL, 2011). Domestic perpetrators were often personalized and, in some cases, "labeled as being mentally unstable", "smart", or "intelligent" (*Ibid.*, pp. 98-99). On the other hand, international perpetrators were often framed as extremists. Powell concludes that the media reporting of terrorism reflects the idea that "it is the outsider that is more of a threat than the one that walks among us" (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

In sum, the news reporting on familicide, gang violence, school and workplace shootings, domestic radicals, and other relationally close violence shows that intimacy repels "terrorism" labeling.

Cultural Direction

Cultural characteristics that are more frequent in a society are more conventional (BLACK, 2010 [1976]). The participants in every act of violence can be measured by their degree of cultural conventionality. An offense against a target with more conventionality is more serious, and attracts more social control, than an identical offense against a target with less conventionality (*Ibid.*). For example, religion is a cultural characteristic and in the United States Christianity is more conventional than Islam because there are more Christians than Muslims in the United States. Thus, an attack by a Muslim against a Christian in the United States should garner more social control than an identical attack in the opposite direction. Applying this logic to the news labeling of violence, I propose the following provisional formulation: *"Terrorism" labeling is greater in response to attacks perpetrated against more conventional targets than against less conventional targets.*

First, consider national origin. Nationality is an indirect measure of culture because national origin is often associated with specific cultural behavior such as distinct manifestations of language, dress, and folklore. "Research has revealed", Nacos writes, "that the U.S. media is more prone to label violent acts as 'terrorism' when U.S. citizens are involved than in cases without American involvement" (NACOS, 2007 [2002], p. 103). Studying three major American newsmagazines between 1980 and 1988, Simmons and Lowry (1990) found that the "t-word was used in 79% of the cases when American citizens were targets, but in only 51% of the cases when no U.S. citizens were involved" (NACOS, 2007 [2002], pp. 103-104). In other words, violence is more likely to be labeled "terrorism" by American news outlets when Americans are targeted

compared to when non-Americans are targeted. The higher degree of "terrorism" framing by the American news media in response to violence targeting Americans is a function of the conventionality of the targets.

As predicted, when Americans are the perpetrators of violence the likelihood that "terrorism" is reported by the American news media falls. Consider the 1994 attack by Dr. Baruch Goldstein. During prayer at the Ibrahimi Mosque on February 25th Goldstein opened fire leaving 29 dead and over 100 Palestinians wounded. In the aftermath of the incident, "members of the American media characterized Goldstein's deed as a massacre, a shooting rampage, murder, or mass murder, but not as an act of terrorism" (*Ibid.*, p. 106). Because Goldstein was an American citizen, the attack was seen by American news outlets as committed by a culturally conventional perpetrator. As a result, rather than reporting the "terrorism" label, the news media used less severe labels (e.g., "murder") to describe the attack.

Now consider religion. The American media typically frames Muslim perpetrators of violence as "terrorists". This is exactly what the cultural direction formulation predicts considering the unconventionality of Muslims in contemporary American society. The portrayal of Muslims as perpetrators of terrorism has been widespread in American popular culture for decades (SHAHEEN, 2000). Yet, as Edward Said (1997 [1981]) notes, the media's labeling of Muslims (and Arabs) as "terrorists" is not isolated to the realm of Hollywood cinema. In fact, Muslims remain the most prone to being characterized as "terrorists" by the Western news media (see NACOS, 2007 [2002]). Specifically,

> The media in the United States and in other Western countries report on "Islamic" or "Muslim" terrorists and terrorism but not on "Christian" terrorists and terrorism, for instance in the context of…anti-abortion violence in the United States committed under the banner of the Christian "Army of God" (*Ibid.*, p. 106).

A set of recent experiments, looking at popular labeling instead of news labeling, provides additional evidence for the association between Islam and "terrorism". West and Lloyd (2017) presented British participants with identical news articles that varied the religious characteristics of the perpetrators. As predicted, for the same attack, Muslim perpetrators were more likely to be labeled "terrorists" than non-Muslims.

With that said, considering the conventionality of the perpetrator(s) or target(s) individually is misleading. When analyzing the social geometry of violence, the conventionality of both the perpetrator(s) and target(s) must be considered simultaneously. Consider the 2017 incident on Westminster Bridge in London. Khalid Masood deliberately hit several individuals with an automobile – killing four pedestrians – before entering the Palace of Westminster and fatally stabbing Police Constable Keith Palmer. Masood's targets were largely white and Christian, while

Masood was black and Muslim. This attack received significant news coverage and negative framing. A search in LexisNexis Academic for "(Khalid Masood) and (terrorism or terrorist)" between March 22, 2017 and March 24, 2017 produces 455 newspaper articles from around the globe. In short, the "terrorism" frame was widely adopted by newspapers directly after the attack.

A similar attack occurred three months later on June 19, 2017. The white Christian perpetrator, Darren Osborne, deliberately drove an automobile into a group of brown Muslims outside the Muslim Welfare House in London. Osborne's attack resulted in the death of one individual. Like Masood's attack, this incident received significant news coverage and negative framing. A LexisNexis Academic search for "(Darren Osborne) and (terrorism or terrorist)" between June 19, 2017 and June 21, 2017 produces 207 newspaper articles.

Despite the adoption of the "terrorism" frame in response to Osborne's attack, it was significantly less compared to Masood's attack. In fact, Masood's attack garnered over two times more newspaper articles containing the "terrorism" label than Osborne's attack. Although these events are not identical, they do share some important characteristics such as being committed only three months apart, by one male, in London, and with the use of an automobile as the primary weapon. As a result, the observed variation in "terrorism" labeling between the two attacks can arguably be attributed to cultural direction—Masood's attack was perpetrated against more conventional targets, while Osborne's attack was perpetrated against less conventional targets.

In sum, evidence suggests that "terrorism" labeling is greater in response to violence perpetrated by those who are culturally unconventional, such as foreigners and ethnic minorities, against those who are culturally conventional than in response to attacks in the opposite direction.

Organizational Direction

Organization is "the capacity for collective action" and can be measured by "the presence and number of administrative officers, the centralization and continuity of decision making, and the quantity of collective action itself" (BLACK, 2010 [1976], p. 85). The participants in every act of violence can be measured by their degree of organization. As a participant's degree of organization increases so does their status. An act of violence against a principal with higher organizational status is treated as more serious, and attracts more social control, than an identical attack against a principal with lower organizational status. As a result, I propose the following provisional proposition: *"Terrorism" labeling is greater in response to attacks perpetrated against more organized targets than against less organized targets.*

When "terrorism" is discussed it often refers to "'terrorism from below'" (CHOMSKY and HERMAN, 1979, p. 87). In other words, "terror" and "terrorism" "have generally been confined to the use of violence by individuals and marginal groups" (*Ibid.*, p. 6). This is particularly true in the American context:

> According to the American discourse on "terrorism" as it has existed, virtually unchanged, since the mid-1980s, the definition of "terrorism" is self-evident, and accepted by all. "Terrorism" is something that groups or individuals engage in, uses of force by States, especially Western ones, cannot amount to "terrorism" (BRULIN, 2015, p. 71).

While there have been some discussions of state "terrorism" in American history (see BRULIN, 2011), this labeling is rarely used in news reporting. Additionally, the existence of contemporary academic debates over whether states can be "terrorists" provides further support for "terrorism" being associated with perpetrators of low organizational status (see, e.g., STOHL and WIGHT, 2012).

"Terror" as a function of upward attacks against more organized targets has been observed in news discourse: "terrorism as a frame…seems reserved only for individuals, sub-national groups, and pariah states" (quoted in PICARD, 1993, p. 100). For example, *Time* magazine between January and December 1986 was found "consistently [*magnifying*] the importance of…antistate terrorism" (STEUTER, 1990, p. 264). Similarly, violence in Latin America by left-wing groups against U.S. allied states has garnered significant "terrorism" framing by major U.S. newspapers (EPSTEIN, 1977). Also consider environmental violence. Environmental violence is often perpetrated by groups whose "organization is nonhierarchical [*and*] without formal membership" (BECK, 2007, p. 165). In most cases these groups average only a few individual members. On the other hand, the targets of environmental violence are often organizations such as private corporations. An analysis of 84 environmental attacks between 1998 and 2005 found that just under 60% targeted businesses, followed by private property, and finally the government (*Ibid.*). With the direction of most environmental violence occurring toward more organized targets it is not surprising these attacks are often labeled "eco-terrorism".

Mass violence also occurs in the opposite direction – against less organized targets. However, organizationally downward violence rarely elicits the "terrorism" label. For example, in May 1985 the headquarters of the black organization MOVE, located in a rowhome on Osage Avenue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was destroyed with a bomb dropped from a state police helicopter. Eleven people died, including five children. On the front page of the *New York Times* the following day, William K. Stevens (05/14/1985) labeled the incident a "confrontation" and the targets as "radicals" and an "armed group". The perpetrators, law enforcement, did not garner any explicit labels besides being called the "authorities". Seven years later, agents of the Federal

Bureau of Investigation and United States Marshals Service exchanged gun fire with Randy Weaver and his family (including a family friend) at their remote cabin in Idaho. The violence resulted in the deaths of one U.S. marshal and two members of the Weaver family. On September 1, 1992, the *New York Times* labeled the incident an "11-day siege", a "shootout", and a "standoff" (EGAN, 09/01/1992). Weaver was labeled a "white-supremacist". Again, agents of the state were able to avoid the "terrorist" label.

In sum, evidence suggests that violence perpetrated by principals with low organizational status, such as individuals, against principals with high organizational status, such as states and corporations, garner more "terrorism" labeling than violence in the opposite direction.

Partisanship

Not only is there evidence that the principal disputants influence "terrorism" labeling, but also that third parties matter. Third parties encompass anyone with knowledge of the violence (e.g., witnesses and news outlets). Third parties vary in their degree of partisanship (BLACK, 1998 [1993]). Partisanship is the extent to which a third-party takes a side in a conflict. On one end of the continuum are strong partisans – third parties who lend total support to a principal against another. On the other end of the continuum are nonpartisans – third parties who either remain uninvolved (cold nonpartisans) or are supportive to both principals and act to settle the dispute (warm nonpartisans). Principals attract partisan support from third parties whom they are socially close – intimate and culturally similar (*Ibid.*). When third parties are partisan toward one principal and socially distant from the other, they often treat the latter as an enemy (*Ibid.*). As a result, when news outlets are positioned as third parties, the moral labeling of violence will often favor the principal whose side the outlet is socially closest. This logic implies a fourth provisional formulation: *"Terrorism" labeling increases with the social closeness of news outlets to the target(s) and social distance from the perpetrator(s).* In other words, "terrorism" labeling increases as the news outlet becomes more intimate with and culturally similar to the target(s) of violence, while at the same time becoming relationally and culturally distant from the perpetrator(s) (see Figure 1).

Recall "that the U.S. media is more prone to label violent acts as 'terrorism' when U.S. citizens are involved than in cases without American involvement" (NACOS, 2007 [2002], p. 103). When United States citizens are targeted in an attack perpetrated by someone who is not a United States citizen, American news outlets are socially closer to the American targets than the foreign perpetrator. The social closeness between American news outlets and American targets increases the likelihood that the news outlets will become an ally to the targets and report the "terrorism"

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label declaring the attack morally wrong. This proposition is supported by the fact that "terrorism" labeling diminishes "in cases without American involvement" (*Idem*). The absence of American targets indicates an increase in social distance between the targets and American outlets. As predicted, the result is less "terrorism" labeling. This is also demonstrated outside the United States. The media in Germany and Britain are more likely to label attacks "terrorism" when they are committed "at home or in Europe", while simultaneously using less severe terms, such as "rebel", "hijacking", and "bombing", when attacks are conducted abroad (*Ibid.*, p. 104).

Figure 1: Partisanship Structure of the "Terrorism" Label
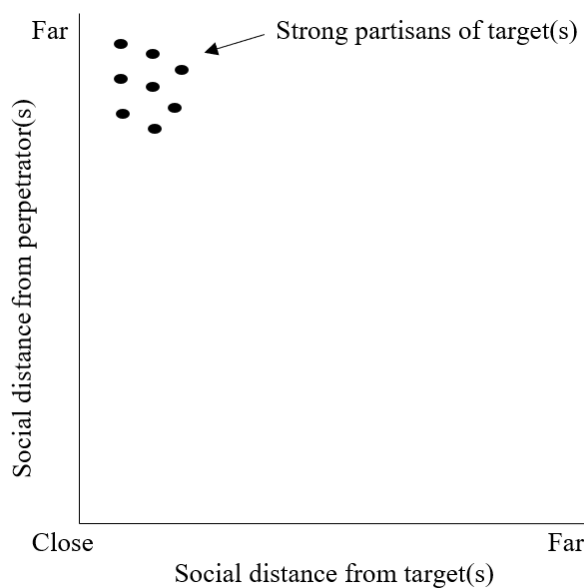
Source: Black (1998 [1993]).

Social distance is measured by a combination of relational and cultural distance. Considering that "people are more likely to support a member of their own culture than a member of a different culture" (COONEY, 1998, p. 71), my fourth proposition predicts that the "terrorism" label is more likely to be reported when the perpetrators of violence hold political views that are different from those held by the news outlets and journalists reporting on the violence (see OZYEGIN, 1986; PICARD, 1993). For example, in Turkey between 1976 and 1980 "terrorism" was found to be "used by the mass circulation center and right-wing newspapers to refer to left-wing political violence. Similarly, the left-wing press used the term to refer to right-wing political violence" (PICARD, 1993, p. 100). A contemporary analysis on the framing of terror in three Turkish newspapers also found that the more politically different the perpetrators were to the political slant of the newspapers the more likely the perpetrators were emphasized and negatively framed in news reports (NARIN, 2011). Likewise, *Le Figaro* in France and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in

Germany "make more frequent use of negative labels in portrayals of terrorist groups that they see as antagonistic to their own traditional national interests" (WEIMANN and WINN, 1994, p. 194). In the United States, one study found that newsmagazines used the "terrorist" label 72% of the time when perpetrators opposed U.S. policy compared to only 55% of the time when they were neutral to U.S. policy (SIMMONS and LOWRY, 1990).

Consider a final example: the Boston Massacre. Within weeks after the March 5, 1770 attack on King Street in Boston, Massachusetts, "massacre" started to appear as a label in the local press (HINDERAKER, 2017). Along with ministers and orators, "newspaper editors reminded Americans of the streets 'Stained with blood,' 'the piercing, agonizing groans,' and 'ye bloody butchers' who served as tools of 'this *British* Military Tyranny'" (RITTER and ANDREWS, 1978, p. 7). About a month after the event, a pamphlet titled *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston* was published (HINDERAKER, 2017). Around the same time, testimonies of the incident were gathered at the behest of British officers, the contents of which were later published in the appendix of a pamphlet titled *A Fair Account of the Late Unhappy Disturbance at Boston in New England* (*Ibid.*). In short, those socially close to the targets expressed moral outrage in response to the attack, using "massacre" to describe the event.[3] On the other hand, as demonstrated by the title of the pamphlet which contained the testimonies gathered by the British, social closeness to the perpetrators resulted in less severe labeling.

In sum, only looking at the characteristics of the perpetrator(s) and target(s) of violence limits our ability to explain "terrorism" labeling. Equally important are the news outlets reporting on the violence. Evidence suggests that the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling is greatest when news outlets are socially close to the target(s), while simultaneously distant from the perpetrator(s).

Beyond the 'Terrorism' Label

Morality is a quantitative variable that includes not only social control, but also social approval (COONEY, 2009). Recall that in addition to negative labels, news outlets may also report positive and neutral labels in response to violence. As a result, the next critical question is, *what explains positive and neutral news labeling in response to violence*? This question takes me beyond exploring variation in the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling, my primary concerns up until this point, and requires me to address variation in the severity of moral news labeling more broadly. Like my analysis of above, social geometry can help provide some answers.

By identifying the conditions under which violence is praised, geometric logic provides an alternative explanation for why "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter". Rather than being subjective or in the eye of the beholder, geometric logic predicts that the distinction between "terrorist" and "freedom fighter" partially results from the evaluators (e.g., news outlets) and their different relations to the principals. Multiple news outlets may report different moral labels (e.g., "terrorism" and "liberation") for the same act of violence because their respective relationships with the principals result in different geometries. While one news outlet may be socially close to the target(s) and socially distant from the perpetrator(s), another outlet may be socially close to the perpetrator(s) and socially distant from the target(s). I argue that the latter configuration is conducive to positive labeling. Stated more formally: *Positive news labeling increases with the social closeness of news outlets to the perpetrator(s) and social distance from the target(s).* Furthermore, a third outlet may be equally *close* to both the perpetrator(s) and target(s) in the same act of violence. Again, this is known as warm nonpartisanship and results in neutrality. Thus, an additional provisional formulation can be stated as follows: *Neutral news labeling is a direct function of the isosceles triangulation of social closeness between the three participants.* Other outlets may be equally *distant* from both principals and ignore the violence entirely. This is likely to occur when violence breaks out in a location that is socially remote from where the news outlet is stationed (e.g., a culturally distant foreign country).

If positive, neutral, and negative news labeling is partially a function of social geometry, the evolution of moral news labeling in response to violence may also be explainable. In other words, it may be possible to partially explain and predict how moral news labeling changes over time. Specifically, due to the rise of the internet and electronic communications in recent decades, the assortment of digital media platforms, news organizations, and journalists have been expanding. This change may be resulting in more variation in geometric configurations for each act of violence and an increase in the variety of moral labels reported. This logic informs my final provisional proposition: *Variation in moral news labeling is a direct function of social diversity.*

Conclusion

This paper focused on understanding variation in news labels of violence, which reflect moral judgments. The news labeling of violence is an aspect of social control and can be partially explained by the geometric configuration of violent acts. Specifically, I proposed that, all else constant, the likelihood and frequency of "terrorism" labeling in response to violence is greatest when a culturally unconventional and unorganized perpetrator, who is socially distant from the

news outlet reporting on the conflict, attacks a conventional and organized stranger who is socially close to the news outlet reporting on the conflict. Furthermore, I argued that as the social closeness between the news outlet, perpetrator, and target start to equalize, neutral labeling increases. Positive labeling, on the other hand, is likely to increase as the news outlet becomes more intimate with and culturally similar to the perpetrator of violence, while at the same time becoming relationally and culturally distant from the victim. Finally, I argued that the rise of electronic media is increasing the assortment of news outlets and journalists reporting on mass violence. This has likely resulted in an increase in the diversity of geometric configurations for each act of violence. And as diversity in geometric configurations increases, I would expect the variety of moral news labels reported in response to violence to also increase and agreement over how to label mass violence to decrease.

These predictions, informed by my seven propositions, offer important contributions to the literatures on "terrorism" labeling and social control. First, my approach emphasizes variables, such as the relational distance between principals and the organizational direction of the attack, that have often been ignored in prior explanations of "terrorism" labeling. Second, my formulations are stated in terms of sociological variables and ignore speculation about psychological mindsets. As a result, the variables in my propositions are highly observable, making them easier to test. And it is a test of my formulations that is needed next. After all, the utility of an explanation is largely dependent on its validity. Third, my approach to "terrorism" labeling demonstrates that news labeling belongs to the family of social control. News labeling may be considered an act of justice like law, genocide, homicide, suicide, therapy, gossip, avoidance, and other forms of social control. However, unlike most theory and research on social control, my analysis of "terrorism" labeling explores the definition of deviance, not the response to deviance. Additionally, I move beyond prior work on therapeutic labeling and begin to address the social conditions conducive to negative labeling.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Casey Boches, Mark Cooney, Michele Dillon, Nicole Fox, James Tucker, and several anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts.

[2] Consider just a few definitions of terrorism. Black defines terrorism in purely sociological terms: "self-help by organized civilians who covertly inflict mass violence on other civilians" (BLACK, 2004, p. 16). Tilly cautions against the reification of the term and argues that terror is a strategy that refers to "asymmetrical deployment of threats and violence against enemies using means that fall outside the forms of political struggle routinely operating within some current regime" (TILLY, 2004, p. 5). Others seek a definition informed by empirical analyses on how scholars use the term. For example, Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefler find that scholars tend to use terrorism to refer to "a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role" (WEINBERG,

PEDAHZUR, and HIRSCH-HOEFLER, 2004, p. 786). Nacos argues that with such disagreement over the meaning of terrorism, news outlets are often confused about when to label violence "terrorism".

[3] The use of "terrorism" was uncommon at the time. "Terrorism" became widely used as a media label in the early 1970s (ZULAIKA and DOUGLASS, 1996).

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