



**SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES**

# **PERCEIVING TERRORISM:**

A survey experiment about how Swedish students define terrorism based on the perpetrator's ethnicity

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*Bachelor thesis in International Relations*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze how students perceive the concept of terrorism based on the ethnicity ascribed to the perpetrator. Studies conducted in the US have shown that the public defines political violence differently depending on the language used to describe the event, white perpetrators are more often called mass shooters while perpetrators of other ethnicities are more frequently called terrorists. At the same time, there is a lack of studies on that specific topic in Scandinavia and the aim of this study was to conduct a survey experiment to contribute to this field in a Swedish context. Respondents were reading a fictional scenario about a fatal shooting in Malmö, Sweden. Two groups (n=180) were participating in the experiment. The name of the perpetrator was deliberately changed to an Arabic name in the second group, compared to a Swedish name in the first group. Respondents were then asked to define the scenario and answer questions about the possible motive of the attack. The main result shows that the students were not more eager to define the event as a terror attack with the Arabic-named perpetrator. This could be explained by the fact that the respondents are mainly educated female students between 18-25 years. Further studies including a higher number of respondents from different age groups, background and social statuses will be needed to investigate this complex issue.

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Syftet med denna studie är att analysera hur studenter uppfattar terrorism beroende på gärningsmannens tillskrivna etnicitet. Studier utförda i USA har visat att allmänheten definierar politiskt våld på olika sätt beroende på språkbruket som använts för att beskriva attacken; vita män anges i större grad vara masskjutare medan gärningsmän med en annan etnicitet blir oftare kallade terrorister. Samtidigt saknas det studier om detta temaområde genomförda i Skandinavien och denna uppsats avser att belysa ämnet närmare i en svensk kontext genom att utföra ett enkätexperiment. Respondenterna fördelades på två grupper (n=180) och läste en text med ett fiktivt scenario om en skjutning i Malmö. Gärningsmannens namn har medvetet ändrats till ett arabiskt namn i den andra gruppen, vilket ska indikera en annan etniskt bakgrund jämfört med den första gruppen där gärningsmannen hade ett svenskt namn. Respondenterna uppmanades sedan att definiera händelsen och svara på frågor om ett möjligt motiv. Resultatet visar att respondenterna inte gör någon skillnad mellan gärningsmännen, vilket kan bero på att den undersökta gruppen tillhör en relativt homogen grupp på främst kvinnliga studenter under 25 år. Vidare studier med ett större antal respondenter från olika bakgrunder, åldersgrupper och sociala gruppering behöver genomföras för att kunna undersöka detta komplexa studieämne.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Terrorism is a concept difficult to define. Scholars within International Relations (IR), political science and others have come up with nearly 250 definitions on the term (Easson and Schmid 2011 cited in Shanahan 2016). However, it seems that both traditional media and the public shows an ever growing interest on the concept of terrorism given the latest decade's development of *the war on terror* since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Furthermore, since the attacks, scholars and academics have spent an increasing amount of time and energy doing research within the field of terrorism studies (Richards 2018). But how does the public perceive the concept and definition of terrorism? While many scholars have focused on discussing working definitions or creating official policy definitions on the term, few have studied the public perception of the term. The public plays a central role forming the discourse and debate of terrorism. Also, the public view on terrorism influences policymakers reaction in the aftermath of an event. Recently published studies in the United States have analyzed the public perception of terrorism, with some interesting findings. Huff and Kertzer (2018) for instance have shown that the language used for describing an attack seen as political violence influences the public's willingness to define the act as terrorism. One of the findings, among others, showed that the US-respondents are more willing to see Muslims as terrorists than Christians. D'Orazio and Salehyan (2018) have focused on the role of ethnicity ascribed to the actor in an attack and have shown that an actor described as *Arabic* is more likely to be called a terrorist than an actor described as a *white man*. Being described as a white man makes the public more willing to see the act of violence as a mass-shooting or seeing the actor as a person being mentally ill. In that context, arguably, media reports play a central role in framing the perception of terrorism, depending on the language used to describe the event. Those findings also show that stereotypes and prejudices still influence the way of seeing terrorism.

Although there exist a few studies conducted on the public's view on the term terrorism in the United States, it seems that there exists little current research on how some of these findings also apply in a European or Scandinavian context. In Sweden, despite recent fatal events of political violence and an ongoing debate over whether different acts of political violence should be seen as terrorism, there is no academic research focusing on the public's view of the term. Sweden has lately encountered a number of deadly attacks defined as political violence and terrorism, for instance Rakhmat Akilov's lorry attack in Stockholm 2017 or Anton Lundin

Pettersson's murder of immigrant pupils and teachers in a school in Trollhättan 2015 as well as bombings and arsons committed against refugee camps (Grönlund 2018; Gardell, Löow & Dahlberg-Grundberg 2017; Håkansson & Björn 2017; Johansson & Krång 2016). Following those recent attacks in Sweden, there have been ongoing debates in Swedish newspapers on whether those attacks should be defined as terrorism or not (Haddad 2017; Löow 2016; Nordberg 2015). While the Akilov attack in Stockholm was quickly defined as a terrorist act, both authorities and Swedish newspapers have been cautious to use the term terrorism when it came to other attacks, for instance arsons against refugee camps. While both media and the public have discussed the difficult issue on defining an act of political violence as terrorism, there are currently no academic studies conducted in Sweden aiming to delve the public's view of possible terrorist attacks.

## **1.2 Purpose & Aim**

The aim of this paper is to fill the mentioned gap by conducting an experimental study in a Swedish context to see how the public defines an act of political violence as terrorism based on the ethnicity ascribed to the actor. Ethnicity will be the main object of study concerning the definition of terrorism, as studies have shown that ethnicity plays a major role when the public defines violent acts as terrorism. Research conducted in the United States have shown the link between both ethnicity and religious identity on one side, and terrorism on the other side. After 9/11, for example, Americans who perceived a higher level of threat were more eager to support stricter immigration policy for persons described as *Arabs* (Huddy, Feldman, Taber & Lahav 2005). Also, studies have shown that perpetrators described as being Muslims risk to face public opinions supporting harsher jurisdictional treatment like being charged without an attorney (Piazza 2015). While there seems to be some knowledge on the link between ethnicity and the public perception on terrorism in the United States, there are currently no such findings in a Swedish context. It is therefore both relevant and important to examine whether some of those aspects also exist in another western country having encountered terror attacks in 2010 and 2017 as well as political violence against refugees and other minority groups in the latest years. In addition, arguably, studies conducted in the United States need to be tested in another context as knowledge and research is not universally valid.



### **1.3 Research question**

Therefore, the main purpose of this thesis is to study how reports of events including fatal political violence influence the public's willingness to define the event as terrorism. For this study, the following main research question is going to be analyzed:

*In a Swedish media context, how does the ethnicity attributed to the perpetrator of an event including fatal political violence influence the public's willingness to define the event as a terror attack?*

As this study is oriented on two experimental studies conducted in the US, the purpose of this work is to see whether Huff and Kertzer's (2018) as well as D'Orazio and Salehyan's (2018) findings also are applicable in a Swedish context. This is relevant since research is in need of studies conducted outside of the United States, but also because of the fact that the Swedish media situation differs significantly from the one in the US (Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2006). Thus, this study is relevant for the fields of Terrorism Studies and International Relations as there are ongoing debates in the Swedish society as to whether different attacks in Sweden could be defined as terrorism. Due to the gap of academic research on this matter, as well as a general lack of studies on terrorism in the Nordic countries (Malkki, Fridlund & Sallaama 2018), this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how narratives used in the media influence the public perceptions on terrorism, also because of the assumption that those narratives could be seen as being able to shape the public's view on future events.

### **1.4 Disposition**

The present study is based on a population-based survey experiment which has been conducted in Gothenburg, Sweden. For this purpose, two different surveys were created and presented to students at the University of Gothenburg. The study population of this work are explicitly students of social sciences and humanities due to limits of time as well as concerns about efficiency and costs. With more time and planning, a bigger survey experiment could have been conducted via the internet aiming to reach a greater number of respondents who, ideally, come from different backgrounds, ages and social statuses. Often, surveys aiming to include a larger number of respondents (around n=1500) need to be conducted for example by using online recruitment tools which are quite costly and therefore less viable for undergraduate students to employ.

In this study, all the respondents were asked to read a fictional news report describing a violent attack before answering a couple of questions related to the text. In order to examine

the role of the ethnicity ascribed to the perpetrator, the language describing the actor was deliberately changed in the second group. One of the main advantages of a survey experiment includes the possibility of testing a working hypothesis directly by just changing some of the variables the researcher is interested in. Similar research has shown that survey experiments conducted in a quantitative manner are especially useful in order to get a broader understanding of the public's perception on a social science problem. The working hypothesis of this study is that the tested group, relative to the control group, would be more eager to define the presented scenario as a terror attack when the perpetrator has a name indicating a possible Arab background.

This report is presented in the following way: First, some theoretical approaches and discussions on main terms and aspects are introduced in the next chapter, including the definition of terrorism and an overview of recent studies relevant to the field. After that, the scientific method of population-based survey experiments as well as details about the effectuation of the method will be discussed in chapter 3. In chapter 4, the main results of the study are presented and analyzed, followed by final conclusions of this study.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In this section, some theoretical perspectives and aspects related to this study are going to be presented. Those aspects include the definition of terrorism, the public perception of the term as well as the role of ethnicity ascribed to a perpetrator. As mentioned above, those elements are central to the understanding of the project, as the aim is to examine how the public differentiates between various ethnicities when reading about a certain deadly event.

Therefore, as a theoretical starting point, this chapter will commence with a discussion about the difficulty finding a common definition on the term terrorism. As this thesis discusses the public's definition of terrorism, it seems applicable to start with this main element and to analyze how difficult it is for scholars to agree on a common definition. After that, a short overview about recent numbers of terrorism-related victims is going to be presented.

Media plays a certain role in forming discourse on terrorism and readers can expect to find various uses of its definition in everyday reports. Therefore, it seems appropriate to build on that thread by presenting some findings of studies examining different terror attacks in a media context both in the United States and in Europe. Finally, as ethnicity is the main subject of study related to the two elements presented above, the role of ethnicity linked to the public perception of terrorism as well as findings of other survey experiments concerning that research question are going to be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

### **2.1 The struggle to define terrorism**

The aim of this study is to thoroughly investigate how the public perceives fatal attacks of political violence as an act of terror. Therefore, it is central to discuss one of the main terms of this paper, the definition of terrorism. Principal to the term terrorism is the concept of political violence which could be described as violence that is politically motivated outside the control of the state (O'Neil 2011). From that point of view, groups and individuals are mainly meant as being the principal actors although also states can use politically motivated violence. One of the principal assumptions of this paper is that the term terrorism is a product of a social construction (Richards 2018, p. 16). Approximately 250 different definitions on the term indicate that there is not one act of terror but many different ideas, norms and values behind the definition of it (Easson and Schmid 2011 cited in Shanahan 2016). As Shanahan (2016, p. 104) states:

*“Terrorism is a social construct rather than a brute fact, but it would be fallacy to conclude from this observation that the term “terrorism” cannot identify objective features of the world.”*

Depending on whether one has a subjectivist or objectivist point of view, different aspects on the definition of terrorism are being highlighted. From the subjectivist’s side, the term “terrorism” depends merely on the viewer, their values, norms and experiences shape the way of defining the term. Objectivists, however, are more eager to create a definition of terrorism in order to be able to handle the concept. An objectivist could argue that there will not be any combat against terrorism without a proper working definition (Shanahan 2016). While both sides contribute to the understanding of the term, it is clear that definitions play a major role in shaping the debate on terrorism. Defining an act of political violence as terrorism has consequences not only for policymakers when it comes to counter-terrorism policy, moreover, the definition of terrorism shapes the way of understanding society, knowledge, norms and values. Richards (2018, p. 19) proposed therefore to see terrorism as a method, focusing on the intent behind the act of violence instead of putting the perpetrator in the center of attention:

*“(…) Terrorism should be understood as a particular method of violence rather than conceptualized according to who the perpetrators are or what the cause is. Hence, whatever the cause is, it is the method and activity of terrorism that we should be seeking to determine the meaning of.”*

There are also researchers seen as “rejectionists”, arguing that the term terrorism used as an analytical object should be abandoned. As Dominic Bryan (2018) argues, there are indeed some problematic aspects in the definition of terrorism. For instance, he contends that one of the key elements of the term, the political motivation of the act, makes it difficult to delimit the use of it. From a broader point of view, criminal acts as robberies or rape could be seen as having some kind of political dimension assuming that politics in a broad sense are “activities relating to relationships of power” (Bryan 2018, p. 23). Secondly, according to Bryan, another key element in the definition of terrorism is the symbolic and communicative aspect of terrorism. While also other types of violence include creating fear, Richards (2018) argues that terrorism has creating fear as its main objective. Although many attacks defined as terrorism might be aimed at religious sites, for example, there are many other violent acts, sometimes legitimized as war, that are symbolic, too: For instance dropping the Hiroshima atomic bomb, which has not been defined as an act of terror but as a tool to end the Second World War, could be clearly

seen as a psychological act of creating fear, aside from the fact that the bomb killed 130 000 people (Karlsson 2014, p. 337). Finally, another problematic aspect in a definition context include defining a certain group of people as terrorists, something that has proved to be able to change over time. One of the most famous examples is the South-African revolutionary and later president Nelson Mandela, who was fighting against apartheid and received the Nobel Peace Prize. Mandela was being labelled as a terrorist by the United States from the 1980's until 2008 (Dewey 2013).

Hence, if terrorism is a broad political term with many problematic aspects within it, one could question why it is important to call an event of violence as terrorism or why both academics as well as the media focuses on the perpetrator instead of seeing terrorism as a method. Does it make any difference? Arguably, it does. Calling an event as an act of terror has both psychological, jurisdictional and political effects, as the Nelson Mandela example shows. While the psychological effects range from the public's perception of threat to danger and personal security, acts labelled as terrorism imply more severe penalties in court (D'Orazio & Salehyan 2018). Using the term terrorism also contributes to dehumanizing the perpetrators, an aspect that has been seen in a variety of other contexts for example in colonization or slavery (Bruneau 2016). Also, the number of events described as terrorism affect counterterrorism policy which in turn affects immigration policy or mass surveillance (D'Orazio & Salehyan 2018). Giving the importance of the effects when labelling an act of political violence as terrorism, Sweden together with the rest of the European Union decided to agree on a common definition on terrorism which has also been embedded into Swedish law.

### **2.1.2 Working definition**

Although it is difficult to find a common definition on terrorism, for the purpose and realization of this study, it is important to have a working definition on terrorism as the newspaper report presented to the respondents include different factors of violence that could be seen as terrorism. The following, quite wide and complete traditional definition of terrorism with a political dimension is used as the working definition of this study (Wardlaw 1982, p. 16, cited in Rogers 2018, p. 397):

*Political terrorism is the use, or threat of use, of violence by an individual or a group, whether acting for or in opposition to established authority, when such action is designed to create an extreme anxiety and/or fear-inducing effects in a target group larger than the immediate victims*

*with the purpose of coercing that group into acceding to the political demands of the perpetrators.*

This definition includes some of the main features of terrorism, namely the fact of creating fearful effects to a wider group and that the purpose of that violent act has some kind of political dimension affecting society. Those elements will also be found in the newspaper report presented to the study population in this thesis. That being mentioned, it is however clear that also other, broader definitions on the term need to be included when discussing the issue. As discussed above, there are no clear borders given for the definition of terrorism being a product of a social construction. Thus, when analyzing the results of the study and discussing terrorist related issues in general, one should be open for different understandings of the definition having in mind that the process of broadening and deepening helps one to widen its spectra of knowledge.

## **2.2 Fatalities from terror attacks**

Before going on with discussing terrorism in a media context, a brief background and numbers of terrorism related victims in Sweden, Europe and the world is going to be presented in this section. It seems relevant to compare these facts and numbers for different regions, also in order to be able to understand how terrorism-related incidents are being framed in news reports compared to other fatal happenings in society.

The data used in this section comes from the online-platform “Our World in Data” which cites its numbers from the 2018 Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Before presenting their statistics, it is important to understand how the Global Terrorism Database defines terrorism and how terror-related incidents are getting into the database. The following criteria need to be fulfilled in order to get the event listed in the database (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism 2019):

- 1. “The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;*
- 2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and*
- 3. The violent act was outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law”*

This means, that the GTD does not include state terrorism, for example. Also, data is collected only by using reports available to the public.

When comparing numbers from different regions, the majority of fatalities, namely 75 percent of all terrorist attacks, can be found in the Middle East and Africa (2016). Europe stands for 1 percent of all fatalities (Roser, Nagdy & Richie 2018). In numbers, when totaling Western and Eastern Europe, there were 184 fatalities in 2017 as a direct result of terror attacks (ibid). This number could be compared to 5000 victims of intentional homicide in the European Union in 2015 or to the 25 250 people who died as a result of traffic accident on European Union roads in 2017 (Eurostat 2018; European Transport Safety Council 2018). At the same time, the European Union lists terrorism on a top-priority list in the European Security Agenda, meaning that terrorism related issues should be focused on in the following years (European Commission 2019). When looking at terrorism in Sweden, there were 18 incidents including five fatalities and 32 non-fatal injuries in 2017 (Roser, Nagdy & Richie 2018).

While terrorism stands for quite a small number of fatalities in the Western world, compared to other deadly events, it seems that the discourse on terrorism is an ever-growing one. Terrorism has found its place on top-priority lists of national security agendas but can also be found in Swedish information brochures sent out to 4.8 million households warning for possible terror attacks and how to react to them (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency 2018). Hence, one could argue that terrorism has found its way into many people's everyday lives, in one way or another. But why does terrorism take such a big place in public discourse? Surely, it has to do with one of the main aims of terror attacks, which is creating fear. And the central catalyst in communicating terrorism are the media.

### **2.3 Terrorism in a media context**

As noted above, analyzing how the public perceives different events of political violence as terrorism is one of the central aspects of this study. Thus, it is important to discuss the role of the media and how terrorism is being framed in a media context.

Media plays a central role in terrorism, both for perpetrators who use media attention in order to communicate danger and threat, but moreover media reports contribute to shape the way the public perceives terrorism and a certain event of political violence. Avdan and Webb (2018) for example have shown that the American public tends to have greater empathy towards victims of terrorist attacks having the same ethnicity or color of skin. They concluded that Americans cared more about the victims of the Paris attacks 2015 than similar attacks that took place in Kenya or Turkey, as the public tends to care less about people who do not look like them. When focusing on the perpetrator, though, a recent study conducted in the US revealed that print and online media tend to focus on those who are the "other". Between 2006 and 2015,

terrorist attacks where the perpetrator was described as a Muslim received on average 357 percent more media coverage than other attacks in US-media (Kearns, Betus & Lumieux, forthcoming). A similar study in Canada showed, too, that acts of violence where the perpetrator was described as being a Muslim received on average 1.5 times more coverage than acts where the perpetrators were right-wing or white-supremacist although attacks from the latter resulted in 11 times more deaths (Kanji 2018).

In a European context, similar findings were published in a content analysis study conducted in the UK and Denmark: In the United Kingdom, more than 70 percent of media reports focused on Islamist terrorism whereas only 10 percent discussed far-right terrorism. Akin numbers have been shown in Denmark (Parker, Pearce, Lindeskilde & Rogers 2018). Those numbers could be compared to actual terror attacks as defined by, for instance, the US state institution “START” (The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Responses of Terrorism) led by the University of Maryland. As listed, between 2010-2016, 53 percent of all events in the United States listed as terror attacks in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) had religious extremism as a motive, compared to 35 percent of right-wing motives (Miller 2017).

## **2.4 The public perception of terrorism**

### **2.4.1 The role of ethnicity**

In this study, the question about the perpetrators ethnicity is one of the main focus areas for the present experiment. Arguably, especially the ethnicity of people described as terrorists seems to be playing a major role. Several studies have shown the relationship between terrorism and ethnicity, when it comes to define an event as terrorism but also regarding threat and danger analysis or anti-terrorism policy. Huddy et al. (2005) have analyzed data from quantitative telephone interviews after 9/11 in the United States. Their findings show that Americans who felt a higher level of terrorism threat were also more eager to support restrictive immigration policy or more surveillance of Arabs living or travelling to the US. Kam & Kinder (2007) make a link to ethnocentrism and showed that the concept studied amongst Americans increases the probability of supporting counterterrorism policy. Aspects like ethnicity are also closely linked to religious beliefs ascribed to the perpetrator. A survey experiment conducted by James A. Piazza (2015) showed that respondents are more supportive of new, harsh and extraordinary detention practices against terror suspects identified as being Muslims. In contrast, the public is less likely to accept those practices including detention without attorneys or detention without charge for perpetrators described as domestic right-wing.



When looking at official policy documents like the recent report on terrorism of the European Police Office (*Europol*), one could argue that both the media attention and the public response to the perceived threat coming from Arabs or Muslims might be justified. Listing the twelve most important and recent trends in the 2018 report, Europol focuses primarily on jihadist terrorism, before mentioning at number ten that ethno-nationalist and separatist terror attacks far outnumber terror attacks from any other ideology or motivation (Europol 2018). Although, according to the report, the majority (67 percent) of all terrorist attacks in 2017 within the EU member states had separatist motivations, followed by 16 percent of jihadist extremism. Despite those numbers, it seems that separatism attracts far less attention from media and authorities. This trend might also exist in Sweden, where the Swedish Security Service (*Säkerhetspolisen*) in its latest year book called Islamist extremism as the main threat against Swedish national security (*Säkerhetspolisen* 2017). Examining the Global Terrorism Database for Sweden listing all terrorist attacks from the latest decades, only a handful of events describe the perpetrators as jihadist groups –in most cases, the perpetrator groups are unknown (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism 2018). As the nature of intelligence services is to work in the dark, it remains thus unclear whether the alleged risk of jihadist extremism is justified.

When it comes to right-wing political violence, Sweden has encountered the highest number of fatal attacks, more than all the Nordic countries together. Also, Sweden is the country having encountered the greatest number of right-wing violence per capita in Western Europe<sup>1</sup> between 1990-2015 (Ravndal 2018). It is not exactly clear how this affects the Swedish society, but it could be assumed that attacks against religious and ethnic minorities, especially Muslims and Jews, are one of the central problems. In a study at Gothenburg University, 91,5 percent of Muslims interviewed in Gothenburg (n=176) perceived a higher degree of negative attitudes after 9/11, including discrimination and negative treatments (Sander 2006). The high amount of right-wing extremism in Sweden together with the global war on terror and a western media focus on both Muslims and Arabs, could be one of the explanations behind the perceived situation of Muslims living in Sweden. Recent attacks on Swedish refugee camps, mosques and synagogues are likely to contribute to that feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> The exact definition of “Western Europe” is not stated.

### 2.4.2 Previous survey experiments

Previous studies on the public perception of terrorism were conducted by, amongst others, Huff and Kertzer (2018), D’Orazio and Salehyan (2018) and Woods (2011). All of them made population-based survey experiments, the first two of them via the internet in order to reach a broader population, the latter reached out to about 170 students recruited from a US-university. Asking parts of the population about their opinion on terror attacks contributes to a better understanding of the concept. Public opinion plays a major role in shaping policy decisions, when it comes to counterterrorism measures, surveillance, immigration or the willingness to fight for the *war on terror*. Who would not support US-led strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq or Pakistan if it was not for combating terrorists who want to create fear and danger in our societies? In order to get people to fight in a war, it is therefore important to have the public opinion on your side. Using the media to communicate various political statements and to convince the public of certain terrorism-related issues is a useful and powerful tool.

Hence, focusing on media narratives and analyzing their impact on public perception is crucial for a better understanding of the field. Huff and Kertzer (2018) have shown that the likelihood that Americans will classify an event like the San Bernardino shooting<sup>2</sup> can vary between about 30-80 percent depending on the language used to describe the attack. They conclude that terrorism therefore is a social construct, as the media, depending on the narratives chosen to frame the attack, have the ability to shape the public perception of an event, and consequently, also the public’s definition of terrorism. Several variables tested in the study influence the likelihood to define an act of violence as terrorism: Bombings and hostage taking are more often called terrorism, groups (especially those having foreign ties) more than individuals, Muslims and Right-wing perpetrators more than Christians and Left-wing perpetrators. Interestingly, there seems to be no statistically significant difference concerning the target of violence, e.g. government buildings or military facilities. In other words, the public seems to define violence targeting non-governmental buildings like schools or religious sites as terror attacks, too. This finding is especially interesting as many terrorism definitions distinguish between civilian and military or governmental targets as one of the main factors for defining the act as terrorism (Huff & Kertzer 2018). In Swedish terrorism law, on the other hand, the main condition to be fulfilled in order to define an act of violence as a terrorist act, is that the act could severely harm the state or an intergovernmental organization (SFS 2003:148).

In this chapter, definitions on terrorism, media coverage and the role of ethnicity in relation

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<sup>2</sup> A deadly shooting in California, described as the worst terror attack in the US since 9/11 (Nagourney, Lovett & Pérez-Peña 2015).

to the public's perception on terrorism have been discussed. For the purpose of this study, those aspects mentioned are both relevant and important in order to find out whether those elements also exist in a Swedish media context. Therefore, in the following part, the research method is going to be explained and discussed, followed by a presentation and discussion of the present study's main results.

## 3. Method

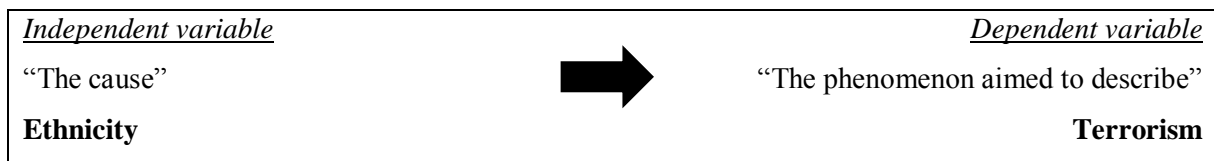
### 3.1 Population-based survey experiments

In this chapter, the present study's research method, the disposition of the study as well as the gathered material is going to be presented and discussed.

Previous works aiming to analyze the public's perception of terrorism have used quantitative survey experiments, as presented above. Therefore, in order to study whether the Swedish public perceives an act of fatal political violence including different perpetrators as terrorism, this work has been based on population-based survey experiments. In simple terms, this method can be described as "an experiment that is administered to a representative population *sample*" (Mutz 2011, p. 2). In other words, by using survey methods, samples are being produced which should be able to represent the group studied. The approach used for the present study is a so-called *vignette treatment*, whose aim is to "evaluate what difference it makes when the actual object of study (...) is systematically changed in some way" (Mutz 2011, p. 54). Therefore, if the aim of this study is to find whether the ethnicity attributed to a perpetrator makes a difference when defining an act as terrorism, it is central to systematically change the ethnicity of the perpetrator in one or more various surveys presented to the public in order to get a result. One of the main advantages of (survey) experiments is that they make an important contribution when it comes to measuring causal interference of a concept studied, even though there remains some concerns about the generalizability of results (Mutz 2011, p. 14). On the other side, one of the disadvantages of survey methods include the fact that the researcher won't be able to know why respondents have chosen to answer as they did. In order to follow up this weak point, semi-structured interviews and/or other qualitative methods could be used.

Overall, in an experiment, the researcher aims to test one or many different variables attributed to the research problem. This is done by manipulating the *independent variable*, sometimes also called the "controlled" variable. In this study, the independent variable relevant for the research question is ethnicity. By changing the ethnicity ascribed to the perpetrator in the fictional event one can see what effects the variable has on the *dependent variable* being, the phenomenon aimed to describe, in this case terrorism. To facilitate this process for the reader, see table 1 inspired by Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, Towns & Wängnerud (2011, p. 52).

Table 1 - Variables



### 3.2 Approach and realization of the study

In this study, the population chosen are members of the Swedish public, people living in Sweden. Due to limitations in time and effectuation, it was not possible to extend the population studied to a wider group than students at the University of Gothenburg. Therefore, it is clear that the findings of the present study cannot be considered representative for the public in general. Woods (2011, p. 212), who conducted a similar study with students at a Midwestern University in the United States (n=176), noted correctly that external validity at best could be given for a wider body of university students at the institution the study was conducted. External validity is the circumstance to being able to generalize from the group studied to a wider more relevant population (Esaiasson et al. 2017, p. 59). Thus, the present study should be seen and analyzed in its context: The main target group was students of the School of Global Studies and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Gothenburg.

For the realization of this study two different versions of the same survey, including a fictional newspaper report, were created. The survey and all information given to the respondents was written in Swedish. The working hypothesis is based on previous conducted studies in the field, as mentioned above, and was formulated as followed:

*Relative to the control group, violence where the perpetrator was described as having the Arabic name “Fahid Al-Hashemi” will be more likely to be called terrorism.*

The fictional newspaper report included a scenario where the perpetrator, a shooter, killed a number of civilians in a shopping mall in the third largest city of Sweden, Malmö (see appendix). The reports were identical up to the point where the perpetrator was described. In fact, only the name was changed in the second version of the survey. In the control group, group A, the perpetrator was named “Johan Bergkvist”, a typical Swedish male name. In the testing group, group B, the perpetrator was named “Fahid Al-Hashemi”. The names were chosen after a google-search for Swedish and Arabic names, they do not correspond to real persons or have,

to the author's knowledge, any other connection to real-world incidents. For this study, deliberately, the name of the perpetrator function as the main element describing his ethnicity. Thus, it seemed unnecessary to further describe the perpetrator. Arguably, due to existing stereotypes and prejudices in the public, it seemed enough to only let the name speak for the perpetrators ethnicity, well aware of the fact that the name itself does not tell everything about a person's real ethnicity or background in general. In a media context, though, it seems that quick decisions based on stereotypes (which include names) from the public could be quite common.

Based on findings of Huff & Kertzer (2018) and D'Orazio & Salehyan (2018), the scenario presented to the public was deliberately chosen. First, the city of Malmö was chosen as it seemed the most appropriate given the fact that there recently was a terror attack in Stockholm which could influence the public in a certain direction. Gothenburg was not chosen as most of the respondents live in that city having close ties to it, which could influence their perception as well. Secondly, the location of the attack, a shopping mall, was chosen as it is a public place with many innocent people circulating. The mall was chosen because of the fact that a public service building like a police station or a governmental agency could have been interpreted of being too political. In the news report, different factors which are known to influence the public when it comes to define an act as terrorism were deliberately left unclear in order to let the respondents decide by themselves how to define the incident. For instance, the exact motive of the attack was not stated, instead it was only known that the perpetrator had ties to a violent political organization without specifying that more closely. This was done as findings show that the public is more eager to see (foreign) religious extremist organizations or right-wing organizations as terrorism. In this case, the motive was unclear which opened up for interpretation by the respondents. Finally, in the report, there were three deaths and several injured without clearly stating the identity and background of the victims. Thus, it was left open whether this could be a hate crime or not and the respondents were able to choose by themselves.

Three main questions were asked following the fictional news report. In the first question, the main research question of this thesis, respondents were asked to define the mentioned incident. The respondents were only able to choose one answer for all the three questions. Four alternatives could have been chosen for the first question (1):

- a) Mass shooting
- b) Gang violence

- c) Terror attack
- d) Murder

As this report mainly focuses on differences between the ethnicity ascribed to the perpetrator, the other two remaining questions were chosen in order to mislead the respondents to draw attention from the first question about terrorism. Thus, in the second question (2), the public was asked to describe the possible motive of the act:

- a) Criminal
- b) Racist
- c) Religious
- d) Political
- e) Mental illness

Actually, only the categories “criminal” and “political” were somehow directly or indirectly mentioned in the text. All other categories were open for interpretation, and, interestingly some of the respondents chose those categories although there was no such motive mentioned in the text. The third question (3) was about possible actions the government should consider taking in order to prevent similar violent attacks. The following alternatives were given:

- a) Harsher penalties
- b) More CCTV-cameras
- c) More police officers
- d) Welfare efforts

Those categories were chosen deliberately as there are ongoing debates in Sweden about both surveillance in public places, stricter punishment for crimes in general as well as calls for more police personnel (Knutson 2018). Finally, for statistical purposes, respondents were asked to specify their age group ranging from 18-55+, their gender identity and highest level of accomplished educational attainment. As all of the respondents were students or teachers at the University of Gothenburg, the lowest possible education level to choose was a high-school degree.

Prior to filling out the survey, respondents were informed, in written form, that their participation is voluntary, their anonymity guaranteed and that none of the results will be used

for other purposes than this academic study. The respondents accepted those conditions by participating in the survey without having to sign the document. As the survey is part of an experiment, respondents were prior to participation not given detailed information about the aim and purpose of this study other than that the general aim is to study “violence in a media context”. This seemed appropriate because revealing that the aim of the study was to see whether respondents define the presented text as terrorism would probably influence the respondent’s answers in a specific way which would be rather counterproductive.

Data was gathered during week 50 in 2018, and different classes at the University of Gothenburg were visited. During that week, several incidents reported in Swedish and international media could have influenced the public in a certain way. On Tuesday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, there occurred one fatal shooting in Strasbourg, France, killing several people at a Christmas market (Nordstrand 2018). Also, on Wednesday morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, there was a deadly shooting at an open street in Malmö, Sweden, which is the city where the fictional shooting of the survey takes place (Nord 2018). Those incidents, whether they will be defined as acts of terrorism or not, could have influenced the respondents answers. While the Malmö shooting initially seems to be reported as part of a violent gang conflict, the shooting in Strasbourg was in some news reports described as an act of terror. In addition, media reports from Gothenburg on Thursday, December 13<sup>th</sup> 2018, published information from the Swedish Security Service and local Police forces having arrested several suspected terrorists in various western Swedish cities for planning a possible terrorist attack (Olausson, Youcefi, Zare & Sund 2018). Those media reports could have influenced the respondent’s answers in some way as all those reports came on days where they participated in the study.

### **3.3 Study participants**

In total, 180 respondents have decided to participate in the study, 91 respondents in group A (the control group) and 89 in group B (the treatment group). The two groups are quite comparable given the fact that the number of respondents in the groups is nearly equal.

The large majority of people in both of the groups were women (*tables 2 and 3*). In total, about 76 percent of the respondents identified themselves as women, a higher number compared to 2014/15 statistics where 64 percent (social sciences) and 62 percent (humanities) of all new students in Sweden were women (UKÄ, 2016, s. 35). In both groups, men represented the minority of the respondents and the numbers are quite comparable for the both groups. In order to design the question of gender as inclusive as possible, respondents had the possibility to not



mention their gender identity or to choose “uncertain” or “other alternative”. However, none of the respondents has chosen those alternatives.

*Table 2 - Gender total*

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Men</i>	43	23,9
<i>Women</i>	137	76,1
<i>Total</i>	180	100

*Table 3 - Gender per group*

	<i>Group A</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Group B</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Men</i>	18	19,8	25	28,1	43
<i>Women</i>	73	80,2	64	71,9	137
<i>Total</i>	91		89		180

In general, the present study could be seen as a random sample representing a homogenous group of mainly young Swedish women with high educational backgrounds. The large majority of respondents were in the age group 18-25, see *table 4*.<sup>3</sup> Most of the students were in their first or second year of undergraduate studies, 90 percent of all the respondents highest educational attainment was at a high school level.

*Table 4 - Age*

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Age:</i>		
<i>18-25</i>	135	75
<i>25-35</i>	37	20,6
<i>35-45</i>	6	3,3
<i>45-55</i>	0	0
<i>55 and older</i>	2	1,1
<i>Total</i>	180	100

<sup>3</sup> Respondents aged 25, 35, 45 and so on could have chosen to be in either group categories due to an error in categorizing the groups.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 General overview**

The purpose of this study was to see whether the ethnicity ascribed to a perpetrator of an act of fatal political violence described in a Swedish media context would influence the public's willingness to define the act as terrorism. Hence, the aim was to test the hypothesis and to see whether the tested group would be more eager to define the presented scenario as terrorism when the perpetrator was described as "Fahid Al-Hashemi", indicating a possible Arab background.

The main result of this present sample showed that this work's hypothesis could not be confirmed. Respondents did not make the expected difference between the "Arab" perpetrator and the "Swedish" perpetrator when defining the act as terrorism. In fact, the majority of respondents in the B-group defined the act as a mass shooting rather than a terrorist attack. A more detailed discussion of this will be presented below.

At this point, it is important to note that the results presented here have to be seen in its context: The study population of this survey experiment was quite a homogenous group of mostly educated young people. As mentioned earlier, both groups have been reading the same news reports describing a fatal shooting in Malmö killing a number of people in a mall. The reports were identical up to the point where the perpetrator was described by his name. After that, respondents were asked to define the event. This result section will be presented as followed: First, a general overview of the main results for both groups, A and B, will be discussed and visualized by some tables. Then, some possible explanations and theories about the present outcome will be discussed. The last chapter of this thesis will include the main conclusions of the study.

### **4.2 Group A – the control group**

In group A, the control group with the Swedish perpetrator, 46,2 percent of all respondents defined the act as a "terror attack". A slightly but not significantly higher number of 48,4 percent have chosen to define the act as a "mass shooting". So far, this finding, although the results show nearly 50/50 for both categories, was in line with the expectation that the Swedish perpetrator will be more likely called a mass shooter. This could also be compared to earlier research, namely of D'Orazio and Salehyan (2018) who found that white men are more often called mass shooters. In the present case, the perpetrators color of skin was never mentioned,

although it could be assumed that the majority of Swedes typically perceive “Johan Bergkvist” as a white man.

Interestingly, though, the numerical difference between the terrorist / mass shooting category is quite small. One of the expectations of this survey was that the difference between those two categories would be higher, that the mass shooting category would have been chosen more often in relation to the terrorism category when it comes to the Swedish perpetrator. This was not the case. Both the mass shooting category and the terrorist category were chosen nearly equally frequent (see table 5). As expected, the categories gang violence and murder were not chosen very often.

*Table 5 - Group A definition*

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Mass shooting</i>	44	48,4
<i>Terror attack</i>	42	46,2
<i>Gang violence</i>	3	3,3
<i>Murder</i>	2	2,2
<i>Total</i>	91	100

In the fictional scenario, the perpetrator of both groups was described as having suspected ties to a politically violent group. Other motives remained unclear and were open for interpretation of the reader. Following the definition of the attack, respondents were asked to define the motivation of the attack. For group A, the following categories were chosen by the respondents, see table 6.

*Table 6 - Group A motive*

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Criminal</i>	25	27,5
<i>Racist</i>	5	5,5
<i>Religious</i>	0	0
<i>Political</i>	55	60,4
<i>Mentally ill</i>	6	6,6
<i>Total</i>	91	100

The majority of respondents of the Swedish perpetrator group interpreted that the attack should be seen as a politically motivated one. This was more or less to be expected as there were no other motives mentioned in the scenario. A small amount of respondents thought that the Swedish perpetrator had a religious motive (five respondents) or was mentally ill (six

respondents). Table 7 shows a detailed overview of a crosstab between the chosen definition of the attack and the motive attributed to it.

*Table 7 - Group A motive per definition*

	<i>Mass shooting</i>	<i>Gang violence</i>	<i>Terror attack</i>	<i>Murder</i>
<i>Criminal</i>	14	0	11	0
<i>Racist</i>	1	0	3	1
<i>Religious</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Political</i>	23	3	28	1
<i>Mentally ill</i>	6	0	0	0
<i>Total</i>	44	3	42	2

Arguably, there should be some kind of correlation between the definition of the attack and the motive attributed to it. Those who chose to define the scenario as a mass shooting in group A thought mainly that the attack was politically motivated. About one third thought he was acting criminally and a small amount of respondents choosing the mass shooting category thought he was mentally ill. For the terror attack category, there are similar numbers although the political motivation was chosen more often than in the mass shooting category. Although other studies have shown that a white perpetrator was more often defined as being mentally ill, in this sample case, there seems to be no significant result confirming that finding as only six respondents defined the perpetrator as being mentally ill.

The third and last question concerning the fictional scenario was about possible actions the government should consider taking in order to prevent similar attacks. In table 8, those results are being presented.

*Table 8 - Group A preventive actions*

	<i>No. of respondents<sup>4</sup></i>	<i>%<sup>5</sup></i>
<i>Harsher penalties</i>	17	19,1
<i>More CCTV cameras</i>	4	4,5
<i>More police officers</i>	19	21,3
<i>Welfare efforts</i>	49	55,1
<i>Missing</i>	2	
<i>Total</i>	91	100

<sup>4</sup> In group A, there were two (2) missing answers for the third questions concerning possible actions. Thus, there are only 89 valid respondents and answers taken into account for that specific question.

<sup>5</sup> Valid percent

The majority of respondents who decided to answer that question wants to see welfare efforts in order to prevent possible future attacks. That answer seemed quite obvious in regards to the group studied: Young, mostly female undergraduate students of social sciences and humanities who could be seen to be politically liberal and open-minded. As mentioned earlier, the second and third question of the survey were actually meant to mislead the respondents a little. This was done in order to not only let the respondents focus on the definition of the attack. However, as there are measurable results from both of the groups present now, for the sake of completeness, they have been presented here.

It was somehow expectable that the majority of respondents would choose the welfare category, because of the fact that this answer implies a generalized proposition that both sounds politically correct and aims to reach a wider group of stigmatized people. All other categories imply some kind of punishment as a consequence of criminal behavior: Harsher penalties or more police officers and CCTV-cameras could be seen as a typical “right-wing” proposal while welfare efforts could be interpreted as a more left-wing statement which does not punish anybody. For example, when looking at the Swedish Left Party’s homepage where the party presents its politics, one can read about “economic equality and a strong welfare society” needed to fight criminality in general (Vänsterpartiet 2018). On the other side, the right-wing party “Sweden Democrats” (Sverigedemokraterna) demands more police officers, harsher penalties for certain crime categories and facilitating the use of CCTV-cameras (Sverigedemokraterna n.d). It will be interesting to see whether those results differ for the B-group whose general results will be presented below.

### 4.3 Group B – the testing group

*Table 9 - Group B definition*

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Mass shooting</i>	52	58,4
<i>Terror attack</i>	28	31,5
<i>Gang violence</i>	1	1,1
<i>Murder</i>	8	9,0
<i>Total</i>	89	100

The majority of the 89 respondents belonging to the second group reading the fictional scenario with perpetrator Fahid Al-Hashemi did not define the attack as a terror attack. The main assumption of this study was that the ethnicity ascribed to the perpetrator of an event of fatal

political violence would influence the public in a certain direction and make them more eager to see an “Arab” as a terrorist in comparison to a Swedish perpetrator. The result of this present study shows that those students of social sciences and humanities did not make this distinction. Interestingly, and maybe somehow ironically, answers from both groups show that the respondents were more eager to call the Swedish perpetrator as a terrorist rather than the Arab one (see table 10).

*Table 10 - Both groups definition comparison*

	<i>Group A</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Group B</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Mass shooting</i>	44	48,8	52	58,4
<i>Terror attack</i>	42	46,2	28	31,5
<i>Total</i>	86 of 91		80 of 89	

When it comes to the motives ascribed to the attack by perpetrator Fahid Al-Hashemi, there is a significant difference between the two groups. A much higher number of respondents in group B described the attack as “criminal”, 43,8 percent, compared to only 27,5 percent in group A (see table 11). Even though the majority of the respondents in group B assigned him the “political” category, it was somehow unexpected that the criminal designation was chosen that often. The religious assignment was chosen by 4,5 percent of the respondents, a number that was expected to be higher as it seems that there exists a discourse on terrorism that mainly focuses on religious extremism (IS, Al-Qaida and so on), especially when it comes to foreign perpetrators.

*Table 11 - Group B motive*

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Criminal</i>	39	43,8
<i>Racist</i>	0	0
<i>Religious</i>	4	4,5
<i>Political</i>	40	44,9
<i>Mentally ill</i>	6	6,7
<i>Total</i>	89	100

This result is somewhat difficult to interpret. Why did such a high number of respondents in group B, reading about a shooting with a perpetrator named Fahid Al-Hashemi, perceive the attack as a “criminal” one, defining it nearly as often as the political motive? And why did the religious motive get the smallest amount of answers although religious extremism and jihadist terrorism receive a high number of media attention? In order to be able to answer those questions precisely, one would have to interview the respondents and discuss their thoughts in

detail. A possible explanation could be found in factors like social desirability bias or the underlying idea of respondents that the perpetrator was part of a gang conflict. A more thorough discussion of this results will follow below.

A cross table between the definition of the attack and the motive attributed to the scenario shows, for group B, that a large group of respondents chose the “criminal” category while also defining the scenario as a mass shooting, gang violence or murder. Compared to the terror attack definition, the number of respondents giving the motive “criminal” is lower (see table 12).

*Table 12 - Group B motive per definition*

	<i>Mass shooting</i>	<i>Gang violence</i>	<i>Terror attack</i>	<i>Murder</i>
<i>Criminal</i>	23	1	8	7
<i>Racist</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Religious</i>	1	0	3	0
<i>Political</i>	24	0	16	0
<i>Mentally ill</i>	4	0	1	1
<i>Total</i>	52	1	28	8

Concerning the third and last question about preventive actions, respondents of group B answered more or less the same as in group A. The majority of respondents want to see welfare efforts as the main action from the government in order to prevent future attacks. There is a 10 percent difference between the groups for the welfare efforts category, being higher in the B-group (see table 13).

*Table 13 - Group B preventive actions*

	<i>No. of respondents<sup>6</sup></i>	<i>%<sup>7</sup></i>
<i>Harsher penalties</i>	12	14,0
<i>More CCTV cameras</i>	4	4,7
<i>More police officers</i>	14	16,3
<i>Welfare efforts</i>	56	65,1
<i>Missing</i>	3	
<i>Total</i>	89	100

<sup>6</sup> In group B, there were three (3) missing answers for the third questions concerning possible actions. Thus, there are only 86 valid respondents and answers taken into account for that specific question.

<sup>7</sup> Valid percent

#### **4.4 Statistical significance**

In order to test statistical significance of the main result, a simple Chi<sup>2</sup>-value test has been conducted. Therefore, a cross table between all respondents (Group A and Group B) on the one hand, and the definition of the attack on the other hand has been created. This was done as the main result showed that a higher number of respondents defined the scenario as a terror attack in group A, compared to group B.

In SPSS, the categories mass shooting, gang violence and murder were regrouped to value 0 and the terror attack named value 1. This was done in relation to the hypothesis, namely that a higher number of respondents would define the scenario as terrorism in one of the groups. The test showed a Chi<sup>2</sup>-value of ,043. Hence, there is a 4,3 percent chance that the difference between those groups depend on coincidence which indicates a statistically significant result.

#### **4.5 Gender differences**

The majority of all respondents participating in the study are women. But are there any differences between men and women when defining the scenario? There are, indeed, even though the results for those calculations are not statistically significant. In group A, there are no big differences between the two gender groups when defining the attack as a mass shooting (44 percent of all men, 49 percent of all women). On the other hand, men were more eager to define the Swedish perpetrator shooting as a terror attack compared to women (55 percent men, 44 percent women).

In group B, the differences between men and women are higher. While 63 percent of the women saw Fahid Al-Hashemi as a mass shooter, it was only 48 percent of the men. Meanwhile, men chose to define the event as a terror attack more often than women, 44 percent (men) versus 26 percent (women). The latter could indicate that men could be more willing to see the Arab perpetrator as a terrorist, although there is no statistical significance for this result.

#### **4.6 Discussion**

The results presented above show a clear picture about how the studied population perceive the fictional attack. To summarize, three main findings could be mentioned.

First, changing the name of the perpetrator indicating another ethnic background did not affect the respondent's tendency to define the attack as terrorism. In the present case, the Swedish perpetrator actually was "more terrorist" than the Arabic one. Secondly, the group reading the text with the Arabic perpetrator defined the attack as a "murder" more than four



times more frequently than the group with the Swedish perpetrator. Finally, although there is a possible political motive mentioned in the text, a large number of respondents in group B chose to define the attack as a “criminal” one, 44 percent in group B versus 28 percent in group A.

So how could these results be interpreted? Why does it seem that the results of this study are somehow quite the opposite of both expectations and similar studies conducted in the US? When comparing the fictional scenario of the survey with the working definition of this thesis, all the main aspects of this definition can be found in the text: The use of violence by an individual with suspected ties to a politically violent group, creating extreme anxiety in a group larger than the immediate victims. At this point, it should be said that the process of creating fear and anxiety is a complicated one, closely related to media reports and complex psychological effects. This can be seen in everyday news reports: Although there are bombings and shootings happening all over the world, people are not that fearful or scared about events happening in other parts of the world if not having close ties to that specific place. In that context, one could also argue that if there is no news report, there is no fear. Hence, the more reports, news coverage, personal stories from victims touching the general public, the more fear-inducing effects should be expected. In the present study, apart from the scenario briefly described in the text, respondents were lacking both detailed background information about the perpetrator and victims but also personal ties and feelings which are suspected to exist when a real terror attack happens. For example, most of today’s grown up westerners know what they were doing the moment they received reports of the 9/11 attacks. In this present case though, one short media report about a fictional scenario lacking detailed information about the whole event leads to an eventual psychological distance to the scenario and could be one hypothetical explanation of the present study’s outcome.

Another central explanation proposed here relates to the population studied: Critical students of social sciences and humanities who are mainly female and under 25 years old. One assumption is that most of the students have both knowledge about the fields of International Relations, Political Science and the like, and thus are trained to think critically about different information given in a text. Thus, if assuming that this group could represent a wider group of young critically thinking students, it seems that factors like prejudice and ingroup/outgroup biases do not affect this group as much as might be the case for the general public. Possibly, the respondents in the surveys actually do not really care whether a perpetrator is Swedish or not. Or do they, but might there be a reason why this message did not get through in the survey?

The outcome of this survey experiment could have been different based on various factors. First, the present survey was conducted in connection with university lectures. Students were

asked to do the survey while having a short break during the lecture. It could be assumed that both peer pressure, time pressure and the university context in general affected the outcome of the study. Although most of the students did not talk to each other while participating in the study, still, talks between respondents could possibly have influenced their answers in a certain way.

Secondly, one assumption is based on a feeling that political correctness could have influenced the respondent's answers. One could assume that respondents somehow answer in a certain way because they do not want to express their real thoughts, a notion closely linked to the "Social Desirability Bias" (SDB). This bias could be explained as being a conscious or unconscious action management where respondents behave or answer in a way that relates to the impression they are giving of themselves (Brace 2008, p. 195). There are topics where a certain behavior could be seen as socially desirable, especially concerning central themes in politics and social sciences. There are different types of social desirability, like the *instrumentation* type where respondents totally consciously give answers to bring about a social desirable outcome (ibid, p. 198).

Another possible explanation linked to the outcome is about the fact that the respondents sat closely together when answering the questions, making it possible for other respondents to see how one has defined the attack. That could have influenced the respondent's answers. Although anonymity was guaranteed for all the respondents as they did not write their names or other personal information on the survey, possible friends and colleagues sitting nearby the respondent could have seen some of the answers.

In a short informal conversation after conducting the survey, one of the respondents approached the author to briefly discuss the project. The respondent said that she had difficulties choosing the proper definition of the attack, depending on whether you should choose what you "really think" or what you "should think". Although this conversation with the respondent only was a brief talk, it gives one possible indication about the present outcome of the study. Here, the term political correctness comes in, being "the act of avoiding language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex and race" (Cambridge dictionary 2018). It might be possible that political correctness and social desirability could have influenced the respondents thinking in a politically sensitive topic like terrorism and ethnicity. One assumption is that some of the respondents might have chosen the mass shooting category rather than the terrorism category because it could be more politically correct or socially desirable to do so. There is no empirical evidence for that claim, but it would be interesting to see if that conjecture could be a possible factor.

As findings of Huff and Kertzer (2018) and D’Orazio and Salehyan (2018) showed, the language used for describing an act of political violence plays a vital role when defining an event as terrorism. Thus, the wording used in both the fictional scenario and the following questions definitely play a role. One possible explanation for the differences between the groups concerning the definition of the attack could be related to the wording “mass shooting”, “terror attack”, “murder” and “gang violence”. The term “mass shooting” could be interpreted as being quite a neutral term compared to the somewhat more emotionally loaded term “terror attack”. Assuming that some of the respondents are both uncertain and have the aim to think critically and politically correct when deciding which definition to choose, the final outcome for group B does not appear to be that surprising. From that point of view, choosing the category “mass shooting” is quite easy and more neutral when feeling doubtful about whether to define the attack as terrorism. Also, this argument could be applied to the second main finding where respondents in group B mostly perceived the act as a “criminal” one rather than a politically motivated attack. Choosing the word “criminal” seems both more neutral and politically correct, thus easier if you would not want to reveal your real thoughts. One could only speculate about the possible explanation concerning political correctness, therefore it would be desirable and interesting to conduct further studies on that assumption and to see whether this could be a leading incentive when approaching those kind of aspects in a terrorism context. One possible explanation given for the fact that a large number of respondents in the testing group chose “criminal” as a motive could be related to the idea that the scenario might represent a violent gang conflict. Especially Malmö, but also Gothenburg and Stockholm have encountered various gang-related murders in recent years, leading to an extensive public debate (Orrenius 2018).

When designing the fictional scenario for the survey experiment, various wordings were used and tested to describe the attack. As Huff and Kertzer (2018) showed, a bombing with ten casualties conducted by an organization with foreign ties would have increased the likelihood that the public defines the event as terrorism. Also, if the word “terror” would have been mentioned in the text from the beginning, there would possibly be a higher number of respondents choosing the terror attack category. For the purpose of this survey experiment though, it seemed important not to let the scenario be too obviously about terrorism. One could criticize that and argue that the outcome might have been different if the wording in the scenario and the questions had been changed. At the same time, this confirms one of the main theoretical points of departure of both this study and terrorism studies in general, namely that the concept of terrorism should be seen as a social construction not existing outside a specific context.

## 5. Conclusion

It was the aim of this thesis to conduct an experimental study in a Swedish context to see how the public defines an act of political violence as terrorism based on the ethnicity ascribed to the actor. Previous and similar survey experiments in other countries have indicated that there exists a difference concerning the definition of terrorism when it comes to factors like ethnicity or religious identity. The present work seems to be the first conducted academic study in Sweden aiming to find out whether some of those factors mentioned also could exist in a Swedish media context. Terror attacks, shootings and political violence conducted in Sweden bred ongoing discussions in the society about whether some of those events should be seen as terrorism. In the light of that discourse, this study could be seen as a starting point for further academic studies aiming at analyzing how the public perceives terrorism.

The theoretical basis of this study were studies conducted by Huff and Kertzer (2018) and D’Orazio and Salehyan (2018), amongst others, who contributed to a better understanding of the public defining terrorism and political violence based on different factors. Still, both the fields International Relations and Terrorism Studies in general are in need of empirical studies conducted in a European and/or Scandinavian context, both because of recent terror attacks in Europe but also due to an ongoing political discourse on terrorism-related policy where the public opinion plays an important role.

Further studies on the subject will be necessary, as the present study population is too small and narrow to draw conclusions that have external validity. The main hypothesis that a foreign perpetrator will make respondents more eager to define the deadly attack as terrorism, could not be confirmed. The major results show that the tested group did not see the Arab perpetrator as “more terrorist” than the Swedish one. In fact, respondents defined the shooting conducted by “Johan Bergqvist” more often as a terror attack than in the testing group. Also, when ascribing a possible motive to the shooting, a large group of respondents in the Arab group chose to define the motive as “criminal” although there is a possible political motive mentioned in the text. This finding is both interesting and difficult to explain. Why say that Fahid Al-Hashemi is a criminal rather than a politically motivated terrorist? When comparing with the Swedish perpetrator group, only 27,5 percent defined the motive as a criminal one. Further investigative studies on the perception of terrorism and political violence should be conducted in combination with survey experiments in order to find the decisive underlying factors. Surely the main explanation concerning the current result can be found in the group studied: Young students of social Sciences and humanities who are mostly female and educated. Critical

thinking and knowledge in the field could be possible factors that have influenced the study's outcome. Political correctness as well as social desirability bias could be central elements affecting the result. Concerning the possible motive ascribed to the attack, ideas of possible gang violence in Malmö could have been a factor.

The present study's results confirmed the theoretical point of departure that it also depends on the media context and the wording used when defining an event of political violence as terrorism. If there had been a clearer picture of both motives, background of the perpetrator, country of origin and so on, one could assume that the results would have been a different one. In the present case, despite of the perpetrators name, location of the shooting and the suspicion that the perpetrator is a part of a political violent group, other details remained unclear. Having this in *arrière-pensée*, the outcome of the present study should be seen as a product of all those factors that could have influenced the respondents.

To summarize, pointing to the theoretical framework of this thesis, one should not forget that there are many different definitions of terrorism making it difficult to grasp the term and say "that is it". This brings one back to one of the main difficulties when it comes to defining terrorism overall: Who has the power to say that a certain event is terrorism? Governments, newspapers, authorities, the public or academic researchers? And why do some deadly events get three times more attention than others? Surely, media plays a certain role in this context, having the power to influence public opinion on highly complex issues such as political violence. Therefore, journalists and editors have a special responsibility when reporting about possible terror attacks and should be conscient about how their language used in news reports influences public opinion. This liability also applies to authorities and policy makers, who should be aware about the fact that common definitions, often formulated in legal documents, do not necessarily correspond with the public's understanding of terrorism. The unexpected outcome of this study shows that more research is needed in order to both assure external validity but most importantly to better understand motives, thoughts and explanations when the public defines terrorism.

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# Appendix

## 1. Survey - group A

### Enkät om media och våld

Detta är en kvantitativ undersökning för min kandidatuppsats i Internationella Relationer på Göteborgs universitet. Syftet med enkäten är att undersöka olika faktorer av våld i en medial kontext.

Deltagandet är anonymt.

Dina svar kommer endast användas för forskningsändamål och behandlas konfidentiellt. Resultaten kommer att redovisas i uppsatsen efter publicering.

Du informeras härmed att ditt deltagande är helt frivilligt och att du kan avbryta ditt deltagande i studien utan att ange något skäl. Genom att fylla i denna enkät samtycker du att delta i studien.

Det tar max fem minuter att fylla i enkäten. Tack för din hjälp!

Ansvarig student för undersökningen:

Niklas von Mentzer Marcev, IR1511

Har du frågor om undersökningen? Mejl: [niklas.marcev@yahoo.com](mailto:niklas.marcev@yahoo.com)

Handledare: Arne Wackenhut

## **Instruktioner till studiedeltagare:**

Läs noggrant igenom texten. Svara därefter på samtliga frågor, välj endast ett alternativ!

Det finns inga rätta eller felaktiga svar.

OBS! Detta är en fiktiv text. Handlingarna och samtliga namn i texten är påhittade och stämmer inte överens med någon verklig händelse.

### **Malmö: Flera döda i skjutning – gärningsman gripen<sup>8</sup>**

Polis och ambulans larmades till en skjutning inne på ett köpcentrum i centrala Malmö, skriver nyhetsbyrån TT. Larmet kom tidigt på onsdagskvällen. När attacken började flydde människor skrikande åt alla håll. Enligt ögonvittnen kastade sig människor ut genom fönstren, andra gömde sig på toaletten eller slängde sig ner på golvet. Blåljuspersonal var snabbt på plats och de första poliserna som kom till platsen kunde skjuta gärningsmannen i benet och gripa honom i anslutning till köpcentret.

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<sup>8</sup> The font setting for the fictional media report has deliberately been changed to the font “Helvetica Neue” to make the report look more authentic.

Tre personer omkom vid skjutningen och ett flertal personer vårdas fortfarande på sjukhus. Offren uppges vara besökare av köpcentret som vistades i en restaurang. I nuläget finns det inga uppgifter om de skjutna personernas identitet.

### **Tidigare känd av polisen**

Polisen angav att gärningsmannen är 28-årig Johan Bergkvist. Man misstänker att mannen tillhör någon form av våldsam politisk gruppering, utan att nämna några detaljer. Polisen var vid presskonferensen mycket förtegen att berätta mer om gärningsmannens bakgrund.

Motivet till dådet är ännu okänt. Polisens presstalesperson Agneta Sundström säger vid presskonferensen att Polisen känner till mannen sedan tidigare. Hon uppgav att man i mannens lägenhet hittat dokument som gett information om eventuella motiv utan att närmare gå in på detta. Utredningen uppges vara i ett känsligt läge.

### **Frågor:**

**1. Vad tycker du beskriver den ovan nämnda händelsen bäst? Välj ett alternativ.**

- Massskjutning
- Gängvåld
- Terrorattack
- Mord

**2. Vilket motiv beskriver den ovan nämnda gärningen bäst? Välj ett alternativ.**

- Kriminell
- Rasistisk
- Religiös
- Politisk

Psykisk sjuk

**3. Vilka åtgärder ska regeringen främst vidta för att förebygga liknande händelser?  
Välj ett alternativ.**

Strängare straff

Mer övervakningskameror

Fler poliser

Satsningar på välfärd

**Några bakgrundsfrågor som enbart används i statistiskt syfte:**

**4. Vilket kön har du? Med kön menas könsidentitet, alltså det kön du själv känner dig som.**

Kvinna

Man

Osäker

Annat alternativ

Vill ej svara

**5. Hur gammal är du?**

18-25 år

25-35 år

35-45 år

45-55 år

55 år och äldre

**6. Vad är din högsta avslutade utbildningsnivå?**

Gymnasiekompetens

Kandidatexamen eller motsvarande

Masterexamen eller motsvarande

Forskningsnivå eller motsvarande

## **2. Survey - group B**

### **Malmö: Flera döda i skjutning – gärningsman gripen**

Polis och ambulans larmades till en skjutning inne på ett köpcentrum i centrala Malmö, skriver nyhetsbyrån TT. Larmet kom tidigt på onsdagskvällen. När attacken började flydde människor skrikande åt alla håll. Enligt ögonvittnen kastade sig människor ut genom fönstren, andra gömde sig på toaletten eller slängde sig ner på golvet. Blåljuspersonal var snabbt på plats och de första poliserna som kom till platsen kunde skjuta gärningsmannen i benet och gripa honom i anslutning till köpcentret.



Tre personer omkom vid skjutningen och ett flertal personer vårdas fortfarande på sjukhus. Offren uppges vara besökare av köpcentret som vistades i en restaurang. I nuläget finns det inga uppgifter om de skjutna personernas identitet.

### **Tidigare känd av polisen**

Polisen angav att gärningsmannen är 28-årig Fahid Al-Hashemi. Man misstänker att mannen tillhör någon form av våldsamt politisk gruppering, utan att nämna några detaljer. Polisen var vid presskonferensen mycket förtegen att berätta mer om gärningsmannens bakgrund.

Motivet till dådet är ännu okänt. Polisens presstalesperson Agneta Sundström säger vid presskonferensen att Polisen känner till mannen sedan tidigare. Hon uppgav att man i mannens lägenhet hittat dokument som gett information om eventuella motiv utan att närmare gå in på detta. Utredningen uppges vara i ett känsligt läge.

### **Frågor:**

**7. Vad tycker du beskriver den ovan nämnda händelsen bäst? Välj ett alternativ.**

- Massskjutning
- Gängvåld
- Terrorattack
- Mord

**8. Vilket motiv beskriver den ovan nämnda gärningen bäst? Välj ett alternativ.**

- Kriminell
- Rasistisk
- Religiös
- Politisk
- Psykisk sjuk

**9. Vilka åtgärder ska regeringen främst vidta för att förebygga liknande händelser?  
Välj ett alternativ.**

- Strängare straff
- Mer övervakningskameror
- Fler poliser
- Satsningar på välfärd

**Några bakgrundsfrågor som enbart används i statistiskt syfte:**

**10. Vilket kön har du? Med kön menas könsidentitet, alltså det kön du själv känner dig som.**

- Kvinna
- Man
- Osäker
- Annat alternativ
- Vill ej svara

**11. Hur gammal är du?**

- 18-25 år
- 25-35 år
- 35-45 år
- 45-55 år
- 55 år och äldre

**12. Vad är din högsta avslutade utbildningsnivå?**

- Gymnasiekompetens
- Kandidatexamen eller motsvarande
- Masterexamen eller motsvarande
- Forskningsnivå eller motsvarande



### 3. SPSS Data files

- Complete dataset, both groups: <https://bit.ly/2srqOhn>
- Dataset group A only: <https://bit.ly/2D6SaiR>
- Dataset group B only: <https://bit.ly/2M7FYBp>