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*Facts Shape Feelings: Information, Emotions,
and the Political Consequences of Violence*

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Facts Shape Feelings: Information, Emotions, and the Political Consequences of Violence*

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Abstract

What makes violence political? Existing research argues that experiencing violence generates anger and grievances, which cause political mobilization, retribution, and spirals of escalating violence. I argue that the effect of violence on the political behavior of survivors is highly variable: situation-specific information shapes how survivors of violence experience anger, and whether they attribute blame to individual perpetrators or form more durable, expansive political grievances toward targets like police or prosecutors. I use qualitative and computational methods to analyze transcripts of original interviews with relatives of Black and Latinx homicide victims in Chicago, IL. I find substantial diversity in emotional experience and blame attribution. I argue that this diversity is caused by variation in clarity about identity and motive of the perpetrator, and variation in perception of perpetrator responsibility. Having or lacking crucial information determines whether survivors become angry at perpetrators or form broader political grievances after traumatic experiences. Evidence from Chicago challenges the notion that violent trauma and anger have automatic or straightforward consequences for political behavior.

Keywords: Violence, Emotions, Anger, Trauma, United States, Homicide

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1 Introduction

Ms. K's son and Ms. L's brother were murdered in Chicago the same week. Both were gang-affiliated but killed over non-gang-related personal feuds. "So-called friends" set up Ms. L's brother. Ms. K thinks her son was killed over romantic competition. Ms. L is extremely angry at her brother's killers. She wants revenge. One of the "so-called friends" was later murdered, and Ms. L relishes that he was too mutilated for an open-casket funeral (Respondent 83, Chicago, IL, 2018). Ms. K, however, feels differently. She says her son's death is "nobody's fault." Rather than the killer, she focuses mainly on the detectives who haven't "done their job" and who "disrespected" her, making her provide an alibi for the time of her son's murder (Respondent 75, Chicago, IL, January 2018). Why is Ms. L primarily angry at the killers while Ms. K's main grievance is toward the police?

Political scientists argue that anger is a critical link between perceived injuries—including violence—and various political behaviors. Anger about violence motivates retribution and participation in violence (Gurr, 1971; Petersen and Zukerman Daly, 2010; Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015; Balcells, 2017). It spurs both greater political participation (Bateson, 2012) and lesser trust in government (Webster, 2017). Anger inspires extremist views (Nielsen, 2017), approval of inter-group violence (Claassen, 2013; Zeitzoff, 2014), and support for vigilantism (Javeline, 2014; García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2019). I attempt to reconcile mixed results in this literature by focusing on underappreciated variation in emotional experiences after violence, and variation in blame attribution that shapes the political implications of anger.

I analyze 31 original interviews with relatives of homicide victims in Chicago, Illinois to study emotional responses to violence. Among families who experienced similar trauma, I find substantial variation in how angry survivors are, and how they attribute blame for the homicide. Where the existing literature either assumes that anger is an automatic consequence of violent injury, or focuses mainly on the political effects of anger compared to other emotions, I show not only that emotion experiences vary among people exposed to similar violence, but also that the

political implications of a single emotion—anger—vary between different people as well. Some angry survivors focus on the private citizens who killed their family members, while others mostly express anger at agents of the state who are not the perpetrators, strictly speaking. I develop a new theoretical framework to account for this variation, and argue that the processes linking victimization to grievance, anger, and action are more variable than previous studies assume.

I show that knowing particular information about the circumstances of a homicide—the perpetrator’s identity, motive, and culpability—is associated with increased expression of anger toward the individual perpetrator, and, crucially, with relative de-prioritization of grievances against the state. When survivors *lack* information necessary to experience anger at a specific perpetrator, the political consequences of violence are counterintuitively *larger*.

I develop a new theory, building on Lerner and Keltner’s (2000) cognitive appraisal framework, to explain why some survivors express anger at individual perpetrators, rather than political targets. I propose that *cognitive clarity* about the perpetrator’s 1) identity, 2) motive, and 3) culpability are important predicates for expressing anger and blame at the perpetrator. Negative emotions have larger political consequences when people are unclear about any of the three conditions but still experience a negative core affective state common in the wake of violence (Barrett, 2006). Without *cognitive clarity*, survivors often attribute negative emotions including anger to a “next best” target, like the police or other political actors. Anger and blame directed at police—usually for valid reasons, to be sure—has clear political implications: My research suggests that even non-state-perpetrated violence can directly affect attitudes toward the state under certain circumstances.¹

Anger motivates more or less political grievance depending on what information is available after violence. I show that emotion experiences and political grievance vary widely

¹ I use the term “non-state” only to distinguish from police-perpetrated homicides. However, as Richie (2012) and Perry (2013) argue, it is difficult to characterize violence against racial minorities as decisively non-state given the state’s role in perpetuating conditions that make violence possible.

within a single context, but I also argue that information, emotional experiences, and the political consequences of violence vary widely between contexts. Violence in a conventional war or inter-group conflict, for instance, typically comes with near-definitive information about the perpetrator's (group) identity and motive (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015). Criminal violence, non-conventional civil wars (Pearlman, 2016), and even repressive state violence (Davenport, 2005; Young, 2016) are less definitive, making assignment of blame more dependent on situation-specific information. The link between violence, anger, and *political* grievance in a violent context may be stronger or weaker depending on the ubiquity of such "shared" information. Reasoning individually about motive, identity, and circumstance, makes the political consequences of violence more variable.

In addition to a new theoretical framework, this paper makes two methodological contributions. First, I use open-ended interview responses to more holistically measure emotion experience including targets/justifications for reported emotions. Comparing these to traditional emotion elicitation questions, I show that traditional questions miss variation that is relevant for understanding the political consequences of emotions. Second, I develop a new application of structural topic modeling (STM, Roberts, Stewart and Airoldi, 2016) to support qualitative analysis of interviews. STM provides a new way to show patterns in sensitive text, making findings transparent and reproducible even when sharing underlying data is unethical.

2 Violence, Anger, and Politics

How does anger shape the politics of violence? Anger at perpetrators of injustice explains desire for retribution (Lerner et al., 2003; Fischer and Roseman, 2007; McDermott et al., 2017), participation in punishment more broadly (Frijda, 1994), or supporting harsh policies against transgressors. A large literature on electoral campaigns finds anger is a powerful mobilizer within certain limits. Anger at political elites can mobilize people in electoral politics and social movements (Lebel and Ronel, 2009; Valentino et al., 2011), and affect assimilation of political information (Suhay and Erisen, 2018). Phoenix (2019) and Phoenix and Arora (2018), though,

find that the “mobilizing” effects of anger vary across racial groups in the United States. Using cognitive appraisal theory and affective intelligence theory, they show that Black and Asian Americans are less mobilized by anger, possibly due to lower expectations of the political system. Banks et al. (2019) show that anger among Black Americans only promotes participation in group-specific acts like donating to Black organizations.

Studies focused on violence and anger find contradictory results as well. Some studies identify a straightforward relationship between injustice, anger (or indignation), and either short-term retribution (Claassen, 2013; Costalli and Ruggeri, 2015), or long-term political alignments (Balcells, 2017). Other work finds weak links between anger or moral outrage and preferences for punishment of violent offenders (Javeline, 2014; García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2019). In studies of violent events like terrorist attacks or rebel violence, there are divergent findings suggesting that anger might either support conservative voting, or not (Bonanno and Jost, 2006; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018; Nussio, 2020).

I argue that some of this divergence results from imprecise measurement. Anger is typically targeted at specific objects of blame (Lerner and Keltner, 2001), so the consequences of a person’s anger depend on *who* they are angry at and *why*. Many studies use broad questions (“How many times have you felt angry in the last week?”) to measure a narrow quantity of interest: anger at a particular target for a particular injury. Other studies use indirect proxies or simply assume that violence exposure causes anger.

These approaches have drawbacks. First, simply counting anger episodes confuses anger caused by violence—the signal of interest—with anger-proneness as a personal trait. High trait-anger increases attention to angering stimuli (Wilkowski et al., 2007). Second, closed-ended measurements usually neglect information about the target and justification for anger, which are important for understanding anger’s political consequences. When blame is measured directly, angry people often blame unexpected targets (García-Ponce, Young and Zeitzoff, 2019). Accounting for blame attribution helps reconcile divergent findings in existing studies. In

interviews, I find substantial variation in both emotional experiences and blame attribution, leading to variable political consequences.

3 Violence and Trauma in Chicago

I interview relatives of 31 homicide victims who were killed in Chicago, Illinois between 2015 and 2017.² Interviews, conducted in January 2018, lasted 90-180 minutes. From 2015-2017, over 1,500 people were murdered in Chicago, but death toll is a conservative measure of gun violence; more gunshot victims in Chicago survive compared to other American cities (Asher, 2017). Violence in Chicago largely affects Black and Latinx people living in highly segregated neighborhoods on the South and West sides (Papachristos and Wildeman, 2014). Though discourse around violence affecting Black and Latinx communities is often “masculinized,” women are disproportionately impacted by the after-effects or sequelae of violence (Smith, 2016), including exposure to abuse, intimate partner violence, and social marginalization (Richie, 2012). Not all violence in Chicago relates to gang politics or political motivations. Chicago police designate around half of homicide victims and two-thirds of perpetrators as “gang-related” (Kapustin et al., 2017), but these designations are criticized as unreliable (Sweeney and Buckley, 2019).

4 Data and Measurement

I use open-ended interviews and survey-style questions to study individuals’ emotional experiences after violence. Audio-recorded interviews covered: circumstances of the homicide, experiences with police and prosecutors, emotional experience, and post-homicide changes in behavior, plus standard demographic questions, questions about attitudes toward government and police, and three short clinical instruments to measure emotions (Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988; Vagg and Spielberger, 1979).

² Respondents were parents, guardians, or siblings of the victim.

To recruit participants, I worked with Chicago Survivors, a 501(c)(3) social service organization serving families of homicide victims. Chicago Survivors has unparalleled access to families of people murdered in Chicago, contacting nearly 100% of victims' families in person at the crime scene, morgue, or hospital. Roughly 80% accept free services and are assigned to a Family Support Specialist (FSS). Over six months, the FSS supports survivors through home visits, referrals to outside services, and assistance with government interactions—especially state victim's compensation. To enter the research context, I began with personal introductions: First, from a pre-existing professional contact to FSSs at Chicago Survivors, and then from FSSs at Chicago Survivors who introduced me to the families they served. As a researcher who did not share the “survivor of homicide” identity with interviewees, I first worked to build trust with the FSSs, many of whom are also survivors. I started the research process with participant observation—shadowing Chicago Survivors staff as they interacted with families—and then later relied on the trust that individual FSSs had built with families to negotiate and conduct interviews. These relationships were essential to the study: A number of interview participants made contact with their FSS to “check me out” after I asked for an interview.

Guidance from FSSs was critical for all aspects of research with such a sensitive population—from making introductions and explaining the interview process to potential respondents, to vouching for my commitment to protecting privacy. FSSs as trusted intermediaries were also important in helping me navigate power and identity dynamics that arise in all interview research (Brown, 2012). I discuss these issues more in Appendix F. I obtained written consent for interviews (and recording), following a conversation about the interview process, the intended purpose of the research, and the rights of participants. Respondents were reminded that participating was not a condition of their relationship with Chicago Survivors, nor would Chicago Survivors ever have access to personally identifiable data from the project.

I developed a three-pronged approach to monitor and mitigate harm. First, I developed the interview guide in consultation with Chicago Survivors staff. Their input led to changes that

mitigated possible psychological risk, and to the identification of free counseling resources in case respondents felt psychological distress from participating. Second, all respondents received contact information for my institution's IRB. During the consent process, I reminded participants of their right to contact the IRB to report concerns. Third, following Wood (2006), I provided IRB contact information to Chicago Survivors staff, and told respondents that their FSS could initiate a complaint on their behalf.

A long-list of interview candidates was constructed non-randomly by Chicago Survivors staff based on professional judgment about a) who could participate safely, b) who could offer informed consent and “understand what [the researcher] was trying to do,” and c) who they thought a priori would be willing to participate. All candidates' families had already completed six months of Chicago Survivors services (no one whose family member died after July 2017 was interviewed). Additional sample characteristics are reported in the appendix.

Respondents were selected by stratified random sampling from the long-list. For each selected family, I reached out to Chicago Survivors' “primary contact.” Primary contacts skewed older—often the homicide victim's parents—and included more women than men.³ I typically interviewed this “primary contact,” but some referred me to other relatives. Almost all respondents (and homicide victims) were either Black or Latinx, and most respondents were women. Women are over-represented among respondents because they are over-represented among these “primary contacts.” Feminist scholarship on violence and coping in Black communities, suggests that women are often more likely to undertake the logistical and emotional labor (and attendant harm) that follows a violent death in the family (Smith, 2016), and that Black women are doing “humanizing labor” as mothers even after the death of their children (Threadcraft, 2016). Because women's voices are relatively under-represented in the literature on

³ I chose not to “oversample” men to correct for this imbalance. Accordingly, the conclusions of this study are more likely valid for women's behavior than men's.

violence and emotions, focusing mainly on women's experiences is valuable even if the findings do not generalize to men. On generalizability, though, research suggests that gender differences in emotions (if any) are in modes of expression: women discuss anger more whereas men exhibit more aggressive behavior (Coleman, Goldman and Kugler, 2009). The results cut against what we would expect if there were gender bias in measurement: In interviews, I find surprisingly inconsistent anger in a population theoretically more likely to discuss anger.⁴

5 Results

5.1 Correlates of Anger

Respondents' emotional experiences do not support common assumptions about anger after violence. In a composite measure averaging self-reports for "angry," "upset," "hostile," and "irritable" from an adapted PANAS battery (Watson, Clark and Tellegen, 1988), respondents average 3.39 of 5, between "moderately" and "quite" angry, when thinking *specifically about their relative's homicide*.⁵ Many respondents are surprisingly un-angry when thinking about the homicide, but this measure still undersells emotional diversity across respondents. Among respondents who report extreme anger, only half blame the perpetrator (See Figure 1). A quarter of all respondents report extreme anger when thinking about the homicide, but identify someone other than the perpetrator as the target. Many are angry at agents of the state. Appendix figure A.2 shows that half respondents who reported maximum anger also reported frustration with the detectives assigned to their relative's case, and focused blame on the police as well.

Evidence belies other common assumptions about anger and blame as well. A widely-cited version of cognitive appraisal theory predicts that anger abates when perpetrators are punished (Goldberg, Lerner and Tetlock, 1999; Lerner and Keltner, 2001). This implies a negative association between anger self-reports and the perpetrator being caught, but I find the

⁴ I discuss how my identities as a researcher may have influenced this trend in Appendix F.

⁵ One standard deviation ranges from "a little" angry to "quite a bit" angry. Average scores for "angry" alone are higher but the difference is not significant.

association is actually positive but insignificant. Interviews do, however, show a positive relationship between anger and knowing the perpetrator's identity. Whether survivors of violence know the perpetrator's identity is rarely measured in political violence studies of anger.

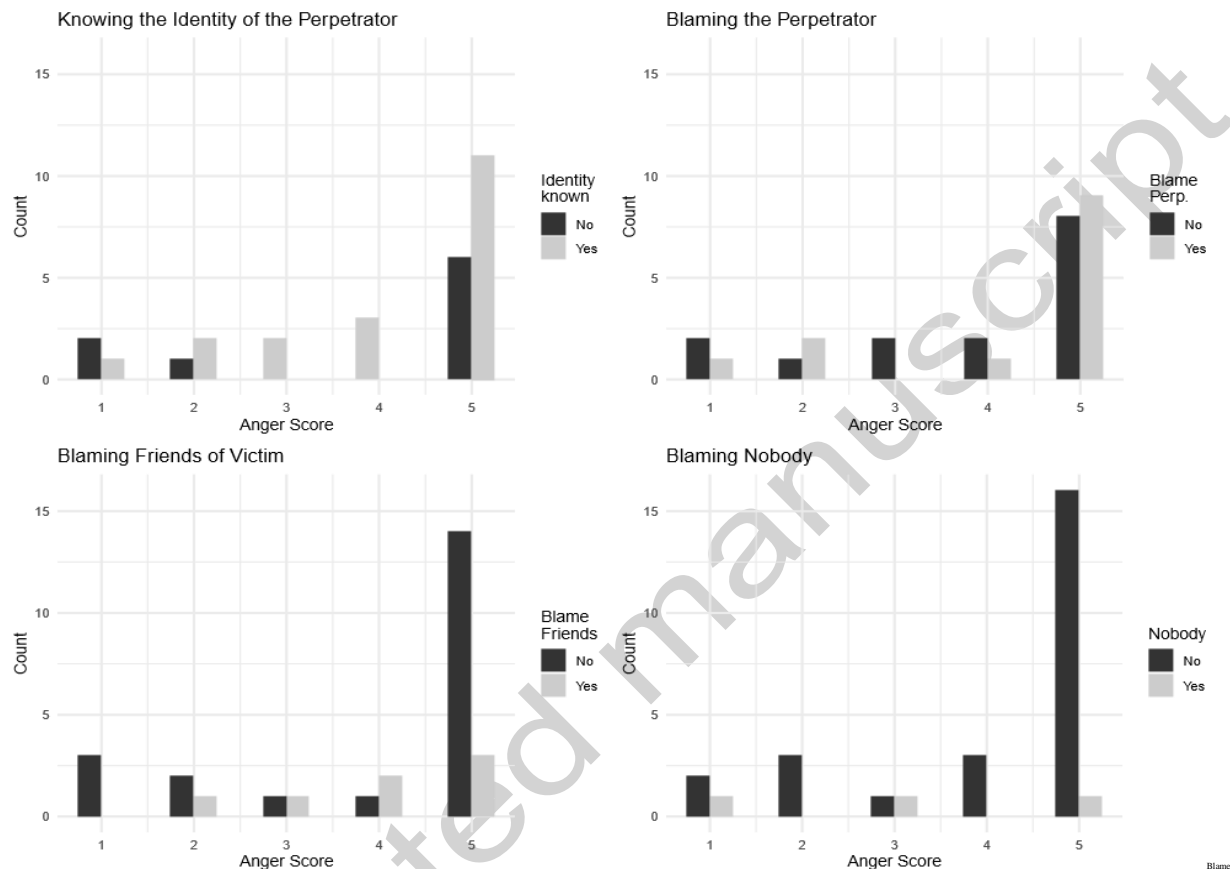


Figure 1: Self-reported anger levels plotted against other respondent characteristics. The horizontal axis of each plot shows self-reported anger levels from 1 to 5. The black and grey bars show the number of respondents at each anger level who do/do not know the perpetrator's identity. The top left pane shows that knowing the perpetrator's identity appears positively related to anger levels. This may seem trivial, but nearly 35% of respondents had no notion of the perpetrator's identity. This is likely an even more common condition in the general population of survivors in Chicago: Interviews oversampled respondents whose cases went to trial. The remaining panes show that distributions of anger levels are quite similar between respondents who do/do not blame perpetrators, friends, or the victim themselves. This suggests that simple measures of anger mask important variation in the targets of anger.

5.2 Topic Models for Qualitative Research: A New Application

Survey data suggest that respondents' emotional experiences after violence are inconsistent with existing theories, but do not fully capture information shared in response to follow-up questions or during open-ended discussions. I describe these findings in detailed case studies in Section 6.

Here, I use Structural Topic Modeling (STM) as a tool to show high-level patterns across all 31 interviews.

Topic models are typically used to analyze large corpora of publicly-available documents, but STM is useful for analyzing smaller, private corpora for two reasons. First, STM honestly presents evidence of patterns in any size corpus. Topic models fit to smaller corpora can “aid the researcher’s memory” by correcting for the human tendency to inadvertently weight evocative, surprising interviews more heavily than others during qualitative analysis; STM has no such tendency. Second, STM is good for summarizing sensitive material. Respondents participated in interviews—with surprising candor—on the condition that audio and full transcripts would never be published, and quotations carefully limited. Using STM to present patterns in sensitive data allows me to fulfill this promise while still conducting transparent, reproducible analysis. The technical features of topic model workflows that make this possible are described in the appendix.

STM models words in a document as a function of an unobserved latent variable—the “topic” words are describing. It assumes each document is a mixture over unobserved “topics,” and that a particular word’s appearance can be attributed to the group that “explains” that word (Blei, Ng and Jordan, 2003). A topic model output summarizes each document with a vector of topic proportions. Document-level proportions can then be compared to other metadata to measure associations between topic prevalence and covariates of interest.⁶

STM-generated topics are a powerful tool for identifying patterns in text. Human language is a high dimensional representation of information: interviews, for example, transmit meaning through thousands of unique words. STM facilitates dimension reduction—it summarizes—by identifying groups of words that frequently co-occur, and treating co-occurrence as evidence that those word groups communicate one underlying idea. Topics can be

⁶ STM is an improvement that incorporates document-level metadata into the model fit (Roberts, Stewart and Airoldi, 2016).

interpreted as evidence of latent “ideas” across documents—the idea of memorial, for example, can be understood as the common cause behind words like “funeral,” “homegoing,” or “flowers.”⁷ Topic model interpretation is very involved. Researchers, not computers, determine what (if anything) the fitted topics mean in the context of a particular research question (Grimmer and Stewart, 2013).

5.3 Topic Model Analysis

I find four trends in the interview text that shed light on what causes anger at perpetrators versus development of political grievances. First, there is a strong, positive association between discussion of the perpetrator’s motive and expression of perpetrator-directed anger/blame in the same paragraph. Knowledge of motive seems important for attributing blame to the perpetrator. Second, self-reported anger levels (see Section 5.1) are not strongly related to extent of discussion about perpetrator-directed anger/blame: Anger and perpetrator-directed anger are not the same thing. Third, knowledge of motive and knowledge of identity, both important for attributing blame to the perpetrator, are separate in respondents’ considerations of trauma. Fourth, relevant to the political consequences of anger, I find that when respondents know the perpetrator’s identity, they systematically spend less time discussing topics like frustration at detectives. In other words, perpetrators and state agents seem to be *substitutable* targets in practice.

I fit a topic model with 10 topics on the complete corpus of interview transcripts (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2018).⁸ I model topic prevalence as a function of respondent ID even though each transcript is broken into 70 documents on average. The topics upon which the model

⁷ Topic models ignore semantic structure, so they incorporate vernacular and slang easily. For example, STM associates Chicago Survivors-specific terminology like “homegoing” (funeral) and “angel-day” (death anniversary) with other descriptors of funerals.

⁸ The interviews are broken into 2,300 paragraphs for model flexibility, but preserve correlation between paragraphs from the same interview via STM’s prevalence covariate functions. Topic correlations are reported at the paragraph level—i.e. ideas discussed *together* within a paragraph—whereas other associations are reported at the respondent level. The estimations of other associations propagate uncertainty from the model fit, which includes respondent ID as a covariate, into the (conservative) errors.

converges are listed and interpreted in Appendix Table 1. To generate topic descriptions, I analyze the 25 highest-proportion documents for each topic. A small subset of those documents are in Appendix C. Researchers cannot prompt STM to converge on useful topics, but this model recovers a number of relevant topics.

Four important patterns emerge. First, respondents ruminate on perpetrator-focused anger/blame *together* with discussion of the perpetrator's motive, and they tend *not* to discuss perpetrator-focused anger when confused about the motive. Respondents ruminate more on anger at the perpetrator when they have specific information about the motive. Figure 2 shows the correlation for topics related to "Perpetrator Anger/Blame" with a coefficient greater than 0.1 or less than -0.1. Other emotionally evocative topics, like respondents discussing how they found out about the homicide, are negatively associated with discussing anger. Negative correlation between topics 4 and 5 suggests that anger is not automatically dominant in the immediate aftermath of the homicide. Whether anger develops, and whether it targets the perpetrator or not, is determined by additional moderators.

Second, overall anger is not significantly associated with discussion about anger/blame *at the perpetrator* (Topic 5, Figure 3). Measuring anger in general without specifically measuring targets and justifications would lead to substantively different conclusions about emotions after trauma. Qualitative analysis supports this suggestion: Some respondents are very angry, but angry at police or prosecutors.

Third, the STM shows that knowing the perpetrator's identity and knowing the perpetrator's motive are separate but related criteria. Respondents who do *not* know the perpetrator's identity talk less about the perpetrator's motive (Topic 3). Knowing the perpetrator's identity is also a good predictor of *perpetrator-targeted* discussion of anger and

blame (Topic 5). Anger at the perpetrator seems to be driven by availability of relevant information about both identity and motive (Figure 3).⁹

Finally, there is a strong relationship between frustration at detectives (Topic 2) and *not* knowing the perpetrator’s identity. Respondents who lack important information that facilitates targeting anger at the perpetrator are *likely to focus more* on frustration or anger at the police. The perpetrator and police seem to substitute for each other as possible targets for negative emotions felt in the wake of a homicide.

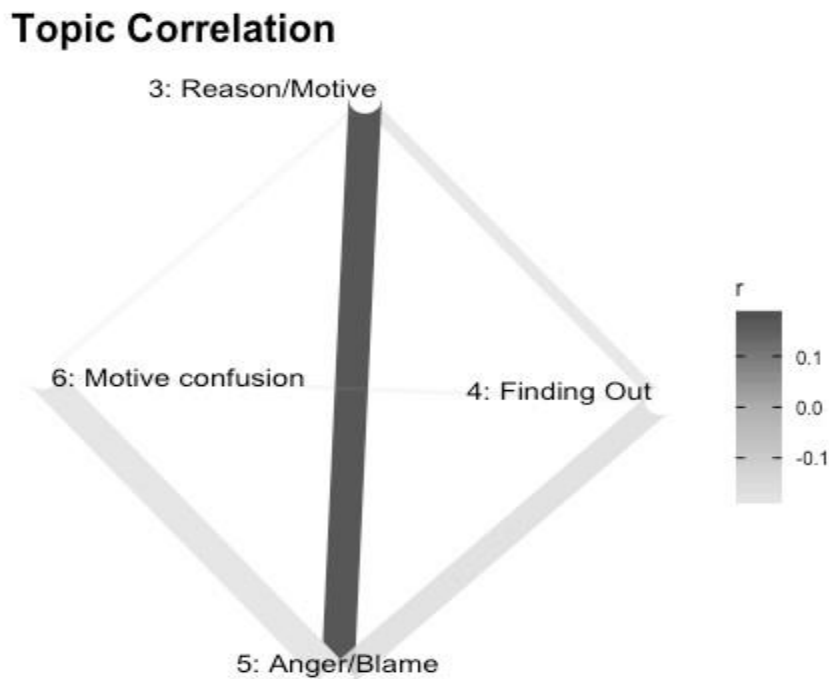


Figure 2: An inter-topic correlation plot for the structural topic model. Each topic is a “node” or point, that is labeled with the topic description. Dark lines connect topics that are positively correlated. Light edges connect topics that are negatively correlated. The plot only shows topics that are related to Topic 5 (Anger at the perpetrator) with a correlation coefficient $|r| < 0.1$. The plot shows that discussion of anger is positively associated with discussion

⁹ Topic prevalence should be un-affected by crowding-out, i.e. talking more about one emotion automatically reducing discussion of another. All ten topics happen to be associated with one or more questions in the interview guide, and responses were not time-limited. Talking more about panic, for example, would never lead to “skipping” an opportunity to talk about anger.

about the perpetrator's motive, and is strongly negatively associated with expressing confusion about the motive, and with discussion about the immediate aftermath of the homicide. Other topics (shown in figure 3) are not strongly correlated with discussion of anger at the perpetrator either positively or negatively.

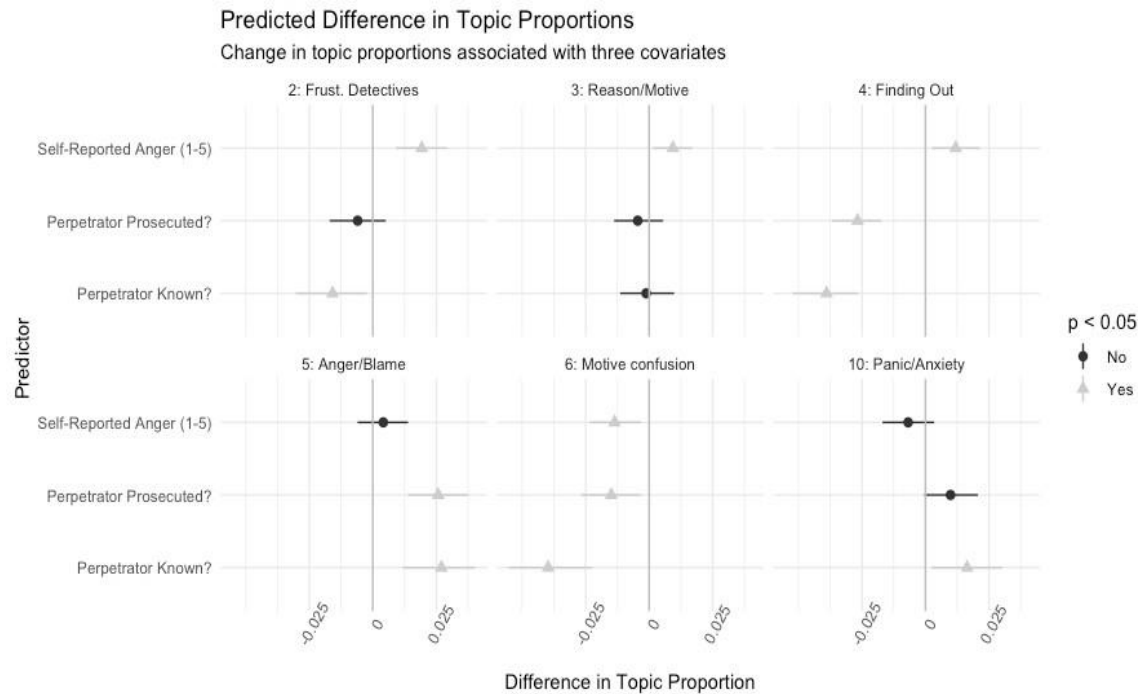


Figure 3: This plot shows the estimated associations between respondent characteristics (self-reported anger, whether or not the perpetrator was prosecuted, whether or not the perpetrator was known) and topics of discussion in the STM. The plot shows expected difference in topic proportion (amount of discussion) associated with difference between values of 0 and 1 for indicator variables, or with difference between the 25th and 75th percentile values for continuous predictors. Note in the bottom left pane that respondents who know the perpetrator's identity discuss anger at the perpetrator 2.5% more than respondents who do not, and also that respondents who have higher self-reported anger do not necessarily talk about anger at the perpetrator more than others. Estimates are generated using the STM package with the most conservative uncertainty estimation, which propagates uncertainty from the topic model estimation (which includes respondent ID as a prevalence covariate) into the estimated errors (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2018).

Other associations are also worth mentioning. First, some topics are significantly associated with gender (See appendix Fig. A.3). Men talk less about frustration at detectives, and less about the immediate aftermath of the murder. They talk more about motive and reason, and more about anger, blame, and justice. Looking individually at transcripts from male respondents to interpret this finding, though, only half are angry at the perpetrator. The others are angry at friends of the deceased, or at the justice system. Second, there is a strong negative association

between church attendance and discussion of anger at the perpetrator. The relationship between religious practice and emotion expression is worth exploration in another study. As detailed in Appendix A2, more religious respondents might express less anger as a consequence of messages they hear in church services or faith communities. Focus on forgiveness and leaving vengeance to God is a central message promoted by pastors involved in anti-violence work in Chicago.

6 Understanding Variation in Emotional Response

Interviews show substantial diversity in survivors' emotional responses after violence. In this section, I develop a new theory to explain the variation. I argue that cognitive clarity about three separate issues—the perpetrator's identity, the perpetrator's motive, and the perpetrator's culpability—is important in determining whether trauma survivors blame and express anger at perpetrators, or instead channel negative emotions into political grievance. After introducing the cognitive clarity framework, I present nine case studies showing how cognitive clarity accounts for variation in emotions and grievances.

6.1 Cognitive Clarity Framework

A relative's murder is a clearly negative experience, but it does not always result in perpetrator-targeted anger and blame. Comparing respondents' PANAS scores to a non-clinical reference population shows that interview respondents report more negative feeling and less positive feeling after their relative's homicide (Appendix D). But only half of respondents blame negative emotions on the perpetrator.

Why do people who virtually all feel negative feelings after similar traumatic events experience different emotions directed at different targets? I focus on the role of information and context in assigning meaning to feelings: "categorizing" affect into emotional experiences (Barrett, 2006). I use the Feldman-Barrett concept of "core affect," but also refer to empirical findings about the correlates of anger that come from a "natural-kind" view of emotion adopted

in cognitive appraisal theory.¹⁰ Focusing on *cognitive clarity* is in some ways an extension of cognitive appraisal theory to the specific circumstances of emotion formation after violent trauma.

I argue that some information is especially important for directing or attributing emotional experiences. Interpreting negative feelings as anger at a perpetrator of violence depends on *cognitive clarity*, or clear understanding of three issues: 1) the perpetrator's identity, 2) the perpetrator's motive, and 3) absence of blame-mitigating circumstances around the act of violence. Identity, motive, and circumstances may seem like foregone conclusions in many situations, but acquiring information about the causes and circumstances of violent trauma is easier in some contexts than others. In Chicago, and other settings where cohesive political narratives do not pre-attribute blame for injustice, I expect individual differences in emotional experience among people who survive similar violence to be especially pronounced.

6.1.1 Identity

Knowing the perpetrator's identity facilitates anger at the perpetrator. Without identity, it is difficult to attribute negative feeling to a particular source, and difficult to envision restorative action/punishment against that source. Both are necessary for anger.

Emotional experiences are generally connected to people, objects, or processes that we believe caused an underlying feeling. Emotions provide templates for behavior, leading us to actions that are supposed to benefit us (Frijda, 1986). Anger—the emotional response to unjust harm (Frijda, 1994; Fischer and Roseman, 2007; Hutcherson and Gross, 2011)—promotes restoration and retribution: angry people formulate plans to restore fairness (Lerner and Tiedens, 2006), and feel anticipatory exhilaration about punishing transgressors (Tripp and Bies, 1997). The possibility of punishing is integral to anger: Reward centers in the left frontal cortex of angry

¹⁰ These approaches differ over whether different emotions are naturally separate phenomena (Lerner and Keltner, 2000), or a single integrated process (Barrett, 2006). The disagreement is *not* about empirical findings linking anger to risk assessment, attitudes, etc. so I refer to both approaches.

subjects show increased activity *only if* the “cause” of anger can be punished (Harmon-Jones and Sigelman, 2001).

Accordingly, interview evidence shows that respondents have difficulty attributing negative feelings to unknown causes and envisioning vengeance against an unknown target.¹¹ Even if the perpetrator’s individual identity is unknown, identifying them as a member of a specific group (a particular gang vs. “gangs” in general) helps respondents envision punishment and experience anger at the perpetrator. Take for example, two respondents unaware of the identities of their son’s killers. Neither expressed anger at the perpetrator. Both explained their feelings by saying they “did not know who to blame” for what happened (Respondent 75, Chicago, IL, January 2018; Respondent 90, Chicago, IL, January 2018).

6.1.2 Motive

Knowing the perpetrator’s motive also facilitates anger at the perpetrator. Knowing motive helps people perceive their situation as controllable and comprehensible. Laboratory experiments show that anger formation depends on understanding what happened and why it happened (Lerner and Keltner, 2000, 2001). It also depends on attributing the injustice to someone else’s agency—not fate or chance—and believing the injustice is something that can be redressed (Halperin, 2008).

Not knowing the perpetrator’s motive makes conceptual representations of certainty and control tenuous, interrupting the formation of anger. Interviews suggest this condition is separate from—albeit correlated with—knowing the perpetrator’s identity. Respondents who are unclear about the perpetrator’s motive seem frustrated at the cosmic unfairness of their situation, or at their own helplessness, but not angry at the perpetrator. One respondent, whose son was murdered by strangers on his commute home said she felt angry “at the situation” and the randomness of what happened. When asked about motive, she said: “I ask myself constantly...I can’t think of a reason...I have no idea why it happened to him.” After the murder, she tried hard

¹¹ Getting the attribution *wrong* is not an impediment to envisioning punishment (Clore and Gasper, 2000).

to increase her sense of control by “pulling the reins in” on her surviving children to protect them from “random violence” (Respondent 89, Chicago, IL, January 2018).

6.1.3 Mitigating Circumstances

Anger depends on perceiving “unfairness” or transgression, so perpetrator-directed anger is less likely when people believe the circumstances of the homicide mitigate the perpetrator’s responsibility. One respondent, whose son was stabbed to death as retribution after winning a fight, was not angry at the perpetrator despite clear knowledge of his identity, and clear knowledge of a revenge motive. She is angry at her son’s friend for precipitating the situation that killed her son. She was most focused on the earlier betrayal by the friend: “If he had not set [my son] up...it would not have put [my son] in this predicament.”

Others deemed the perpetrator not responsible for their own actions. One respondent, whose younger brother was also killed after winning a fight, was convinced that the environment of the neighborhood contributed at least as much to his brother’s death as the shooter did. He believed that “the kid with the gun is [a] victim...being brainwashed into believing that this is how you defend yourself.” Blaming the environment was not a matter of forgiveness—he is not sure he will ever forgive the perpetrator. Instead, blame attribution follows from his belief that the perpetrator was not in control: “I’ve seen it happen to my friends, people I’ve been to school with. It’s like it’s some type of disease or something.” (Respondent 27, Chicago, IL, January 2018).

Finally, some respondents believed the victim’s behavior mitigated the perpetrator’s responsibility. One respondent felt angry at her nephew about his own death, because she believed it was due to his own recklessness (Respondent 33, Chicago, IL, January 2018). Even after murder, a paradigmatic injustice, not all respondents felt the perpetrator had done the greatest harm.

Respondents who did not meet all three cognitive clarity conditions—knowledge of perpetrator’s identity, knowledge of perpetrator’s motive, absence of blame-mitigating

circumstances—typically expressed some negative emotion other than *anger at the perpetrator of the homicide*. Respondents who lacked this information did not feel “better.” Rather, they used the diminished set of available information to contextualize their negative feelings differently and attribute them to a different actor. This often manifested as anger at a non-perpetrator target like the police, but other times it appeared as anxiety or sadness. While respondents tend to prioritize anger and grievance at *either* the perpetrator *or* some other target, self-reports do not support the idea that all negative feelings are mutually exclusive. Anger and fear/anxiety levels, for instance, are rather highly correlated.

6.1.4 Political Consequences of Diffusion

Many respondents who have less information than necessary for “cognitive clarity” describe their emotional experience as anger at some non-perpetrator target. These respondents are more likely to express political grievances. Their experiences are theoretically consistent with the core-affect-plus-context model of emotional experience—and indicative of an important pattern in the way survivors of non-state-perpetrated violence regard the state.

Respondents who are not angry at the perpetrator still experience emotions in non-random ways. Blame attribution follows the logic of cognitive clarity, but for the identity, motive, and culpability of some other target. Respondents still draw on contextual knowledge to explain the causes of their negative feelings.

The process of attributing blame to a non-perpetrator target, which I call *diffusion*, often results in anger at agents of the state like prosecutors or detectives. Why are agents of the state common non-perpetrator targets for anger? Availability is one answer. After a homicide, state agents are reliably present and often make mistakes (sometimes honest, sometimes malicious). Absent cognitive clarity about the perpetrator, state agents may appear as the people with the “last clear chance” to prevent or avenge the injustice of homicide. It is also possible that respondents are particularly attuned to police-perpetrated injustices based on their own previous experiences. Many respondents live in communities where interactions with police are “Janus-

faced”: Police are too present in everyday life, and then perversely absent or ineffectual when needed (Prowse et al., 2019; Weaver et al., 2020). Indeed, most respondents reported they neither trusted, nor expected fair treatment from, the police. The same respondents, though, often had high expectations about the police’s *ability* to find perpetrators and bring them to justice. The Chicago Police and the Cook County States’ Attorney regularly under-delivered against these expectations. When respondents were angry at the police and prosecutors, they detailed specific, tangible wrongs-done. The political implications of this pattern are expansive: As Bell (2017) shows in other American communities, active harms like excessive use of force or civil rights violations are not the only wrongs that make people in marginalized communities angry at police. Anger and grievance can also come from equally real, less headline-grabbing injuries and sins of omission.

6.1.5 Missing Explanations: Inequity and Race

Very few interview respondents invoked concepts like racism or structural inequity to explain their experience, even as some expressed anger at state institutions and police. Diffusion of anger has political consequences, but it is not clear that diffusion is *caused* by politics. Shared political narratives are not always central to the way people make sense of trauma.

Respondents express political grievances that are specific to their personal experiences. Two observable implications of a shared political understanding of trauma are missing. If political grievances were a response to “race-class subjugation” (Weaver et al., 2020), they would be very widespread among the respondents I interviewed. This was not even the case among the subset of respondents who lacked the cognitive clarity to blame the perpetrator. Further, if attention to structural inequity *drove* respondents’ attributions and emotional experience in a consistent manner, I would expect respondents to more explicitly invoke experiences of racism or inequity, or at least contextualize their experiences as part of a pattern in the way state institutions treat Black and Latinx people in Chicago.

This happened in only a very small number of cases.¹² Even respondents who highlight racial inequity focused on specific personal experiences where police let them down or treated them poorly. It is difficult to attribute the political consequences of diffusion to a political cause even though centering racial inequity to explain trauma would be highly consistent with macro-level evidence about the lived experiences of Black and Latinx Chicagoans and about the deep causes of violence (Richie, 2012).

6.2 Qualitative Cases

I present the experience, reasoning, and emotions of nine interview respondents in case studies, showing how the cognitive clarity framework explains variation in emotional experiences. Seven cases illustrate how emotions differ depending on the extent of cognitive clarity: two show examples of full clarity, five more show how emotion experiences work differently with partial or no clarity. Two additional cases show departures from the framework, where respondents are not angry at the perpetrator despite clearing the bar for cognitive clarity. Longer narratives for each are in an appendix.

6.2.1 Full Cognitive Clarity

In two full-clarity cases, respondents explain anger at the perpetrator with specific reference to identity and motive. Both Mr. A (whose son was killed by a cousin) and Ms. B (whose son was killed by someone he had beaten in a fight) use available information to understand the murder as a) a transgression, b) caused by the perpetrator's agency, and c) avoidable. Mr. A and Ms. B report high levels of anger at the perpetrators. Their experiences are characterized by specific rumination on their knowledge of identity, motive, and nature of injury. Ms. B says thinking about how socially connected she is to the perpetrator makes her angry. She put off learning his real name (she knew his nickname); speaking his real name in court made her want to "walk over there and kick him in his face with my boot." She also refers to motive to

¹² Jackson (2019) shows that perception of inter-group threat (racist treatment by the state) in Chicago varies by gender: Men often downplay the threat of racism and women are more likely to express fear and anxiety.

explain her anger: the “fair” thing would have been learning to fight better instead of shooting (Respondent 68, Chicago, IL, January 2018). Cognitive clarity also informs Mr. A’s response. He is angry at the cousin because killing a blood-relative is a more serious transgression than killing in general. Mr. A says his son’s behavior—gang involvement—put him at risk generally speaking, but he is angry because his knowledge of the perpetrator’s identity shows that his son’s death was a transgression against the norms of family (Respondent 95, Chicago, IL, January 2018).

Knowing the perpetrator and motive help Mr. A and Ms. B form coherent narratives in which their son’s deaths were a violation, carried out by someone who could have made a different choice. The connection between cognitive clarity and anger is not lost on respondents: Ms. B says knowing the motive is the specific thing that makes her angry. Respondents who have cognitive clarity actively use it to describe and justify their emotions.

6.2.2 Partial or No Cognitive Clarity

Five cases where respondents lack at least one key piece of information show how emotions develop without cognitive clarity, and how information shortfalls often lead respondents to attribute negative emotions toward more politically-consequential targets. Ms. C and Ms. G, whose nephew and son, respectively, were murdered, are unclear about the perpetrator’s identity and have “worked backward” from the little available information to guess about motive. They come to different conclusions about motive, but use available information in similar ways. Both women discussed the unknown perpetrators as quasi-structural forces, not actors with agency. Accordingly, they talked about violence as an ever-present environmental threat that people must work to avoid. Both blame people who they think had agency—Ms. C blames the victim, who might have refrained from antagonizing a rival crew (Respondent 33, Chicago, IL, January 2018), and Ms. G blames the victim’s friends who she thinks could have prevented the violence (Respondent 10, Chicago, IL, January 2018). Unknown perpetrators are

absent from their explanations.¹³ Lack of cognitive clarity about the perpetrator's identity changes emotional processes: not knowing the perpetrator inhibits Ms. C and Ms. G from reasoning about the perpetrator's culpability and agency, so they focus on what others could have done differently.

Ms. D knows who killed her son, but doesn't believe what she has heard about motive: a botched robbery. Robbery does not fit with her other knowledge about the perpetrator (attended private school) or the sequence of events (shot before trying to take money), so she lacks cognitive clarity about motive. Ms. D has a competing theory: She believes the real cause of her son's death was the killer's mental illness. She is angry at the government for not helping people like her son's killer get treatment, and for not preventing them from getting guns. Ms. D's emotional response—anger diffused onto a new target—follows from confusion about motive. She makes sense of the situation by stipulating, without evidence, that the killer cannot control his behavior. She blames the people and institutions she thinks could have kept him from hurting others (Respondent 22, Chicago, IL, January 2018).

When respondents have partial cognitive clarity—knowing either identity or suspected motive—they use what they know to try and fill in blanks. Ms. E and Ms. F, however, lack information about both identity and motive. They assume their brother and son (respectively) were accidental victims, and neither knows who to blame. Ms. F explains that not knowing “the who or the why” means she can't be angry at the perpetrator. She says: “anger needs a target, so I'm not angry.” Both say there are too many unknowns for them to focus on blame. They express extreme anger, though, at subsequent transgressions by detectives and funeral directors, with both having more to say about these subsequent indignities than the causes of the homicide itself. Neither woman has enough information to make sense of the homicide, and, as Ms. F says, it's hard to be angry at something you know so little about (Respondent 101, Chicago, IL, January

¹³ Ms. G accuses the perpetrators of a secondary wrong—what Fujii (2013) calls “extra-lethal” violence. She says that sometimes people “catch a bullet,” but is upset that someone “unloaded” a whole magazine into her son, who was likely not the intended target.

2018). Ms. E and Ms. F direct their anger at tangible and understandable things, like the wrong color casket, or a detective who never calls. Both express frustration at feeling impotent, not only when they couldn't protect the brother and son who died, but also because they couldn't "be in control" of the situation after the fact (Respondent 73, Chicago, IL, January 2018).

6.2.3 Departures from the Cognitive Clarity Framework

Ms. H and Ms. J have full cognitive clarity but are not angry at the perpetrator. Variables other than cognitive clarity, like their different senses of what constitutes injury, seem to mediate their emotional experiences. Both Ms. H's grandson and Ms. J's daughter were killed because, the respondents believe, cousins put them at risk. Though perpetrator's identity, motive, and a sense of transgression are clear to both women, they are angry at the reckless cousins more than the perpetrator. One possible explanation for the departure from the cognitive clarity framework here is a different understanding of what constitutes an "injury"—in other words, a different importance placed on the norms of family. Since anger is a response to a transgression, variable interpretations of what behavior constitutes a transgression against important norms might lead to these departures from the cognitive clarity framework.

Ms. H and Ms. J perceive the nature of the injury differently from other respondents. They focus on the cousins' transgression of putting victims at risk in the first place (Respondents 74 and 96, Chicago, IL, January 2018).¹⁴ Still, the content of information about injury, perpetrator, and motive are not just permissive conditions for anger. They are integral to emotional experience and the attribution of blame to the cousins.

¹⁴ I also interviewed Ms. H and her son Mr. H about the murder of a different son, killed by his girlfriend. Here, both were unequivocally angry at the girlfriend; as the cognitive clarity model predicts. This further suggests that "family" norms are an appropriate alternative explanation for Ms. H's case.

7 Narratives of Violence: Generalizability of the Cognitive Clarity Framework and Future Research

Chicago is different from many common contexts for studying political violence. It has a strong state, moderately functional public service provision, and much of the violence is facially a-political. 2010s Chicago, unlike two-sided conventional or unconventional wars or situations of highly institutionalized criminal violence, does not have a shared narrative that pre-designates information about homicide-specific motive and perpetrator.¹⁵ Survivors of violence in Chicago sometimes lack the information to explain who/what is responsible for their trauma. At a loss for anger at the perpetrator, some survivors make sense of their situation in ways that lead to the formation of political grievance as their primary emotional response.

Evidence from Chicago should be instructive for other contexts, including those where shared narratives pre-designate the motive and identity of the perpetrator and obviate information-seeking, making cognitive clarity easy to achieve. First, it demonstrates the breadth of possible emotional responses to trauma. Second, Chicago provides insight about the simultaneous power and weakness of structural narratives. A strong, valid *latent* narrative exists in Chicago to explain violence-in-general as a product of racism and structural inequity, but the narrative does not account for all individual instances of violence, and is infrequently invoked by survivors making sense of their situations.

Political scientists know that macro-political interpretations and individual interpretations of a conflict, a cause, or even a single event do not necessarily match (Scott, 1985). This paper supports a newer, related observation: Interpretations of violence depend on access to information, which varies across individual events in a broader context. Broad versus individual interpretations may even support opposing conclusions about why violence has happened, who is to blame, and how to respond.

¹⁵ Chicago violence perhaps had a shared narrative in the past, but the breakdown of cohesive drug gangs since the 1980s has complicated the violence landscape (Stuart, 2020).

Emotional responses to violence are more variable than often assumed. Focusing on information and cognitive clarity may explain some portion of that variation. Using a more nuanced understanding of emotional responses to violence could provide significant benefits for understanding post-violence behavior, revenge seeking, and grievances against the state in both low-intensity contexts like Chicago, and in canonical situations of political violence like conventional wars.

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