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To cite this article: Mara Ostfeld & Diana Mutz (2014) Revisiting the Effects of Case Reports in the News, *Political Communication*, 31:1, 53-72, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2013.799106](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.799106)


To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.799106>

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 Published online: 30 Jan 2014.

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Revisiting the Effects of Case Reports in the News

MARA OSTFELD and DIANA MUTZ

Synthesizing several theories about the likely impact of case reports in the news, we propose that the impact of featuring identified victims in a news story is contingent on the degree of similarity between the audience member and the identified victims. We execute a population-based survey experiment involving immigration policy to examine our theory. Our results suggest that featuring specific, identified victims in a news story will promote more supportive policy opinions than otherwise identical stories about unidentified victims, but only when the victim is highly similar to the audience member. Conversely, case reports featuring identified people who are dissimilar to the audience member will decrease the extent to which the story encourages victim-supportive policy attitudes. Overall, our experimental findings shed light on the conditions under which the inclusion of case reports increases versus decreases the policy relevance of news stories. Our findings also help explain previous inconsistencies in findings about the impact of case reports. Additional analyses allow us to speculate as to the reasons for the differential direction of effects.

Keywords framing, media effects, case reports

In print and especially on television, news stories have a tendency to illustrate social and political issues using people whose narratives exemplify the larger problem at hand. By embedding specific examples in issue-relevant stories, journalists often attempt to add human interest to otherwise abstract policy debates (see Schudson, 2008). Theories differ, however, in their predictions about the likely effects of this practice.

In this study, we consider closely related theories with seemingly contradictory sets of findings pertaining to the effects of case reports on issue attitudes. Drawing on these heretofore separate areas of research, we synthesize these findings into a theory predicting under what conditions one should expect case reports—that is, concrete exemplars of social problems—to produce greater or lesser impact on issue attitudes relative to news stories without specific case reports. We then utilize an experiment embedded in a representative national population sample of White Americans to examine these contradictory expectations.

We begin by explicating what three interrelated theories have suggested about the influence of case reports on policy opinions. In order to understand inconsistencies in previous evidence, we examine the role of similarity between audience members and the victims

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used in the news stories illustrating social problems. We hypothesize that taking victim-audience similarity into account produces greater consistency in findings across seemingly contradictory theories about the influence of case reports on policy opinion.

Impact of Case Reports in the News

When news stories about abstract social issues such as immigration, poverty, crime, or unemployment include specific case reports or examples, social scientists have alternatively dubbed this an “episodic” (as opposed to a “thematic”) news frame, or as “exemplification” (as opposed to base rate information). Still others have studied this phenomenon by pitting “individually identifiable victims” against “statistical victims” in order to gauge their relative impact on audience opinions (e.g., Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007).

A growing body of evidence from multiple traditions within the social sciences is frankly confusing in what it suggests about the implications of this form of coverage. On the one hand, studies of three different research areas—episodic framing, individually identified victims, and exemplification—all intersect in trying to explain the impact of including one or more individually identified people to illustrate a social problem in a story. However, these theories do not necessarily agree on all dimensions of their conceptual definitions or with respect to how they operationalize the inclusion of case reports. The central outcomes studied also vary, from perceptions of issue severity to political opinions toward issues and candidates to attributions of responsibility for social problems. We briefly review the theory and evidence pertaining to (a) episodic versus thematic framing, (b) identified versus statistical victims, and (c) exemplification versus base rate information, with an eye toward synthesizing the collective knowledge generated by these complementary research agendas.

Episodic Versus Thematic Framing

Among scholars of political communication, the general consensus is that case reports largely undermine the potential policy relevance of news stories. Evidence in support of this view comes primarily from a series of studies of episodic versus thematic news frames (see Iyengar, 1987, 1990, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Episodic frames promote blaming the victim rather than holding government accountable for the problem at hand. For this reason, Iyengar (1990) argues that episodic coverage changes policy attitudes in a direction that blames the victim and insulates government from accountability.

What qualifies a news story as episodic? The episodic news frame is conceptualized as taking the form of “a case study” or as the “particular-victim” frame (Iyengar, 1987, pp. 823, 829). As Iyengar (1991, pp. 13–14) summarizes, “The essential difference between episodic and thematic framing is that episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence.”

What was so surprising about these findings when they first emerged was that they seemed to contradict the lay intuition of most observers—journalists and politicians alike—that the inclusion of case reports would bring home an issue’s impact in a way that would create greater government accountability for the impact of issues on people’s everyday lives. Ronald Reagan complained when the television networks interviewed “some fellow out in South Succotash” who had lost his job, because his assumption was that public opinion would blame him more for an isolated case than for an abstract portrayal of the same issue.

In the real world, as in these experiments, episodic and thematic frames are not mutually exclusive even within the context of a single news story. A person losing his job would not make the news unless he was being used to illustrate some larger trend or problem. Thus, many news stories include both episodic and thematic content, and some are purely thematic, but few case reports involving individuals will be purely episodic; when Joe loses a job, it probably doesn't make the news unless his plight is illustrative of some larger issue or problem. Such a story would nearly always also reference the scope of unemployment nationwide (Iyengar, 1987).

In laboratory experiments supporting this theory, the treatments make this operational distinction clear. For example, in a study using poverty as the issue, in the episodic conditions, "poverty is covered in terms of personal experience; the viewer is provided with a particular instance of an individual or family living under economic duress" (Iyengar, 1990, pp. 21–22). All thematic news stories were edited "so as to exclude any reference or glimpse of an individual victim of poverty" (Iyengar, 1990, p. 24). Likewise, news stories are classified as episodic versus thematic based purely on the presence or absence of a specific case. Drawing on the overall pattern of findings, Iyengar suggests that episodic framing promotes individualistic attributions of responsibility for social problems. As a result, he concludes that episodic news discourages holding government and political leaders accountable for social problems.

In considering to what extent these findings jibe with those from related areas of research, three characteristics of these experiments are worth keeping in mind. First, the experimental treatments in these studies were drawn from actual television news, so the episodic and thematic versions differed in many ways other than simply the presence or absence of a specific case illustrating the social problem. These studies did not manipulate strictly the exemplar while equating all other information provided by the story such as the language used, the images in the video, and so forth. Indeed, Iyengar (1991) points out that although the stories representing episodic and thematic coverage are on the same general topic, the stories differed substantially in other respects.

Moreover, the characteristics of the individual victims could not necessarily be matched to the collective featured in the thematic version of the story. For example, an episodic discussion of unemployment featuring a Black male might be paired with a thematic story that gave no information as to the composition of the collective that was being affected. For these reasons, it is not entirely clear what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for producing the effect observed in these studies.

Second, the findings across many different episodic versus thematic comparisons were highly variable. For example, not all evidence was consistent with the idea that episodic accounts promote individualistic and more punitive responsibility judgments (Iyengar, 1990). The variability in findings was attributed to the many uncontrolled factors in these studies as well as differences by issue.

Third, the final link in this proposed chain of events—from episodic frames to individualistic attributions of responsibility to changes in evaluations of leaders or polices—has been supported primarily through correlational evidence. As Iyengar (1991, p. 24) notes, "The effects of framing on attributions of responsibility are of interest chiefly because such attributions, in turn, powerfully influence public opinion." The assumption is that because of the prevalence of episodic framing, viewers will be discouraged from advocating government policies to fix the problem and from holding their political leaders accountable for not doing so. This conclusion, however, rests on the assumption that attributions of responsibility are *causally* related to opinions toward policies and political leaders. The initial framing results relied on observational evidence for the second part of this chain. Later studies have

attempted to tie episodic and thematic portrayals directly to policy opinions (e.g., Aaroe, 2011; Gross, 2008), but the body of causal evidence bearing on direct effects of episodic versus thematic frames on policy attitudes remains very small.

Identified Versus Statistical Victims

Another closely related theoretical framework comes from the decision-making literature, where researchers have contrasted the effects of specific identified victims relative to “statistical” victims who are not identified. Participants in these studies generally make decisions about how much aid should be allocated to victims of some kind (see Small, 2010) or how much help they deserve. The theory in this case is that “identifiable victims evoke sympathy and a sense of moral responsibility that is lacking in considerations of statistical victims” (Small & Loewenstein, 2005, p. 312), even when the identification of the victim provides no new information about the victim group whatsoever. Individuals are essentially deemed “affect-rich” targets, whereas statistical victims are “affect-poor.” According to experimental findings summarized by Small and Loewenstein (2005, p. 311), “Human sympathy differs reliably toward actual ‘identified’ victims on the one hand, and more abstract ‘statistical’ victims on the other” (Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Friedrich, 1997; Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

Given the obvious parallels between identified versus statistical victims and episodic versus thematic frames, it is surprising to find that respondents favor significantly more aid when told about the individual victim than about the larger group that is similarly afflicted. This pattern seems to contradict the idea of blaming the victim when news stories focus on individuals. These studies attribute their highly consistent findings to the stronger emotional reactions evoked by the identified victims, especially in cases involving victims experiencing loss (see Loewenstein & Small, 2007).

Unlike the episodic/thematic studies, these treatments were not necessarily presented as news stories, nor was government the obvious (unspecified) source of aid that was implied. However, the strength of these studies relative to studies of episodic/thematic framing is that all other material other than the identification of an individual versus an abstract group was held constant, and the name of a single person was substituted for the group (e.g., “[Dozens of women have]/[Jill has] recently acquired a rare and untreatable neurological disorder . . .”). The high level of experimental control in these studies makes their results less likely to be confounded by differences in subject matter, how the people are described, and so forth.

Contrary to the studies of episodic and thematic framing, findings on identified versus statistical victims suggest that featuring identified individual victims of a social problem results in policy positions that are *more* favorable toward the victims, because personal feelings create a desire on the part of the audience to help those in need (Cao, 2009; Harwood, 1983; Simon, 1986, 1987). This may explain why episodic portrayals of hunger in Africa discouraged individualistic attributions of responsibility relative to thematic frames (Small et al., 2007). Feeling an affinity for identified victims is argued to mediate respondents’ support for more aid (see Small & Lerner, 2008). A corollary of this finding is that an identified victim can increase either generosity or punitiveness as a result of positive (negative) emotions. A specific identified wrongdoer increases people’s level of punitiveness relative to an abstract group of wrongdoers, just as an identified victim increases their generosity (Small & Loewenstein, 2005).

Exemplification Effects

Beyond research on episodic versus thematic framing and identified versus statistical victims, a third, closely related area of research argues that anecdotal accounts dubbed “exemplars” have a disproportionate influence on audience attitudes relative to base rate (that is, abstract statistical) information. In these studies, exemplars refer to identifiable people in concrete situations that essentially represent some larger category. Similar to the literature on identified victims, the relative advantage of exemplars in influencing policy-related attitudes is theorized to be the result of the emotion-generating capacity of exemplars. These studies assume a similar design to the research on episodic versus thematic framing by focusing on the effects of news reports that are composites of both base rate information and exemplars. The news generally provides explicit or implied quantitative information about the extent of a problem and the people affected by it (e.g., rising unemployment), along with case reports (e.g., a particular unemployed person and his family). As in the episodic-thematic studies, news stories are conceptualized as combinations of exemplars and base rate information.

Using controlled experiments, exemplification effects have been found to persist even when the vividness of visuals and language are held constant, even when base rate information is pitted against just one contradictory exemplar (Lyon & Slovic, 1976), and even when respondents are told that the exemplars are atypical. Interestingly, the kind of first-person exemplar typically used to illustrate a news story by means of interviewing an illustrative case is precisely the type of exemplar that is most influential: “Exemplars that feature personal testimony exert a stronger influence on issue perception when the testimony is expressed in direct quotes than when it is paraphrased by the reporting agent” (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000, p. 89).

Unfortunately, only a subset of exemplification studies to date have focused explicitly on political issues. For example, Zillman and Brosius (2000) found that episodic framing of convicted criminals prompted respondents to support greater leniency in policies involving the criminal justice system, thus contradicting the pattern suggested in studies of episodic versus thematic framing but reinforcing the pattern of findings from studies of identifiable victims.

Role of Similarity/Dissimilarity

All three of these literatures concur that the degree of similarity between the respondent and the people featured in the case report is likely to be an important factor conditioning the effects of specific exemplars on issue attitudes. In studies of identifiable victims, similarity is said to influence the extent of personal affinity with and feeling for the victims (see Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Small & Simonsohn, 2008). In studies of episodic versus thematic framing, victim-supportive effects on issue opinions are suggested to be “contingent on the affinity between the victim and viewer” such that negative or no impact probably occurs when victims “differ in obvious ways from viewers” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, pp. 40–41). For example, viewers were less likely to make individualistic attributions of responsibility for nationwide poverty after having viewed stories about an unemployed White male.

In studies of exemplification, exemplars that are similar to the audience member are said to discourage attributions of responsibility to the individual and thus promote more victim-supportive attitudes (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Similarity between the exemplar and the audience conditions the extent to which the exemplar is treated more like the

self, thus favoring external attributions of responsibility for problems, or more like the other, whose problems tend to be viewed as largely dispositional in nature (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). When exemplars are similar to the audience member, they thus encourage attributions of responsibility to society.

When exemplars are similar to the audience, they also trigger greater affinity and liking. Among adults, adolescents, and indeed, even 3-year-olds, similarity has been well documented as a cause of interpersonal liking (Fawcett & Markson, 2009; see Sunnafrank, 1983, for a review). The kinds of similarities that produce greater liking include similarities in attitudes (Byrne, 1971; Neimeyer & Mitchell, 1988), behaviors (Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Tolson, 1998), preferences (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer & Silver, 1978), values and background (Johnson, 1989), physical characteristics (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Berscheid & Walster, 1974), and sharing a cultural background (Sturmer, Snyder, Kropp, & Siem, 2006). Perceived similarity also contributes to valuing the other's welfare and producing empathic concern (Batson, 2011).

Some speculate that greater liking for people who share similarities occurs for evolutionary reasons (e.g., Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996). But whatever the reason, similarity is clearly a powerful influence on liking, even when the similarity is superficial and incidental. Even similarity as incidental as sharing a similar name can influence liking (e.g., Gamer, 2005; Guèguen, Pichot, & Le Dreff, 2005). Therefore, with case reports, dimensions of similarity between a target exemplar and an audience member increase liking for the target, thus encouraging the audience toward policies that are more favorable toward the target individual or group.

Because both the capacity to induce affinity for a particular victim and the likelihood of inducing individualistic attributions of responsibility are thought to be influenced by the extent of similarity/dissimilarity between audience members and the particular victim, we suggest that this factor plays a central role in conditioning the impact of case reports in the news. Similarities encourage external, situational attributions of responsibility for problems because they cause the person to see the other as an extension of the self; given that individuals regularly make external attributions of responsibility for the problems in their own lives, they extend this same courtesy to similar others.

In addition, when there are points of similarity between the audience member and the exemplar, exemplars enhance the affinity that a viewer feels for the target featured in the case report. When the exemplars used to illustrate social problems are similar to the respondent, audience members will have "affect-rich," positive reactions to them, and thus be more willing to endorse public policies that favor them.

Thus, our summary prediction is that the impact of an identified victim will turn on the degree of similarity between the audience member and the target victim/group. Inclusion of a case report involving high perceived similarity should trigger affinity, discourage victim blame, and encourage support for policy change in a direction that would aid the target. An exemplar with low perceived similarity between the self and the target, on the other hand, should encourage victim blame, dislike, and more punitive policy attitudes.

To the extent that we find these predicted effects on policy attitudes, we thus expect them to be a function of two underlying, simultaneous processes. The identified victim frame has been shown to produce more victim-supportive policy attitudes by means of creating feelings of affinity for victims (Gross, 2008), affinities that lead audiences to endorse less punitive policy attitudes (see also Aaroe, 2011). This process should be evident when the victims depicted are similar to the respondent. At the same time, identified victims can steer attention toward individuals as the source of their own problems. This should lead

to individualistic attributions of responsibility and less victim-supportive policy attitudes when the victims are depicted as dissimilar from the respondents. Although similarity has been speculated to condition the impact of case reports on issue attitudes in all three literatures described above, this is the first study to systematically manipulate the degree of similarity between audience members and the particular case used to illustrate a social problem.

Research Design

Given the difficulties of interpreting experiments in which conditions differ due to extraneous factors in the treatments as well as the presence of identified victims, we designed our study as a tightly controlled experiment so as to isolate the specific aspect of the frame that is likely to influence policy opinion. In this 2 by 2 fully crossed design, we varied two characteristics of a news story. First, we manipulated the similarity of the identified victims of a policy relative to the respondents; second, we manipulated whether the news story respondents read was framed in terms of an identified family or the more abstractly defined group that the family was being used to represent.

We chose immigration policy as the opinion of interest in this study for several reasons. Immigration lends itself easily to both kinds of frames, and it also lends itself easily to manipulating the perceived similarity of audience members to the exemplars. At the same time, Americans have fairly mixed views on immigration, with majorities simultaneously believing that immigrants cause problems in the U.S. while also endorsing the view that they enrich the United States (see Lapinski, Peltola, Shaw, & Yang, 1997). For the experimental treatment, participants read a news story about tightening immigration policies accompanied by a photograph of a group of immigrants having lunch at a small informal restaurant.

In manipulating *similarity/dissimilarity*, our goal was to make sure that respondents clearly saw the target group as highly dissimilar or similar to themselves, at least insofar as Americans could perceive similarities between themselves and illegal immigrants. In order to accomplish this, we altered two characteristics of the immigrants that are central to their “otherness”: race and cultural assimilation. Using a representative national sample of White, non-Hispanic respondents, we altered the immigrants’ race in the photograph, with respondents in the *similar* conditions viewing light-skinned immigrants and the *dissimilar* conditions viewing dark-skinned immigrants (see Appendix 1). The number of people visible in the photograph and their bodies, gestures, clothing, and so forth remained identical. No specific country of origin was named.

To further emphasize similarity and difference, we altered the immigrants’ level of cultural assimilation through incidental details in the news story. Americans cite immigrants’ lack of willingness to assimilate to American ways of life as among their greatest objections to immigration (Day, 1989; Hood & Morris, 1998), so clearly this is a salient point of difference. Thus in the *dissimilar* conditions, the type of food that was being eaten at lunch included spicy goat meat, and the restaurant was said to be part of an ethnic food market. These details contrasted with a classically American platter of mozzarella sticks, onion rings, and buffalo wings being eaten at Roy’s Diner in the *similar* conditions. The *dissimilar* condition further specified that they were speaking in their native tongue and that they were discussing events taking place in their native country as opposed to local events in the *similar* conditions.¹

Manipulation of the presence of an identified victim was necessarily very minimalist in order to avoid altering the body of information respondents received. Our goal was to

keep the material in the story exactly the same, while still altering the presence/absence of identified targets. In this way, one could be assured that the results represent the effects of having an identified target present or not, as opposed to the additional information bearing on the issue that is added by the exemplar's appearance, demeanor, statements, and so forth. To avoid these potential confounds, we altered only a few words in the news story. In the *identified victim* condition, the story referred to the "Lina family" chatting or gathering for lunch, whereas in the *no identified victim* condition, the same people were referred to as "they" or "a crowd gathering for lunch."²

Against this backdrop, the topic of the news story was possible changes in immigration law:

Yet beneath the apparent cheer of [no identified victim: their/identified victims: the Lina family's] conversation is anxiety surrounding the aggressive lobbying by local advocates for stricter immigration laws. The most severe proposal would deport all immigrants who did not initially enter the country legally—regardless of reason—to return to their native countries and reapply for admission. For [identified victims: the Lina family/no identified victim: this particular group], this would mean returning to the persecution of a military dictatorship.

Both photographs of the scene in the restaurant involved the same number of people eating at the same tables in the same clothing. However, in the text, a specific named family was identified in the article, and in the other case it was the group as a whole that was described in an identical fashion. We chose to make the identified victims a family rather than a single individual in order to hold constant the total number of people called to mind in the story and photograph, as well as their personal characteristics. A photo of one single individual instead of the whole group might unintentionally alter what respondents assumed about the immigrants, perceptions of the size of the immigrant group, and so forth. In order to further preserve experimental control, it was not specified to respondents which family in the picture was the Lina family, if any.

A representative national probability sample of 742 non-Latino, White, adult respondents³ was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions formed by a 2 by 2 factorial design manipulating the presence of identified victims (a named family versus an anonymous group) and immigrants who were racially and culturally similar to or different from the respondent (see Appendix 2 for sample characteristics). Data for this study were gathered by Knowledge Networks (now GfK) of Palo Alto, CA, between February 10 and February 17, 2009. This survey was one of several short surveys that their KnowledgePanel participants were asked to complete each month. Respondents were originally recruited via random-digit dialing and address-based sampling and interviewed via the Internet.⁴ Those who did not already have Internet access in their home were provided with a laptop and Internet service. The lack of a human interviewer in Web-enabled surveys may reduce the social desirability pressures that have been found in both in-person and telephone surveys (Chang & Krosnick, 2009).

We used a non-Latino White sample to reduce the effect that variation in the race of the respondents might have in shaping immigration attitudes and to ensure that the targets in the case report were either similar or dissimilar on the dimensions of race and assimilation. Manipulation checks were included at the end of the survey after measuring the key dependent measures. To check whether race was successfully manipulated, respondents

were asked at the very end of the study from which region they thought the immigrants in the news story were most likely to have come. Respondents in the *dissimilar* condition were significantly more likely to say the respondents were from Africa, Latin America, or Southeast Asia, while respondents in the *similar* condition were most likely to say the immigrants were from Europe or Australia ($t = 6.49$, $df = 734$, $p < .001$).⁵ Assimilation levels were likewise noticed by respondents. At the end of the study, those in the *similar* condition were significantly more likely to say that these immigrants had adopted American ways of life than those in the *dissimilar* condition ($t = 7.37$, $df = 725$, $p < .001$).⁶ On both counts, then, similarity to the respondent was successfully manipulated.

The background story was purposely fairly ambiguous in its portrayal of the immigrants and the new local laws that threatened their ability to stay in the country. However, it communicated that the immigrants in this town (a) entered the country illegally, (b) were escaping political persecution in their home country, and (c) were now at increased risk of deportation due to the proposed reforms to immigration policy.

To assess opinions toward immigration policy, a series of five questions was asked: (a) whether more or fewer immigrants should be allowed into the U.S., (b) whether immigration helps or hurts America, (c) whether immigration policies are too restrictive or not restrictive enough, (d) whether the respondent favors or opposes a border fence between the U.S. and Mexico, and (e) whether the immigrants should be deported or allowed to stay in the United States.⁷ These five items were standardized and combined into an overall index of *immigration policy opinion* with a Cronbach's alpha of .82, thus indicating that it formed a highly reliable dependent variable.

To provide some purchase on how attributions of responsibility and affinity for the targets might mediate effects on immigration opinion, three questions addressed the tendency toward blaming the victims of the proposed immigration policies for their own plight as opposed to some other factor.⁸ Each item asked respondents to attribute responsibility for the problem to either the immigrants themselves or to some external force. To incorporate a range of different external attributions, each item tapped victim blame relative to a different external target of blame (e.g., the U.S. government, their home country's government, or simply "circumstances outside of their control"). These items were combined to represent *victim blame*, that is, the extent to which people consistently chose individual victim blame over situational attributions of responsibility.⁹

In addition, one final item assessed self-perceived *affinity* for the target, that is, the respondent's personal feelings of liking for the immigrants.¹⁰ Are these people that the respondents personally like and would like to live near themselves? Responses were coded on a 4-point scale with higher scores indicating greater feelings of affinity. Our goal with this item was to tap people's affective reactions to these immigrants rather than policy attitudes more generally or attributions of responsibility to them in particular.

To summarize, our central hypothesis is that the effects of having *identified victims* in a story will not be across the board in one direction or the other, but rather contingent upon *similarity*. We expect an interaction between these two experimental treatments such that identified victims will encourage more punitive policy attitudes when the audience member and victims are dissimilar, and identified victims will encourage more supportive, pro-immigration attitudes when the audience member and the victims are similar. *Victim blame* should likewise be greatest with the combination of *identified victims* and *dissimilarity*, whereas *identified victims* and *similarity* will create the least *victim blame*. We expect an interaction between the treatments such that *similarity* and the presence of *identified victims* heighten *affinity* for the target group and discourage *victim blame*.

Results

To test our central hypothesis, we began with a 2 by 2 analysis of variance using our primary dependent variable, the index of immigration policy opinion.¹¹ Do identified victims have a positive or negative effect on attitudes towards immigration policy? And are these effects a function of the interaction between similarity and identified victims? To review, if our predictions are correct, with all other information held constant by the experimental design, the identified victim frame should produce more pro-immigration policy attitudes when similarity between the audience and the immigrants is high, and the identified victim frame should induce more negative, anti-immigration policy attitudes when similarity between the audience and the immigrants is low.

Using a 2 by 2 between-subjects design, the results of our analysis of variance revealed no significant direct effects of similarity or identified victims. However, as shown in Figure 1, the hypothesized interaction of identified victims and similarity was significant ($F = 3.41, p < .05$). The version of the story with identified victims who were similar to the respondents produced more positive attitudes toward immigration policies relative to identified victims who were dissimilar, while the pattern appears reversed when there are no identified victims. While naming a particular family as a specific exemplar for this issue is not a dramatic difference, it draws attention to identified members of the specific group as opposed to treating them as an anonymous collective. So long as those group members are similar to the audience (in this case, in terms of race and cultural assimilation), the inclusion of a specific exemplar raises support for more open immigration. But when they were culturally and racially different, but not identified, there was no difference between levels of immigration support. Although the means on the left-hand side of Figure 1 are significantly different from one another, planned contrasts did not confirm a significant difference between the means on the right-hand side of Figure 1.

To get a sense of whether these experimental results are consistent with the two underlying processes of influence we have proposed, we next analyzed the effects of our experimental treatments on victim blame, that is, the tendency to attribute responsibility for their predicament to the immigrants themselves as opposed to other social forces. As before,

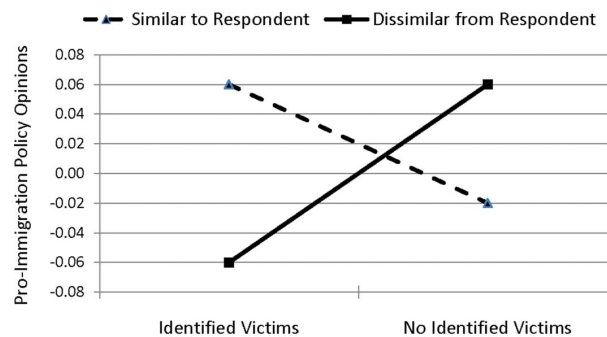


Figure 1. Pro-immigration policy opinions by presence of identified victims and similarity to respondent.

Note: The interaction between similarity and identified victims was significant ($F = 3.41, p < .05$). The main effects of similarity and identified victims were not significant ($n = 736$). Immigration policy opinion was a standardized index with mean of 0 and standard error of .029 (range -1.06 to 2.43).

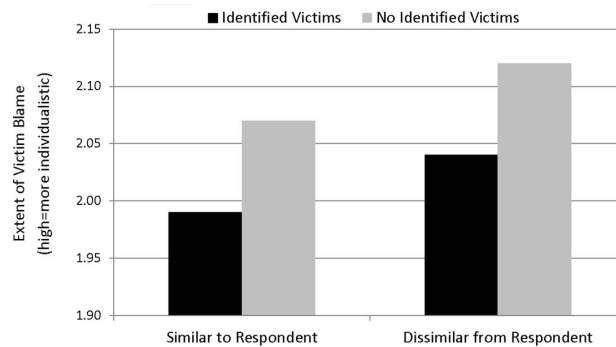


Figure 2. Effects of similarity and identified victims on victim blame toward immigrants depicted in news story.

Note: The main effect of similarity was not significant, nor was there an interaction. The main effect of identified victims was significant ($F = 4.13, p < .05$). Victim blame mean = 2.05, standard error = .019 (range 1 to 4).

our theoretical framework predicts interactions between the presence of identified victims and similarity such that blame should be least when identified victims are similar to the respondent and greatest when identified victims are dissimilar.

In Figure 2, one can see that our hypothesis was only partially supported. Only the main effect of identified victims was significant, and it indicated that anonymous groups were consistently more likely to be blamed than ones that included identified victims. The identified victim frame combined with similarity produced the least victim blame of all four conditions, as anticipated, but the interaction effect was not significant. Instead, the greatest extent of victim blame occurred when the immigrants were dissimilar from the respondent and there were no identified victims (planned contrast $t = 2.28, p < .05$). In the analysis of variance, identified victims had a significant main effect indicating that featuring no identified victims consistently generated more victim blame regardless of similarity ($F = 4.13, p < .05$).

This pattern is surprising in light of the pattern of results from episodic versus thematic framing studies, but it is entirely consistent with findings from studies in which the only difference between conditions is the presence of an identified victim as opposed to an anonymous group of victims. In those studies, for example, episodic portrayals of hunger in Africa discouraged individualistic attributions of responsibility relative to thematic frames (Small et al., 2007). And in studies of exemplification, even portrayals involving relatively dissimilar individuals, such as convicted criminals, prompted respondents to support less punitive policies (Zillman & Brosius, 2000).

As highlighted in our review of the literature, attributions of responsibility are not the only means by which case reports might influence issue attitudes. Personal feelings of affinity for the victims of social problems may be encouraged by identifying these victims by name, especially when they have dimensions of similarity to the audience member. To evaluate this possibility, a third analysis of variance analyzed the same 2 by 2 design, this time using affinity as the dependent measure. As originally hypothesized, the analysis of variance generated a significant interaction between similarity and identified victims ($F = 3.28, p < .05$). As illustrated in Figure 3, respondents felt the greatest affinity when the targets were both identified and similar to the respondent. Similar victims who were not

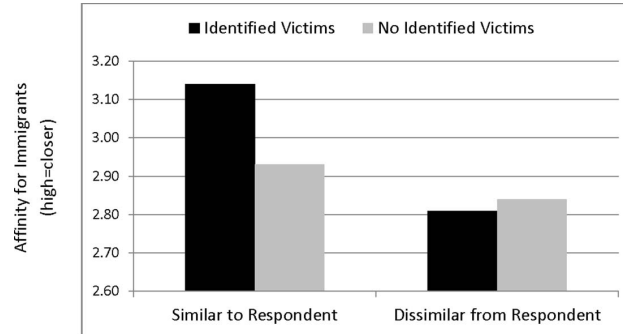


Figure 3. Effects of similarity and identified victims on affinity for immigrants depicted in news story.

Note: The interaction between similarity and identified victims was significant ($F = 3.28, p < .05$). The main effect of similarity was significant ($F = 10.15, p < .001$), but the main effect of identified victims was not significant ($n = 736$). Affinity means = 2.93, standard error = .033 (range 1 to 4).

identified by a surname did not produce the same feelings of affinity. As can be seen on the right-hand side of Figure 3, if respondents were shown immigrants who were dissimilar from themselves both culturally and racially, they did not report positive feelings toward them regardless of whether they were identified by name or not. In addition to the significant hypothesized interaction, this analysis also produced a significant main effect for similarity, which, not surprisingly, consistently raised feelings of affinity toward the immigrant group when they were depicted as similar ($F = 10.15, p < .001$).

Our results suggest that both cognitions (in the form of attributions of personal responsibility) and feelings (in the form of affinity for the victims) are influenced by including identified victims in stories, although when it comes to personal affinity, those effects can be expected to differ based on similarities between the respondent and victim. Given that our manipulations simulate only two possible levels of similarity, it is impossible to say based on this evidence just how much similarity is necessary in order for case reports to produce greater policy support or how different they must be before an exemplar backfires and produces a more negative impact on policies aiding the victims. For similar reasons, it is possible that the previously reported negative impacts of episodic portrayals on attributions of responsibility could be found if the exemplars portrayed were even more different from the respondents. But race and culture are relatively powerful dimensions of difference between human beings. Our results suggest that some other necessary condition may be essential in order to reproduce the effect whereby identified individuals increase attributions of personal responsibility.

Finally, in Table 1, we evaluate whether our evidence is consistent with the idea that affinity and victim blame both mediate the relationships between our experimentally manipulated variables and immigration policy opinion. We did so using the original approach championed by Baron and Kenny (1986), along with further improvements to this basic approach (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). In the preceding analyses, we have documented the causal influence of these treatments on the mediating variables, as well as their effects on immigration policy opinion. To establish an indirect effect, what remains is to evaluate (a) the extent to which victim blame and affinity predict immigration policy opinion and

Table 1
Effects of identified victims and victim similarity on immigration policy opinions, with and without mediating variables

	Immigration policy opinions:			
	Basic model	with both mediators	with affinity as mediator	with victim blame as mediator
Identified victims	.09 (.08)	-.03 (.07)	-.01 (.07)	.03 (.08)
Similarity	.08 (.08)	.12 (.07)	.11 (.07)	.10 (.08)
Identified × Similarity	-.21 (.10)*	-.11 (.10)	-.11 (.10)	-.19 (.11)
Affinity for group		.33 (.03)***	.38 (.03)***	—
Victim blame		-.30 (.05)***	—	-.48 (.05)***
Republican	-.33 (.06)***	.04 (.01)***	-.23 (.06)***	-.28 (.06)***
Education	.12 (.01)***	.09 (.01)***	.10 (.01)***	.10 (.01)***
Constant	-1.18 (.15)***	-1.45 (.22)***	-2.08 (.15)***	-.01 (.20)
R^2	.13	.31	.31	.22
Sample size	735	726	732	726

Note. Entries are regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Using the Preacher-Hayes (2004) technique to test for the presence of indirect effects confirmed the Baron and Kenny (1986) estimation above. Based on the Sobel test, the indirect effect was significant for affinity as mediator ($z = 4.15, p < .001$) and borderline for victim blame as mediator ($z = 1.80, p = .07$). Bootstrap results based on 5,000 resamples for each analysis further confirmed that both variables mediated the effects of the interaction, although again only barely so for victim blame.
* $p < .5$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$.

(b) whether including these mediators in the model explains away the interaction between similarity and identified victims.

In Table 1, we show on the far left-hand side the basic model predicting immigration policy opinion, this time illustrated in terms of regression coefficients. In the next column, we show the same model, but include the two mediating variables. Both victim blame and affinity clearly have strong relationships with immigration policy opinion as predicted. In addition, the interaction between identified victims and similarity falls out of the model and the coefficient reduces in size with the inclusion of the mediators. Although we cannot definitively establish causality without manipulating the mediators themselves, this general pattern suggests that the interaction we hypothesized exercises its influence on immigration opinion largely through its effects on the extent to which people feel affinity for the group.

In the two right-hand columns, we show the effects of including each of the mediators separately. Although either mediator reduces the interaction to insignificance, eyeballing the coefficients suggests that affinity is the mediator making the most difference because it reduces the coefficient size to roughly the same degree that including both mediators does. This is consistent with our impression based on both the Sobel tests and bootstrap estimates using the approach outlined in Preacher and Hayes (2004). As described beneath Table 1, both of these techniques easily confirmed indirect effects via affinity. The results were, not surprisingly, weaker in confirming that indirect effects flowed through victim blame. To be clear, victim blame clearly still mattered to people's immigration policy opinions, as evidenced by the much larger R^2 value in the fourth column relative to the first. But it appears less important as a mediator of the interaction observed in Figure 1.

Discussion

Do case reports in news stories discourage citizens from holding government accountable? Or do they accomplish precisely the opposite, that is, encourage the formation of policy opinions that will help the victims of social problems? Our theoretical model and experimental findings using a representative sample of White Americans suggest that both reactions are possible, depending upon the type of exemplar included in a news story. But our immediate findings are most supportive of the role of case reports in encouraging policy-supportive public opinion when exemplars are similar to audience members and less supportive views when they are dissimilar from audience members.

What is clear from these findings is that any theory predicting an across-the-board effect in one particular direction due to the presence of a case report is probably mistaken. Overall, our results suggest that the direction of the difference between the effects of a story including a case report and one without a case report is heavily contingent upon the degree of similarity between the particular people used as the exemplar and the audience member. As illustrated in Figure 1, if the people featured are clearly very different from the audience, then the version *without* the identified victim should produce more support for the victim-supportive government policy, just as was observed in the original comparisons of episodic and thematic frames. On the other hand, if the victim identified is similar to the respondent, then more policy-supportive attitudes will be registered among those viewing the identified victim. Hints of this contingency could be observed in previous work on episodic versus thematic framing; however, because these manipulations in past studies altered not only the style but also the substance of the news stories without taking into account similarity, it was difficult to attribute variations in results to this factor in particular.

In this sense, Ronald Reagan was not entirely off base when he complained about the networks interviewing "some fellow out in South Succotash" who had lost his job.

Depending upon the person interviewed, an exemplar of this kind could potentially increase support for government policies addressing the larger social problem that the interview was intended to illustrate. But if the victim were notably unlike the audience member, the opposite reaction could occur. Because all news stories have some degree of emphasis on a larger social problem, the key question is whether there is value added or taken away by the presence of an identified victim in the story who is intended to represent the larger social problem.

The one hypothesis for which we failed to find support was our prediction that identified victims would make it easier to blame the victims, particularly when they were dissimilar. Surprisingly, similarity did not affect levels of victim blame in this study. Although levels of victim blame appear lower when the victims were similar, these differences were not significant, possibly due to a need for greater statistical power. Moreover, contrary to our expectations, people were significantly *more* likely to blame unidentified victims than victims who were named. This could be because of a tendency to feel that one “knows” named victims, thus making it more difficult to act punitively toward them. Alternatively, it could be due to the specifics of the predicament faced by these victims. On the one hand, they were illegal immigrants and thus unsympathetic; on the other hand, they were described as having come from a military dictatorship where they were to be persecuted, thus making their plight less within their individual control than for an issue such as unemployment, where individual effort is more likely to reap rewards. The more vivid the exemplar provided in the story, the less likely respondents should be to rely upon their stereotypes about illegal immigrants (e.g., Petersen & Aaroe, 2013).

Unfortunately, the conclusions in episodic versus thematic studies as well as those in this study suffer from the lack of a control group. Findings are all based on comparisons of one frame versus another, without a baseline against which to compare them. We know the relative direction of influence of a case report in episodic-thematic framing, but without a control group, we cannot be certain whether influence flows in one direction, the other, or both. The direction of the two means appears to flip in Figure 1, but it is impossible to know if attitudes toward immigration became more positive if the target was similar, became more negative if the target was dissimilar, or both. Without some reference point, we know only that the identified victim mattered differently when people felt some similarity to the identified people versus when they did not.

In terms of the generalizability of the findings, this study benefits from a large representative probability sample survey of the non-Hispanic White population in the U.S., that is, precisely the population to which we would want to generalize these findings. Unlike many experiments, we did not rely on a convenience sample or a laboratory setting. Using a population-based survey experiment that combines a random probability sample with random assignment to conditions, we are able to make the most of both internal and external validity.

Nonetheless, this study still has limitations stemming from the generalizability of other aspects of its design. Most notably, its findings are limited to one issue for purposes of estimating the effects of incorporating case reports in news stories. It is therefore worth considering how these results might differ if a wholly different issue or treatment were used to estimate the effects of case reports. Immigration policy opinions present a challenging case for producing opinion change because immigration is currently a highly salient issue for which people are likely to have strong opinions; this suggests that opinion change would be particularly challenging for this issue. In addition, because this study was done during the spring of 2009, a period in which the American economy was perceived to be in chaos and on the verge of recession, one might expect especially entrenched views. Given that the

majority of Americans were opposed to liberalization of immigration policies, particularly for those who entered the country illegally (Citrin & Green, 1997; Lapinski et al., 1997), one might expect even less supportive views in the current economic climate.

In other ways, immigration is a congenial issue for testing these hypotheses, in part because Americans demonstrate a great deal of ambivalence on the issue. A majority of Americans simultaneously want to keep immigrants out of the U.S., yet they also perceive their personal experiences with immigrants to be positive and think immigrants are largely hard-working and honest people (Hochschild, 1981; Tesser, 1978; Wilson & Hodges, 1991).

Other limitations on generalizability may flow from the manipulation of similarity. Race and American cultural norms are relatively powerful dimensions of difference that make it easy for respondents to classify identified victims as either us or them. It remains to be seen whether more subtle dimensions of difference between self and exemplar—perhaps class-based or gender-based—produce similarly differential effects.

Most importantly, given that the effects of identified individual exemplars are contingent upon levels of similarity between audiences and the target exemplars, any across-the-board generalizations about the impact of case reports are difficult to justify. Each study's results should be a function of the kind of people used as experimental subjects, in interaction with the types of exemplars used in the case reports. Because this level of detail about the stimulus and subjects is not always known, some past findings that appear contradictory may, in fact, be consistent with this pattern upon closer examination.

In any theory in which respondent-stimulus interactions are important, characteristics of the sample of subjects in combination with the stimulus characteristics will have important implications for the generalizability of findings. For this reason, we suggest that far more research remains to be done in this area. Political communication researchers should not be as quick to condemn case reports as an inherently pro-status quo means of communicating information about issues of public importance. Understanding the conditions under which specific exemplars help or hurt is both far more interesting and far more complex than previously suggested. Just as politicians and their speech writers have long assumed, stories about individuals that exemplify larger social problems may add to the political gravitas of a given issue to the extent that they combine audiences who share salient characteristics with the exemplar used.

Journalistic choice of a human interest angle can have powerful effects on how an issue is perceived and understood. Schudson (1995) argues that a primary role of journalism is to bring a compassionate understanding of how other people very different from us experience their lives. But as suggested by this research, whom they choose to use as an exemplar clearly matters. Past studies have argued that because the individual people are more salient in the perceiver's mind when case reports are used, they must also be the source of blame (Iyengar, 1987, 1991; Rucinski, 1992; Taylor & Fiske, 1978); however, this study as well as the body of work on identified versus statistical victims shows that case reports can have the opposite effect. Case reports may *decrease* the responsibility attributed to the victims themselves. Case reports have particularly important implications for government accountability because individuals are often the most salient possible alternative to blame for social problems. Moreover, when vivid exemplars are externally supplied, stereotypes are relied upon significantly less in making political judgments (Petersen & Aaroe, 2013).

Audience similarity to the individuals used in case reports matters a great deal because as is already well known, similarity breeds liking, and particularly so when identified people are featured in case reports in the news. On one hand, it is both simple and obvious that people will be more likely to endorse supportive policy views when they like the illustrative

exemplar that is used in a story; on the other hand, the emphasis in political communication on attributions of responsibility as the main mediator of the effects of case reports has obscured its importance. It is worth noting that, for the sake of simplicity, we have treated attributions of individual responsibility and affinity on equal terms in these analyses; we have assumed that they are causally prior to opinions on immigration policy, but we have not treated either as causally prior to the other. In reality, however, judgments of liking for another human being are likely to be automatic and fast, and far more so than assessments of personal responsibility. This means that person perceptions are likely to play an important causal role in conditioning the impact of case reports. Similarity's effects on liking may have made it quite difficult to blame these same victims.

In order to further develop our understanding of how case reports in the news affect political attitudes, further replications are obviously needed in the context of other issues with varying degrees of possible personal responsibility, and with other degrees of similarity and difference between the audiences and exemplars. For technical reasons, we used still images in our study so that it was possible to manipulate racial similarity without altering other aspects of the immigrants. But it seems likely that television may well enhance the impact of exemplars as people watch other individuals give living testimony to their problems (e.g., Amit, Algom, & Trope, 2009).

Most importantly, these findings highlight the potential political importance of a widespread journalistic practice. The patterns observed in our findings suggest that by virtue of their control over which exemplars are chosen to represent a given social or political problem, journalists wield a tremendous amount of power. For a story on health care, for example, journalists can choose a lower class exemplar who has no job and no health care and whose illness is plausibly linked to his own behavior, such as lung cancer. This would be someone with whom healthy middle-class American voters would be unlikely to identify or sympathize. In this case, one would expect the identified victim frame to produce less support for universal health care. Alternatively, journalists could select a sick but likeable middle-class person who was in between jobs when an illness such as pancreatic cancer occurred. In the latter case, a larger portion of the audience might well feel greater similarity to and affinity toward the victim. In this situation, one would expect audiences to shift toward more positive views of universal health care as a result. However, given the time pressures and economic constraints faced by today's journalists, it seems unlikely that they contemplate the degree to which their exemplars are accurately representative of the actual distribution of a problem in the population at large.

Underlying the example above is the implication that case reports do more than simply reiterate the contours of a social problem in the context of an individual example. In our experiment, with the exception of content that was purposely manipulated, we intentionally kept the information in the two experimental conditions identical. In the real world, however, an exemplar included in a story about rising unemployment would convey more information than the fact that another person has become unemployed. The chosen person also unintentionally conveys information (or potentially misinformation) about what kinds of people are losing jobs, what kinds of jobs are being lost, how serious or long term a problem this has been for them, and so forth. Understanding when and under what conditions case reports in the news encourage or discourage changes in policy opinions should thus become a renewed source of research interest for scholars of political communication.

Supplementary Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's website at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.799106>

Notes

1. The full text of the news article was as follows: “In Montgomery, Illinois, [no identified victim: a crowd of immigrants gather/identified victims: an immigrant family gathers] for lunch at [similar: Roy’s Diner/dissimilar: an ethnic food market]. As they are served [dissimilar: trays of spicy goat meat/similar: a platter of mozzarella sticks, onion rings, and buffalo wings], [no identified victim: they chat/identified victims: the Lina family chats] [dissimilar: in their native tongue] about [dissimilar: the new school they sent money to build back in their home country/similar: the local baseball team’s previous season]. Yet beneath the apparent cheer of [no identified victim: their/identified victims: the Lina family’s] conversation is anxiety surrounding the aggressive lobbying by local advocates for stricter immigration laws. The most severe proposal would deport all immigrants who did not initially enter the country legally— regardless of reason—to return to their native countries and reapply for admission. For [identified victims: the Lina family/no identified victim: this particular group], this would mean returning to the persecution of a military dictatorship.”

2. The surname chosen to personalize the family was intentionally one that is common to many countries and continents, including Africa, Eastern and Western Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, as was the type of food referred to in the unassimilated condition, to further minimize association with one particular ethnic or national group.

3. The completion rate was 65.9%. The resulting sample population was slightly older and more likely to be married than the U.S. population but was comparable on other demographic parameters.

4. For details on this company’s strategy for non-volunteer sample recruitment, see [http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/knpanel/docs/KnowledgePanel\(R\)-Design-Summary-Description.pdf](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/knpanel/docs/KnowledgePanel(R)-Design-Summary-Description.pdf).

5. “What country do you think the immigrants in the story came from? Please give us your best guess. 1) A country in Africa; 2) A country in Eastern Europe; 3) A country in Latin America; 4) A country in Western Europe; 5) A country in Southeast Asia; 6) Australia.”

6. “During their time in the United States, do you think these immigrants have . . . 1) Adopted mostly American ways of life; 2) Adopted some American ways of life; 3) Mostly kept to the ways of life from their home country; 4) Completely kept to the ways of life from their home country.”

7. Immigration policy attitude index: 1) Overall, do you think immigrants are helping or hurting America? 2) Do you think the number of immigrants in this country should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same? 3) In general, immigration policies in the United States should be: A lot more restrictive to A lot less restrictive; 4) Please indicate whether you favor or oppose the following proposal addressing immigration: Increase border security by building a fence along part of the U.S. border with Mexico; 5) Thinking about [the Lina family/the group] that was discussed in the article, what do you think should happen to them? Should they be deported/allowed to stay? All items were standardized and then combined into an index of policy attitudes by taking the mean across the five items.

8. Computed from a three-item index including agree-disagree responses to “The problems faced by immigrants in the United States are . . . 1) the result of political and economic problems in their home countries; 2) due to the lack of hard work and effort on the immigrants’ part; 3) the result of circumstances outside the immigrants’ control.” The index was coded so that high scores indicated greater victim blame as opposed to blaming external circumstances.

9. The three items in this index do not all attempt to tap the same underlying construct; in each case victim blame is assessed relative to some other form of blame, and that other form is completely different in each question. As is common with knowledge items, they tap progressively more difficult kinds of blame; thus, a Guttman scale reliability procedure was appropriate and produced a coefficient of reproducibility of .83.

10. How comfortable would you be if [a family like the one/a family from the group] in the story moved into your neighborhood? This was coded so that higher scores indicated greater affinity for the immigrants.

11. Because Republicans and poorly educated Americans are known to hold more punitive views on immigration, we included these two variables as covariates in analyses of immigration policy opinions to improve the efficiency of the model.

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