Atitudes on Immigrants – Stories vs. Statistics

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ABSTRACT

The topic of immigration is a politically polarizing issue despite the U.S.A’s characterization as a post-racial nation-state. In the current research, we tested the hypothesis that people’s attitudes about immigration are influenced more by emotional stories about an immigrant than exposure to non-partisan statistics about immigrants. Participants were 369 undergraduate students enrolled at a public, Midwestern university in the U.S.A. In the study, some participants were exposed to a positive story about an undocumented immigrant, some to a negative story, and some to no story at all. In addition, half of the participants in each story condition were exposed to national statistics about immigration through a “Did you know?” quiz, while the other half in each story condition were not exposed to the statistics.

Then, all participants reported their attitudes toward immigrants. Data analysis revealed that attitudes towards immigrants were skewed toward moderate-to-negative regardless of condition, and exposure to the non-partisan statistics had a small, positive effect on attitudes. The current findings suggest that statistics can sway attitudes; however, we question whether the findings will replicate in a sample drawn from a more politically and educationally diverse population.

BACKGROUND

Despite scientists’ wishes, presenting people with data about an issue does not generally sway people’s attitudes if they have a vivid story (or testimonial) that contradicts the data (Hamill 1980). In the research completed by Hamill and colleagues, even when participants were told that the person in the vivid testimonial was atypical, they continued to generalize about others based on their vivid testimonial and NOT based on the (more accurate) statistical information presented to them. In the current study, we investigated the influence of personal stories (vivid testimonials) versus statistical information on people’s attitudes towards immigrants. We assessed participants’ attitudes via the Negative Attitude Toward Immigrants Scale (Varela et al., 2013). On the basis of the literature reviewed, we hypothesized that (1) people’s attitudes towards migrants are polarized and mostly negative; (2) participants’ attitudes towards immigrants would not be influenced by non-partisan, accurate statistics about immigrants; and (3) participants’ attitudes towards immigrants would be negatively affected by a negative story and positively affected by a positive story.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 387 participants were gathered from undergraduate courses at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Student participation was voluntary. After data were entered, researchers omitted participants who failed the manipulation check and participants with incomplete data (final N = 369).

MATERIALS & METHODS

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. Frequency tests, reliability analyses, and ANOVAs were completed to obtain the data presented. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six research conditions. These conditions were created by the combination of two independent variables. The first independent variable, story, had three levels: Positive Story, Negative Story, and No Story. The second IV, statistics, had two levels: Statistics and No Statistics. All participants reported their demographics and completed an assessment of their attitudes toward immigrants (dependent variable).

RESULTS

Finding 1: In the sample as a whole, attitudes towards immigrants were skewed (M=3.69, SD=.22, t=2.03, p=.043), with the vast majority of responses below the midpoint. The histogram to the left shows participants’ composite scores on the Negative Attitude Towards Immigrant Scale (NATIS). The NATIS showed high internal reliability (α=.92). On the NATIS, lower scores imply less negative attitudes towards immigrants. Our hypothesis that the overall mean attitude towards immigrants would be negative was not confirmed. There were only a few participants whose score reflected negative attitudes towards immigrants.

Finding 2: Our second hypothesis was that exposure to true statistics about immigrants would not affect people’s attitudes towards immigrants. In fact, providing statistics led a small negative effect on negativity towards immigrants, F(1,368)=5.55, p=.02, η²=.02. As displayed at left, those who received statistics had less negative attitudes (M=1.95, SD=.62) in comparison to those who did not receive statistics (M=2.11, SD=.68). This finding suggests that presenting non-partisan statistics about immigration may have a small but favorable effect on people’s views towards immigrants.

Finding 3: Although there was no overall systematic interaction between valence of story and exposure to statistics (F(2,368)=.42, p=.66), participants who received statistics in addition to the positive story reported less negative attitudes (M=1.68, SD=.69) than those who received only the positive story (M=2.14, SD=.89). This comparison suggests that being exposed to non-partisan statistics about immigrants has a small positive impact on attitudes towards immigrants. As also displayed in this graph, the negative testimonial did not have a negative effect on attitudes towards immigrants as we predicted it would, and the positive testimonial did not have an overall positive effect on attitudes towards immigrants.

Finding 4: Participants who reported that they did not have an undocumented friend reported more negative attitudes towards immigrants (M=3.01, SD=.77) as compared to those who had an undocumented friend (M=2.51, SD=.81). Participants who were aware of someone who had an undocumented friend reported less negative attitudes (M=2.29, SD=.76) than those who were unaware of someone who had an undocumented friend (M=3.01, SD=.81). This finding corroborates the findings of previous research.

CONCLUSION

Our data suggest that attitudes towards immigrants - at least as indicated by our sample - are not as negative as they are portrayed in the media. In fact, very few students in our sample reported negative attitudes. Thus, one take-away message is that people’s attitudes towards immigrants on college campuses is not as negative as what people might assume based on what they hear about attitude polarization in the U.S.A.

Contrary to expectation, participants’ attitudes were not swayed by reading a vivid testimonial about an individual immigrant. However, we did document data that suggest that having friendships with people who are undocumented immigrants may be either a cause or consequence of positive attitudes towards immigrants. A key takeaway, therefore, is to bridge the gap between those who have friends of varying experiences that may be different from your own. While this may be difficult for some, the ability to make connections beyond your in-group is far easier when we realize we are complex human beings that cannot be categorized in the simplicity of black and white categories.

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REFERENCES


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Additional resources for your consideration:


