Changing Hearts and Minds? Why Media Messages Designed to Foster Empathy Often Fail

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Politicians and social activists frequently employ media designed to "change hearts and minds" by humanizing out-groups. These messages, it is assumed, lead to empathic concern, which motivates individuals to reconsider punitive policy attitudes. How effective is this approach? Using two experiments, we find that while media messages humanized Latinos for all respondents, the treatment messages produced the largest empathy response among those with the most positive prior attitudes. A key intended target of the media messages—those with the highest pretreatment antipathy toward the out-group—reported a dramatically lower increase in empathy. In a second study, we show that unpleasant affect from dissonance is one important mechanism driving these differential results. In both studies, treatments designed to provoke increased empathic concern produced little change in policy attitudes. Thus, changing hearts using empathy-inducing media is a complex task, making the ability to change minds elusive.

Social activists and politicians often assume that humanizing media messages can change the "hearts and minds" of the general public. At the launch of his documentary on immigration reform in the United States, for example, Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas noted, "It is imperative that we remind people what is actually at stake and that we humanize as much as possible a highly political, highly partisan issue. A film to me has the potential to not only change policy but to change people's minds and hearts" (quoted in Iaconangelo 2013). Humanizing media promotes social change, reports Tabitha Jackson of the International Documentary Association, because it works as an "empathy machine": as the machine changes hearts and minds, support for policies that empower or otherwise benefit the target group naturally increases (Curtis 2014). Politicians and activists routinely create and disseminate messages designed to "humanize" individuals affected by issues like the minimum wage, the war on drugs, immigration, and other topics as a means to move public opinion.

But how effective are media messages designed to humanize out-groups likely to be? Can such messages calm in-group fears, promote empathic concern, and ultimately lead to policy preferences that are more favorable to out-group interests? Certainly media messages can powerfully influence the "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann 1922) and can inspire empathic responses to both real and fictional characters (Batson and Ahmad 2009). But the goal of changing hearts and minds implies not just strengthening the opinions of those

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who already view out-groups positively but persuading those who feel differently.

There is good reason for skepticism that media messages can play such a role. For one, persuasive messages must first be received by the target audience (Zaller 1992), but even assuming widespread reception of the messages, persuasion may be challenging. For example, theories of motivated reasoning suggest that people not only seek out evidence that confirms their prior attitudes and predispositions, but when exposed to counterattitudinal information, they are likely to spend considerable time and cognitive resources arguing against those incongruent messages (Lodge and Taber 2013). Not surprisingly, evidence that media messages can prompt meaningful attitude change, at least in the realm of prejudice reduction, is sparse. The most thorough review of recent work on the effect of media messages in reducing intergroup prejudice concludes that while there is some suggestive evidence that reading about those who are different can provoke attitudinal change among schoolchildren, we know far less about the effects of media on large, adult audiences outside of school settings (Paluck and Green 2009b). The few research designs that seek to isolate the causal effects of media messages find little attitude change, even when the media messages appear to prompt empathy (Paluck 2009; Paluck and Green 2009a).

The disconnect between empathy and attitude change in response to media messages deserves additional study because such messages are appealing for reasons of scale: if media messaging could prove effective at generating empathy and also attitude change, then one could influence far more people with much less effort than required by face-to-face experiences. In this article, we focus on two important questions: (1) Does increasing affective empathy via media messages move political attitudes? (2) If, in the face of empathetic response to media messages, attitude change is indeed elusive, why? What are the psychological mechanisms that interrupt the intended effects of media messages on policy, even when those same messages can increase empathy? Given the potential reach of media messaging in the realm of prejudice reduction, answers to these questions have both theoretical and practical import.

To answer these general questions, we present results from a specific context, focusing on negative attitudes toward undocumented Hispanic or Latino immigrants among Anglos in the western United States.[1] As our primary interest is the political psychology of intergroup conflict, we use immigration as an example of a number of possible real world policy contexts marked by conflict between some members of a majority in-group (Anglo citizens of a state, in this case) and a minority out-group (undocumented Latino immigrants). We choose immigration, as opposed to another topic, because the significant influx of Latino immigrants to the western United States has made immigration policy one of the region's most hotly contested issues, with immigration driving a significant increase in anti-Latino attitudes among Anglos (Branton et al. 2011; Ramirez and Peterson 2020; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013). A surprisingly large number of Anglos hold negative stereotypes of Latinos and of Latino immigrants in particular (Reny and Monzano 2016), and that negativity seems to increase with greater political attention to Latinos (Ostfeld 2019; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2020). As such, Anglo attitudes toward undocumented Latino immigrants are a hard test for empathy. While Anglos/Latinos are the focus of this particular analysis, we expect these results to travel to other contexts marked by majority-minority conflict.

We conducted two large-scale experiments with Anglos in a conservative western US state. In the first, participants were randomly exposed to a control message or to a clip from a documentary that humanized undocumented Latino immigrants in an attempt to spur more favorable policy toward them. While our media treatments humanized Latino immigrants as both social activists and politicians would expect, a large proportion of a key intended target of such media—those with the most negative pretreatment views of undocumented immigrants—reported a much lower increase in empathic concern in response to the images, creating a large "empathy gap." These messages also did little to change policy attitudes, a surprising finding given the overall increase in empathy.

Given that this gap arose from differences in pretreatment antipathy levels among our participants in study 1, we designed a second study to examine one key possible mechanism behind it: dissonance. Defined as unpleasant affect that occurs when individuals perceive a disconnect between new information and core beliefs about themselves or the groups with which they identify, dissonance has the potential to interrupt attempts to change hearts and minds.

Study 2 employed an innovative two-wave panel design in which we separated the humanizing message from a dissonance treatment (previous research conflates the two). Participants received a simplified humanization treatment—a sequence of positive images of Latinos—at the start of wave 2, allowing us a within-subjects measure of change from wave 1. After blocking on pretreatment antipathy toward undocumented Latino immigrants as measured in wave 1, we then

1. Although we recognize the distinct origins of the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino," question wording in our studies typically used both together as a way of making the category as inclusive as possible, given different understandings of ethnicity among our respondents. For purposes of simplicity, we use the term "Latino" in the text that follows.

randomly assigned participants in wave 2 to different versions of a "forced compliance" dissonance treatment. Half of the respondents were told that the images they had just seen were of undocumented Latino immigrants, and half were told that the images were of Latinos who had immigrated legally. Both halves were then asked to endorse one of a series of positive statements about the groups depicted in the images; we expected that this "forced compliance" treatment would create greater dissonance in the group told that the images were of undocumented immigrants, especially among those respondents who began with high levels of out-group antipathy. With this unique research design, we are able to directly manipulate the dissonance mechanism. We find compelling evidence that dissonance does indeed interrupt feelings of empathy and can at least partly explain why humanizing media messages rarely induce policy attitude change. To our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically demonstrate the relationship between empathic concern, dissonance, and policy attitudes.[2]

In what follows, we first theorize why those who are an important intended target of humanizing media or images are most likely to feel dissonance and thus fail to respond as expected by proponents of humanizing media. We then turn to a detailed presentation of the research design and measures, followed by the key results. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical import of our findings. Among other things, we find that humanizing media or images that do not deal directly with dissonance might be effective for activists and politicians seeking to rally the base (a "preaching to the choir" effect), but they are likely to do little to expand the base—that is, to change the opinions of those the messages are designed to target.

THEORY: DISSONANCE DISRUPTS

Those who promote humanizing media as a vehicle for social and policy change typically assume the following sequence: humanizing message → empathy → Δ policy attitudes. A significant body of research from psychology supports this assumption, showing that humanizing messages that meet certain criteria (like other more explicit perspective-taking exercises) generate "imagine-other" empathy, which Batson and Ahmad (2009) define as "imagining how another person thinks or feels given his/her situation" (144). Research by Batson and others (Batson et al. 1997; Harth, Kessler, and Leach 2008; Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci 2003) shows that this type of empathy generates "empathic concern" (often called "affective empathy")—feelings of sympathy, compassion, or tenderness for others who are in need—which leads to more positive attitudes toward the target group and an increased willingness to redress wrongs (rules, policies) behind target group suffering.[3]

Reviewing research from Galinsky and colleagues (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000, in particular), Batson and colleagues argue that, across a wide range of groups and settings, imagine-other empathy changes deeply held negative stereotypes about the out-group through increased empathic concern (Batson et al. 2002). For example, Batson et al. (1997) show that imagine-other empathy toward a person with AIDS, a homeless person, and even a convicted murderer led to greater empathic concern and more positive attitudes toward these groups as a whole. Similarly, Vescio et al. (2003) demonstrate that imagine-other empathy for an African American being interviewed on a radio program about his adjustment to college life led to increased empathic concern and thus stronger pro-Black attitudes among participants.

Perhaps the most promising evidence of durable attitude change related to imagine-other empathy emerges from political science research on perspective taking. Although they do not have posttreatment measures of empathic concern, Broockman and Kalla (2016) and Kalla and Broockman (2020) show that messages contained in brief, 10-minute dyadic conversations that encouraged perspective taking as part of door-to-door canvassing efforts altered levels of prejudice against transgender people and immigrants. While small in magnitude, this effect persisted for at least three months. Similarly, Simonovitz, Kezdi, and Kardos (2018) find that an online perspective-taking game targeting anti-Roma sentiment in Hungary evoked empathic concern, reduced prejudice toward the Roma and refugees, and also moved vote intentions away from far-right parties. This effect lasted for at least one month. Adida, Lo, and Platas (2018) demonstrate that a perspective-taking exercise increased willingness to write an anonymous letter to the White House on behalf of Syrian refugees. Proponents of Group Empathy Theory (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2016) also highlight the efficacy of perspective taking and empathic concern in shaping attitudes.

However, while imagine-other empathy/perspective taking represent a potentially compelling path to persuasion, evidence of their effectiveness in moving political and policy attitudes is mixed, with existing evidence suggesting that the break in the connection to attitude change occurs after the generation of empathic concern. For example, Sherman, Cupo,

2. However, see Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2018) for a formal model of dynamics similar to those we highlight here.

3. For stylistic reasons, we use the terms "empathic concern," "affective empathy," and "empathy" as synonyms. In the analyses that follow, the empathic concern or affective empathy index is our measure of imagine-other empathy.

and Mithlo (2020) draw on data collected in the lab and a museum setting to show that perspective taking toward Native Americans increased empathic concern but had no effect on cultural biases. And a recent large-scale, online study on compassion toward the poor again found that perspective taking evoked strong empathic concern and prompted small changes in stereotypes about the poor but had no effect on welfare policy attitudes (Bor and Simonovitz 2021). The authors conclude that their precisely estimated null effects mean that changing attitudes remains a "tremendous challenge" and that perspective taking is "not a silver bullet" (1262). Paluck's yearlong field experiment in Rwanda explored the effect of a radio soap opera designed to encourage empathy and reduce prejudice (Paluck 2009; Paluck and Green 2009a). She found that the media messages altered perceptions of social norms and changed behaviors but (again) had no effect on individual attitudes—despite the fact that she documented evidence of "visible, audible, and frequent" empathic responses to the dramatic radio program, its characters, and their real-life Rwandan counterparts (Paluck 2009, 581).

Taken together, these studies offer a paradoxical set of findings: media messages prompted empathic concern (at least among some participants), affected perceptions of social norms, and even changed some behaviors, but those changes had little to no effect on individual-level policy attitudes toward that group. While it is possible that over time changes in empathy, behavior, or perceptions of social norms could result in durable attitude change (Batson et al. 1997), the best and most recent studies give us little reason to expect that media interventions have a high probability of changing minds, at least in the short term, even when hearts are affected with increased empathic concern. More generally, finding evidence of durable change in political attitudes from brief interventions tends to be the exception, not the rule (Batson and Ahmad 2009; Paluck and Green 2009b). Efforts to prompt attitude change through empathy thus often fall short, even when those efforts can be shown to produce strong pleasant emotions.

Why do positive, humanizing messages fail to prompt policy change? We argue that at least part of the answer is dissonance. First brought to the attention of the scholarly community by Festinger (1957) and later refined by Aronson (1969), the concept of dissonance has seen somewhat of a resurgence (Acharya et al. 2018; Aronson 1992; Harmon-Jones, Amodio, and Harmon-Jones 2009). It begins with the assumption that all individuals have a set of standards and beliefs that form the core of the self. These standards and beliefs generate a picture of one's "ideal self-image" and shape the lens through which an individual views the world. Mackie and Smith (2015, 263) suggest that these standards and beliefs are generated by group memberships: "all social entities, including the self, can be seen as members of social groups" and thus "groups are . . . an important source of identity for individuals." Regardless of their source, abundant evidence suggests that individuals are intrinsically and consistently motivated to conceive of themselves, and of their in-groups, as meeting, or at least approaching, these ideal standards.

Dissonance is a particular type of unpleasant affect that arises when individuals either do something that crosses those standards or are presented with compelling information that contradicts core beliefs, such that they are confronted with an inconsistency (Aronson 1992; Harmon-Jones et al. 2009). Dissonance is likely to occur, for example, when an individual who thinks of herself as kind receives information (perhaps through feedback from others) that she is not. And it happens when one discovers that the individual (or group of individuals) one has treated, and spoken of, as less than human is suddenly perceived as human. Dissonant affect rises as one realizes that behavior or information is inconsistent with internal standards and beliefs.

This dissonance process also plays out for individuals who receive information about their important in-groups, or an out-group, that contradicts their expectations for the group. As Mackie and Smith (2015) note, "the self is defined largely in terms of group memberships" such that individuals often "perceive themselves as interchangeable exemplars of the group rather than as unique individuals" (263). The group thus becomes an extension of self and vice versa. Indeed, previous research suggests that positive information about an out-group can generate dissonance when the information challenges previously held political beliefs, beliefs about the goodness of their in-group, or beliefs about the less-than-human nature of the out-group (Glasford, Dovidio, and Pratto 2009).

Dissonance is best captured by five emotions identified in previous research (Elliot and Devine 1994; Haslam 2006): uncomfortable, uneasy, bothered, tense, or concerned. For the same reasons described in theories of motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013) and emotion regulation (Feldman et al. 2020), we expect this unpleasant affect to counteract the effects of pleasant affect like empathy that might otherwise have logically followed from positive, humanizing information about another group. In this way, unpleasant affect from dissonance can break the expected link between humanization and affective empathy and, thus (by extension), between humanization and policy.

If dissonance does indeed play the role we expect, then media messages should affect recipients differently, depending on their predispositions toward the out-group. When

confronted with positive images of a disliked out-group, individuals who hold the most negative views will be the most likely to feel dissonance from this media, and the unpleasant affect accompanying the dissonance will counteract the pleasant affect from empathy that might have followed from the humanization, thus disrupting the empathic chain described by Batson. Conversely, those with the most positive prior attitudes—the "racial sympathizers" identified by Chudy (2021) and Tesler and Sears (2010), as well as others with humanist perspectives—will be comparatively more likely to feel empathic concern toward the out-group, but for them attitude change is likely to be minimal because their policy positions are already friendly. We call this a "preaching to the choir effect" and note that, while it might be helpful in rallying one's base to a cause, it does not represent the persuasion that the proponents of this media typically seek. Our expectation, then, is that humanizing media will often have little effect on those it is designed to persuade. Put differently, there is no guarantee that changing hearts invariably leads to changing minds. Dissonance disrupts the process.

More formally, our hypotheses are as follows:

H1. Individuals with high pretreatment out-group antipathy—often the targets of humanizing media messages—will exhibit low levels of empathic concern as a result of humanizing information about the out-group, while individuals with low pretreatment antipathy toward the out-group will exhibit high levels of empathic concern.

H2. Dissonance is a key mechanism driving this variation in empathy. This implies two subhypotheses:
H2a. Individuals with high levels of out-group antipathy before treatment will on average exhibit higher levels of dissonance posttreatment.
H2b. Individuals with low pretreatment antipathy will exhibit little or no change in dissonance levels.

H3. While posttreatment empathy levels will be correlated with posttreatment political attitudes, the unpleasant affect from dissonance will result in small or zero average effects of the media message treatments on attitudes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To test these hypotheses, we conducted two large-scale experiments in a heavily Republican and majority Anglo state that has had contentious debates over immigration policy in response to a rapidly growing Latino population. We note that much of the conflict in this particular context is not physically violent, more often taking the form of discrimination, both individually and in the form of policy. The relative lack of violence or physical aggression makes this context a hard test for our theory: violence would only serve to increase intergroup tension and sharpen the relationship between negative predispositions about the out-group, empathic concern, dissonance, and policy attitudes. Within the immigration context, targeting a heavily Republican and conservative population is especially important, given that Republicans are more likely to feel resentment toward immigrants, even after controlling for a variety of demographic characteristics (Schildkraut 2011). As we will demonstrate, our measure of out-group antipathy is distinct from partisanship and ideology; however, it is correlated enough that conducting the study within a heavily Republican state allows us to find large enough numbers of individuals with highly negative predispositions toward undocumented Latino immigrants to provide sufficient statistical power to test our hypotheses.

Both experiments identify individuals who hold negative predispositions about Latino immigrants and then humanize these immigrants for them. Because our primary interest is the attitudes of the Anglo majority toward Latinos, we restrict our analysis to non-Hispanic whites in both studies. As we detail in appendix section E.3, randomization imbalance checks indicate that assignment to treatment groups across both study 1 and study 2 was fully independent of pretreatment covariates.

Study 1

Study 1 participants were recruited via e-mails sent to a random sample of registered voters throughout the state. Participants were drawn from three separate sample populations: (1) voters, (2) citizen activists who participated in Republican neighborhood party caucuses or the Republican state party convention in 2012, and (3) local and state-level elected officials. Each of these populations could be the target of efforts to persuade on the issue of immigration, so conducting the study on each population separately allowed us to explore whether the effect of the experimental treatments differed across these populations. The experiment was fielded simultaneously to all three samples on the same dates. However, as we show in appendix section H.2, we found no significant differences between these subpopulations across the outcomes measured in our study, so we combined them for the current analysis.

To identify individuals with highly negative pretreatment predispositions toward the out-group, we asked participants a variation of the well-known "ethos of conflict" measure developed and validated by scholars like Bar-Tal and colleagues

(2009, 2012), Roccas and colleagues (Roccas, Klar, and Liviatan 2006; Roccas et al. 2008), Shnabel et al. (2009), and others.[4] Our theory focuses on the role of negative affect from dissonance in breaking the empathy-attitudes link. Thus, to identify those most likely to experience dissonance (as opposed to some other type of negative affect) from humanizing undocumented Latinos, we need a pretreatment measure that captures not just any negative attitudes or feelings toward the out-group but instead a set of attitudes that would be challenged if one began to view the out-group as more human. This antipathy measure was designed in other contexts to do exactly that. To create the measure, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements like, "Illegal immigrants have moral values and customs from which legal residents of the state could learn," "In general, illegal immigrants are lazy," and so forth.[5]

In study 1, we used a three-item, short-form version of the scale; in study 2, we used a full nine-item version. Full question wording and distributions of the measure from each study can be found in appendix section B.1. The three items employed in study 1 scale together well ($\alpha = 0.76$); for ease of interpretation, we recoded the index to run between 0 and 1, with high scores indicating greater antipathy toward undocumented Latino immigrants. In both studies there are large numbers of respondents at every point on the scale, allowing us to explore how participants at all different antipathy levels respond to the experimental treatments.

After completing the out-group antipathy battery, participants answered several demographic questions and were then introduced to the experimental manipulation. In study 1, the manipulation consisted of video clips drawn from documentaries created and aired by a local PBS affiliate six years before the experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) a documentary clip humanizing a Latino immigrant family ($n = 843$), (2) a clip from another part of the same documentary providing information about the growth of Latino immigration in the state without any humanizing content ($n = 943$), (3) a clip that combined both the humanizing and information clips ($n = 855$), or (4) a control clip nearly identical to the information clip but that focused on the growth of traffic in the state instead of immigration ($n = 857$). We worked closely with the original producer of the documentary to create each of the clips, ensuring that many images and the voice of the narrator were held constant across treatment and control video clips.[6] We designed the humanizing message specifically to meet the criteria laid out by Batson and Ahmad (2009) to generate empathic concern.

The humanization treatment emphasized the experience of an immigrant family that had recently moved to the state "in search of a better life." The clip introduced two children, shown working hard in school. Their mother commented on the challenge of leaving Mexico to emigrate to the United States "so that our children would have a better upbringing, a better future, a different life." She professed that her family "has been really happy here" and spoke in Spanish, with an English voice-over as well as English subtitles. The clip ended with the mother explaining that she and her husband support their children "with our love," and she sheds a tear while articulating themes associated with the American Dream: "My biggest dream is for my kids to become great professionals. So my children don't have to make hamburgers like me." The humanization treatment was thus designed to generate imagine-other empathy (and in turn, empathic concern) for undocumented Latino immigrants, by offering a positive view of immigrant family life, emphasizing the fact that schoolchildren were part of the family, highlighting a mother's love for her children, and showing a visual display of emotion.

The "information" treatment presented information about the growth of Latino immigration in the state. Unlike the personal stories found in the humanization treatment, this treatment emphasized the state's changing demographics, linking this change to the challenges faced by the state's elementary schools amid the Latino enrollment boom. The video included a graph explaining that the Latino population is increasing at a much faster rate that the non-Latino population but that school capacity has not kept pace with these demographic changes. A third treatment (the "combined" treatment) seamlessly joined the humanization and information treatments with a script that contained the exact text of both with the information treatment coming first.

The control condition was a placebo that drew on images and video from another documentary report created by the same producer. This clip concerned the transportation crunch facing the state. The script closely paralleled the immigration information treatment, substituting information about

4. We chose to adapt this well-tested antipathy measure rather than use a different measure of anti-Latino attitudes as it more closely matches the theory of the article, is focused on undocumented immigrants and their relationship to legal residents of the state, and is more easily transferred to the study of other groups and contexts. As we review in app. sec. C, large-scale pretests showed that our measure is correlated with other measures of anti-Latino attitudes as expected.

5. We prefer the less pejorative term "undocumented" immigrants, but survey questions used the term "illegal" as that wording was common during the period when our studies were fielded and would have been more familiar to respondents.

6. Study 1 participants who indicated they could not hear and see the video were excluded from analysis.

immigration trends with transportation trends. The clip concluded with exactly the same graph shown in the immigration information treatment, but this time it was described as showing growth in the number of miles residents in the state travel by car relative to the number of available traffic lanes. The full script and sample screen shots for all four treatments are included in appendix sections E.1 and E.2.

After the experimental manipulation, we conducted a manipulation check, using the infrahumanization measure validated by Leyens and colleagues (Leyens et al. 2000; Vaes et al. 2003) to capture the degree to which the media "humanized" undocumented Latino immigrants. Participants were asked to identify on a seven-point scale how much they thought undocumented immigrants could feel "primary" emotions (emotions that do not require higher-order processing) and "secondary" emotions (those that require higher-order processing). Research shows that humans generally assume only they are capable of the latter type of emotions. Our measure of humanization is the degree to which participants recognized the ability of undocumented Latino immigrants to feel two pleasant secondary emotions ($\alpha = 0.85$). Like our other measures, we converted this measure to a 0–1 scale, with 1 representing a fully human view of the out-group and 0 representing the opposite.

Following the manipulation check, we measured participants' levels of empathic concern for undocumented Latino immigrants using Batson's standard six-item measure (Batson et al. 1997, 2002). While it almost certainly does not capture as much nuance in empathy as some excellent measures (Sirin et al. 2016) developed after our study was fielded, we use the Batson scale because it most closely captures the process identified by our theory, which focuses on individual-level affect. Participants were asked to identify the degree to which they felt "sympathetic," "moved," "compassionate," "warm," "soft-hearted," and "tender"—emotions often considered the physical manifestation of imagine-other empathy in political and social psychology.[7] Responses scaled together nicely ($\alpha = 0.97$), so we created an additive empathy index for use in our analyses, which we scaled from 0 to 1 like the other measures.

The survey concluded with questions designed to measure support for policies that would harm the out-group. These questions measured participants' support for specific bills targeting undocumented Latino immigrants, such as a punitive measure requiring local police to check the immigration status of anyone arrested on felony or serious misdemeanor charges. Details of the policy variables can be found in appendix section B.5. Factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha suggest that responses to these policies scale together well ($\alpha = 0.87$). Given these results, we formed a "policy harm" index, scaled continuously on a 0–1 scale.

The design in study 1 allows us to test the observable implications of our theory for two of our key dependent variables: empathic concern (hypothesis 1) and policy support (hypothesis 3). We manipulate humanization and then observe the downstream effects on reported empathy and policy attitudes. It provides the added advantage of a treatment with high external validity—treatments were taken directly from an actual documentary designed to humanize Latino immigrants to the state. However, like virtually all real-world messages, study 1 manipulated humanization and dissonance together, so we cannot parse out the effects of each separately, leaving us without a direct measure of dissonance and only an ability to observe its downstream effects.

Study 2

We thus designed study 2 to directly explore the possibility of dissonance as the mechanism behind the results in study 1 by manipulating dissonance separately from humanization. The second study ran in two waves (at least a week apart), with out-group antipathy, the humanization measure, and all demographics measured in wave 1, allowing us to block randomize participants on the basis of their wave 1 out-group antipathy levels. Participants for study 2—once again registered voters age 18 and older—were recruited in late August and early September 2015 from a geographic subsection of the state with a high concentration of Republicans. Details of the demographics of the study 2 sample, which included a larger percentage of younger and female participants than in study 1, can be found in appendix section F.

Measures for study 2 were largely similar to those described for study 1. The key difference is that study 2's index of out-group antipathy used a full nine-item scale ($\alpha = 0.88$).[8] To block randomize by antipathy, we simply divided groups at the scale midpoint; 1,214 respondents were below the midpoint (and were thus classified as "low antipathy"), and 768 respondents were above the midpoint ("high antipathy").

Wave 2 began with a sequence of images showing Latinos in contexts of shared values and friendly interpersonal relationships. All participants, regardless of experimental condition, viewed these images, which were intended to humanize the out-group in a manner similar to study 1 but without

7. These emotions overlap significantly with the Empathic Concern portion of the Group Empathy Index created by Sirin et al. (2016), which includes references to feeling "tender," "concerned," "soft-hearted," "touched," "protective," and "pity."

8. Experimental results are similar when the three-item version is used (see app. sec. H.4).

context (e.g., the immigration status of those shown) that might generate dissonance. Immediately following these pictures, we again administered the humanization measure. We then directly manipulated dissonance by randomly assigning participants to a condition that characterized the people in the photos as either documented or undocumented immigrants using the following language: "The individuals in the photos you saw were Hispanic/Latino immigrants who have come to the United States [illegally/legally]. The next questions will include statements about Hispanic/Latino immigrants who have come to this country [illegally/legally]. Please choose the one that best reflects your opinion. You may feel that none of the statements fully captures your views, but please choose the one that comes closest."

Following the standard "induced compliance" framework (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959), all the questions offered only positive response options. For example, the response options for one question included the following items: "Hispanic/Latino immigrants are devoted to family"; "Hispanic/Latino immigrants are hard workers"; "Hispanic/Latino immigrants are committed to a better future." No other response options were made available. For individuals with high pretreatment out-group antipathy assigned to the "illegal immigrant" condition, we expected that being required to select positive attributes for the out-group would create high levels of dissonance. By contrast, we expected that the positive response options would produce less dissonance in those with high out-group antipathy assigned to the "legal immigrant" condition and in those with low out-group antipathy regardless of condition. At the end of the question battery, we measured respondents' dissonance levels by asking them to report the degree to which they felt the five emotions identified in previous research (Elliot and Devine 1994; Haslam 2006) as indicators of dissonance: uncomfortable, uneasy, bothered, tense, or concerned ($\alpha = 0.86$). Following standard protocols, these emotions were randomly interspersed with 10 other emotions of varying valence.

Subjects then recorded their empathic concern toward the out-group (undocumented Latino immigrants), using the same Batson empathy scale as in study 1 ($\alpha = 0.94$). Study 2 concluded by asking individuals to rate their level of support for policies that would harm Latino immigrants. Some of the policy outcomes used in study 1 were specific to state legislation at the time, so there is only partial overlap in policy outcomes used between studies. As with the first study, support for these policies loaded on a single factor and scaled together well ($\alpha = 0.88$). Results are similar if we use only policy questions common to both studies (see app. sec. H.6).

We discuss the results of these experiments in order of the hypotheses presented earlier. We first show that individuals with high pretreatment antipathy toward the out-group—those who should be the target of humanizing media messages—exhibit low levels of empathy as a result of humanizing information about the out-group, while individuals with low pretreatment antipathy exhibit high levels of empathy. This is our key finding, highlighting a counterintuitive outcome for those interested in using humanizing media as a means of influencing policy. We then present results from study 2 that suggest dissonant affect is indeed a mechanism driving these empathy results. We conclude by showing that despite high levels of posttreatment empathy among some individuals, none of the experimental treatments generated policy change.

CHANGING HEARTS: HUMANIZATION AND EMPATHY (HYPOTHESIS 1)

Study 1

In study 1, the humanizing treatment did indeed humanize its target as intended, working for both high and low antipathy participants. Figure 1 summarizes the results. Among high antipathy individuals, the mean humanization value of individuals in the control condition was 0.43. In the humanizing media condition, the mean for high antipathy individuals was 0.61, a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) representing nearly a fifth of the scale or 2/3 of a standard deviation of the outcome. We observe a nearly identical shift among low antipathy individuals, who saw the out-group much more favorably to begin with on average: the mean humanization level for members of this group in the control condition was 0.59, but it increased to 0.68 among those assigned to the humanization condition ($p < .001$) representing 1/3 of a standard deviation of the outcome. If anything, the increase in humanization is somewhat smaller among low antipathy respondents. The results are virtually identical for both groups when comparing the combined treatment (humanization and information) with the control.

When we turn to empathic concern as our dependent variable, however, a stark difference between those two groups emerges. These differences can be seen especially clearly in the marginal effects plots shown in figure 2.[9] These plots reveal how the effect of the treatments relative to the control changed at varying levels of antipathy (our proxy for expected levels of dissonance in response to the treatments).[10] As the figure

9. Regression tables used to produce these results can be found in app. sec. G.1.

10. As shown in app. sec. H.8, we used the method suggested by Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (2019) to verify that a linear interaction assumption is appropriate and that the data show common support for the moderator.

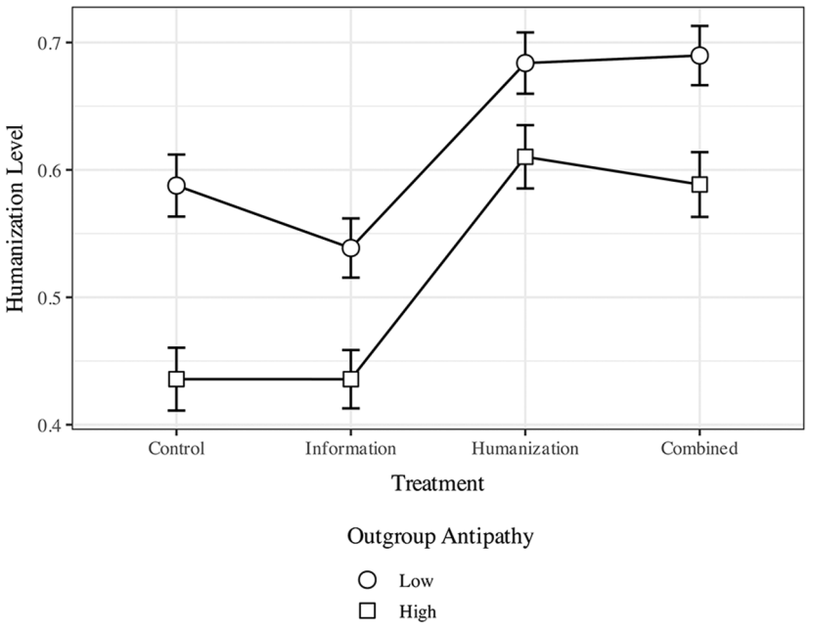

Figure 1. Study 1 humanization by level of out-group antipathy and treatment group. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

shows, low antipathy respondents reported dramatically higher levels of empathy in the humanization and combined conditions compared to high antipathy respondents. For respondents who began the experiment with low levels of antipathy, the humanization treatments worked extraordinarily well, pushing respondents more than halfway across the range of the empathy variable, a change equal to approximately 2/3 of a standard deviation of the outcome. This represents a very large effect, perhaps limited only by the upper boundary of the measure. But the empathy response, while still present, was much more muted among those who began the study with higher levels of antipathy. In the two treatments that included humanizing messages (the humanization treatment and the combined treatment), the effect of humanization was about three times larger at the low end of the *X*-axis than at the high end.

As expected, the information treatment had a much smaller effect on empathic concern, even among those with the lowest levels of out-group antipathy. Interestingly, among those with the highest levels of antipathy, this treatment

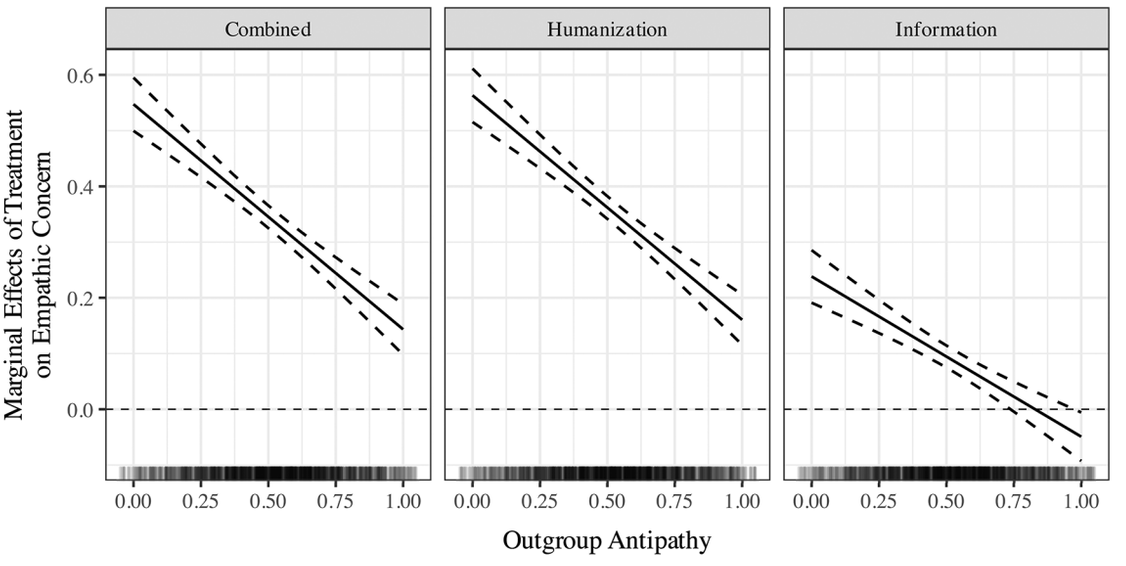

Figure 2. Study 1 marginal effects of the treatments on empathic concern, by levels of out-group antipathy. Rug plot of out-group antipathy included; bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

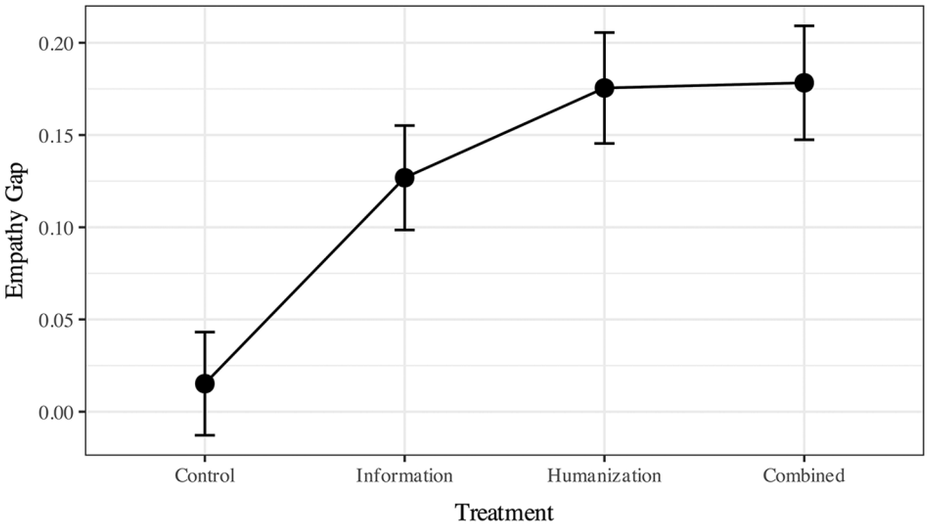

Figure 3. Study 1 empathy gap: difference between low and high antipathy individuals in reported empathic concern, by treatment condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

appears to have a negative effect, making respondents less empathetic than those in the control group. The information treatment emphasized how the state's changing ethnic composition strains state resources, so it is possible that among those at the highest antipathy levels, this information seemed threatening—or at the very least, no cause for feelings of warmth or compassion.

One potential objection to our analysis to this point might be that the moderating effects we have shown are really driven primarily by ideology or partisanship, not by out-group antipathy. With so many strongly conservative respondents in our sample, perhaps the resistance to empathy stems primarily from their conservative political commitments. But this does not seem to be the case. Instead, conservatives and liberals (and Republicans and Democrats) had quite similar responses to humanizing messages. (Graphical representations of the underwhelming magnitude of ideology and party effects can be seen in app. sec. H.3.) Conservatives were less empathetic than liberals when they heard immigration information not accompanied by humanizing messages (the information treatment), but no such difference was present for humanizing messages. Overall, neither ideology nor partisanship appears to be the key moderator at work in our data.

By contrast, levels of out-group antipathy powerfully moderated responses to humanizing messages.[11] Respondents with low antipathy levels were highly sensitive to the messages, while those with high pretreatment antipathy levels were simply much less responsive. These differences are summarized in figure 3, which presents the "empathy gap," defined as the difference in mean levels of empathic concern between those above and below the scale midpoint on the antipathy measure. There were no differences between these groups in the control condition, which was not meant to foster empathic concern. But merely showing a video of immigrants along with immigration information prompted a large difference in empathy, and in the conditions designed to humanize the out-group, differences in empathy were nearly 50% larger than in the information condition. In sum, among those who were already open to the out-group, empathic concern was easy to foster. But among those with the highest levels of pretreatment antipathy, the ostensible target of humanizing messages, creating empathy was a much more challenging task. To the extent that these real-world messages "changed hearts," they did so to a much greater extent among those who began the study already predisposed to see the out-group positively.

Study 2

In study 2, we separated the humanization/empathy manipulation from the dissonance manipulation, allowing us to see the distinct effects of each. Figure 4 shows that both high and low antipathy participants responded positively to the images and became significantly more likely to score Latino immigrants as high on the humanization scale ($p < .01$ for both groups). As in study 1, no matter what respondents' level of pretreatment antipathy, the positive images increased respondents' beliefs about the humanity of Latino immigrants. Low antipathy respondents scored higher on the humanization

11. Both the humanization and empathy results hold in models that employ a dichotomous indicator of high versus low levels of out-group antipathy (see app. sec. G.1).

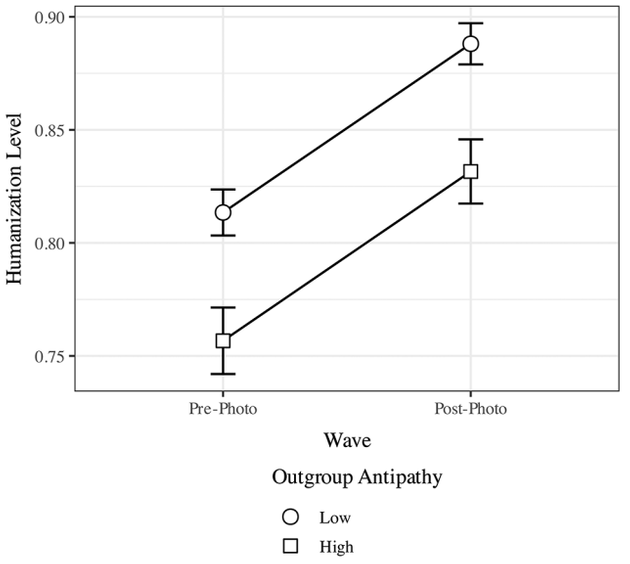

Figure 4. Study 2 humanization by level of out-group antipathy and study wave. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

scale at both points in time, but the magnitude of the change was nearly identical for both groups—a little less than 8 percentage points. Thus, it is not the case that the images themselves were somehow interpreted in negative ways by those with the most negative predispositions toward the out-group. The images humanized the out-group to the same degree for both low and high antipathy participants.

Our theory holds, though, that once we introduce the dissonance manipulation, the reactions of low and high antipathy respondents should diverge, with high antipathy participants reporting lower levels of empathy. Figure 5*A* confirms this expectation by showing average treatment effects of the experimental conditions on empathy for participants by pretreatment out-group antipathy. Low antipathy participants reported significantly more empathic concern than high antipathy participants no matter the experimental condition, and both groups decreased in empathy when they were assigned to the "illegal" condition. But the effect of the illegal condition was over twice as large for high antipathy participants, and the predicted point estimate for those with high levels of antipathy assigned to that condition fell below the scale midpoint.[12] Figure 5*B* shows that the empathy gap—or the difference between high and low antipathy respondents—is larger in the illegal than in the "legal" condition. A formal test of the difference in differences confirms the robustness of this result ($p < .01$). The evidence thus suggests that when assigned to the dissonance condition and the unpleasant feelings that were more likely to accompany it, high antipathy participants were less able to respond with empathy.

DISSONANCE AS A MECHANISM (HYPOTHESIS 2)

The key experimental advantage of study 2 is that it allows us to isolate the effect of dissonance, rather than simply observe effects consistent with its presence, as we did in study 1. To measure its impact, recall that our theory suggests that the combination of positive images, information about legal status, and the "forced compliance" portion of the manipulation, where respondents were asked to indicate something positive about immigrants, would create dissonance, especially among those with the highest levels of antipathy who were assigned to the illegal condition. This is exactly what we find, as seen in figure 6. Participants with high levels of pretreatment out-group antipathy were more likely than those with low antipathy to report dissonant affect regardless of treatment condition ($p < .01$), suggesting that the requirement to say positive things about the out-group was challenging for them,

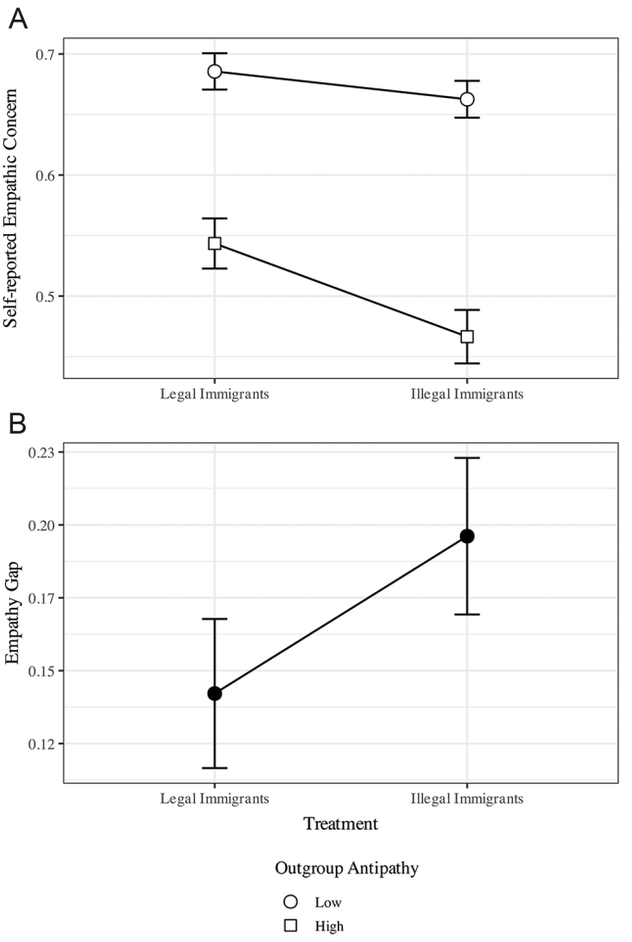

Figure 5. Study 2 self-reported empathic concern and empathy gap, by treatment condition and level of out-group antipathy. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

12. See app. sec. G.2 for evidence of the interaction between antipathy and the illegal condition as well as the marginal effects of the treatment across the range of the antipathy variable.

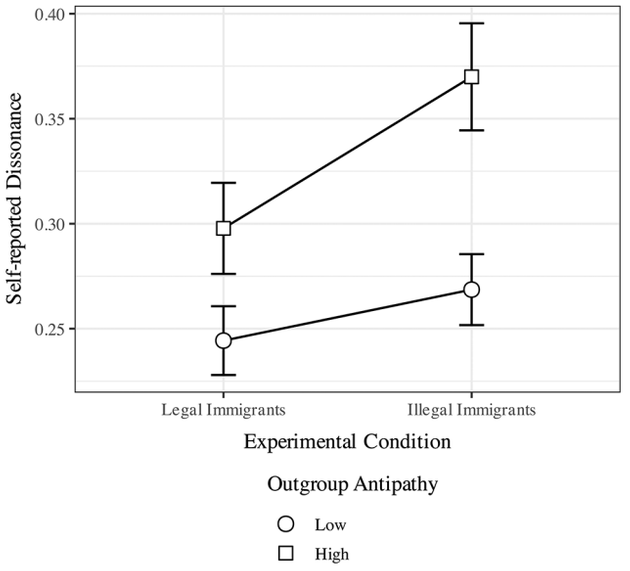

Figure 6. Study 2 dissonance by level of out-group antipathy and experimental condition. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

even when the out-group was restricted to documented immigrants. But the difference between high and low antipathy participants in self-reported dissonance was more than three times larger in the illegal condition. Low antipathy participants also reported slightly higher levels of dissonant affect when assigned to the illegal condition, but the difference across experimental conditions was smaller and only marginally significant ($p = .06$).[13] The difference in differences between high and low out-group antipathy is also significant ($p = .02$), representing key evidence of our hypothesized mechanism at work. In sum, the illegal condition prompted increased feelings of discomfort among those with more negative pretreatment views about the out-group. The proportion of low antipathy respondents scoring above the scale midpoint on dissonance increased by only 3 percentage points between the legal and illegal conditions but by 14 percentage points among respondents high in pretreatment antipathy.

Although the effects are modest in size, study 2 thus allows us to see firsthand how dissonance interrupted the ability to feel empathy. Those with the most negative set of beliefs about the out-group were more likely to feel unsettled and troubled when confronted with the conflict between their beliefs and positive information about the group. Recall that the only difference in the dissonance treatment involved telling respondents that the positive pictures they had just viewed were of undocumented immigrants. Dissonance also affected empathic concern among the participants who began the study with positive opinions about the out-group, but for them, the effect was smaller, and their overall levels of empathy remained high. Of course, dissonance is not the only mechanism at work, as the interaction of the dissonance manipulation and premanipulation levels of antipathy explains about 23% of the variance in empathy. Nonetheless, study 2 provides direct evidence that dissonance is one meaningful part of the psychological dynamic.

13. The corresponding table can be found in app. sec. G.3.

CHANGING MINDS ABOUT POLICY

We turn now to the third hypothesis, which holds that, in the presence of both empathy (pleasant affect) and dissonance (unpleasant affect), average experimental effects of humanization treatments on policy attitudes should be small or nonexistent. Table 1 shows strong evidence of these expected null effects in study 1. The dependent variable is our summary measure of support for policies harmful to undocumented Latino immigrants, although as can be seen in appendix section H.5, results hold for each of the individual measures. Model 1 estimates the effects of the experimental manipulations alone (the excluded category is the placebo control), while model 2 includes the continuous measure of

Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Policy Harm on Antipathy and Treatments, Study 1

	(1)	(2)
Intercept	.71***	.36***
	(.01)	(.01)
Humanization	−.01	−.00
	(.01)	(.02)
Information	.01	.04*
	(.01)	(.02)
Combined	−.01	−.00
	(.01)	(.02)
Out-group antipathy		.67***
		(.02)
Humanization × antipathy		−.01
		(.03)
Information × antipathy		−.06+
		(.03)
Combined × antipathy		−.01
		(.03)
N	3,489	3,482
R^2	.00	.51
Adjusted R^2	.00	.51
Residual SD	.22	.15

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.
+ $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Policy Harm on Antipathy and Treatments, Study 2

	(1)	(2)
Intercept	.62***	.25***
	(.01)	(.01)
Illegal condition	−.03**	−.04*
	(.01)	(.02)
Out-group antipathy		.85***
		(.03)
Illegal condition × antipathy		.03
		(.04)
R^2	.00	.53
Adjusted R^2	.00	.52
Residual SD	.23	.16

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 1{,}982$.
$^{+}$ $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

pretreatment antipathy and the interaction between antipathy and the experimental treatments. Consistent with the possibility that some participants found information about demographic trends to be threatening, there is some evidence for increased support for policies designed to harm the out-group among respondents with low levels of antipathy who were assigned to the information condition. The key finding overall is that neither of the conditions with humanizing messages had any discernible effect on policy attitudes. Nor is there any large or statistically significant interaction between antipathy and the humanizing treatments.[14]

Table 2 highlights a similar result for study 2. Again, the dependent variable in the model is our summary measure of support for policies harmful to undocumented Latino immigrants, and the independent variables include an indicator of the dissonance treatment as well as (in model 2) the continuous measure of out-group antipathy and the interaction of antipathy and the experimental manipulation. While there is some evidence that, relative to the legal condition, humanizing messages in the illegal condition decreased support for policy harm, the effect is quite small. Overall, as in study 1, support for policy harm is primarily a function of pretreatment antipathy toward immigrants, the effect of which is dramatically larger than the experimental conditions. There is no evidence of a moderating relationship between antipathy and the treatments.

Thus, despite the demonstrated ability of humanizing messages to increase empathy, we find no evidence that these messages moved policy attitudes in any substantively significant way. To be clear, this set of findings does not mean that empathy bears no relationship to policy attitudes. Across both studies, posttreatment empathic concern is indeed correlated with lower levels of posttreatment support for policies that harm immigrant out-groups.[15] Nonetheless, such correlation is not evidence of the ability of humanizing messages to cause attitude change. As we have shown, respondents with more immigrant-friendly pretreatment attitudes had an easier time generating empathy when exposed to humanizing messages, and that dynamic helps to explain some of the correlation. But we find precious little evidence that media messages themselves were powerful enough to change the political attitudes of the participants in our study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Together, our studies highlight one reason why using media to "change hearts and minds" in the service of prejudice reduction is so often unsuccessful: dissonance. While video and images were successful in humanizing, these media messages primarily generated empathy among those who were already most open to the out-group at the start, regardless of their political identification or ideological commitments. Thus, the results highlight what appears to be a classic case of "preaching to the choir." For the choir, generating empathic concern made little difference in their political attitudes because they were inclined to support policies friendly to the out-group even in the absence of the treatment. For the group that began with more wariness toward the out-group, however, the treatment had more trouble generating empathy because it simultaneously generated feelings of dissonance—that is, feelings of unease and discomfort. The net result of the different responses of these two groups is, understandably, no general treatment effects on posttreatment attitudes or policy preferences. We suggest this process likely plays a role in many of the null results found by others conducting media experiments.

Of course, the possibility remains that these results are not reliable because of features of our research methodology. For example, one might reasonably ask whether the treatments in these experiments were simply too weak to induce the degree of empathy required among those with high levels of out-group antipathy. Our media messages in study 1 comprised less than two minutes of video. Perhaps a full-length documentary would do better. The treatment messages in

14. As shown in app. sec. G.4, these results hold when we use a dichotomous, rather than continuous, version of the antipathy variable and when controls for gender, age, and party identification are included.

15. See app. sec. H.7 for graphical representations of these relationships.

study 2 included only still images, an even less intense treatment. While we cannot be sure whether we would obtain different results from "more powerful" treatments, our results suggest that this is unlikely. The humanizing messages in both studies did have both substantively large and statistically significant effects on humanization across both low and high antipathy groups. Moreover, the levels of empathy generated among the low antipathy group were also substantively large, as was the level of dissonance generated among the high antipathy groups. In other words, the treatments did generate significant affect, as our theory predicts. While we could have certainly generated more affect, it seems unlikely that the null results on policy change are because of a lack of feeling.

Our treatments generated this degree of affect while still holding on to realism, which also raises their generalizability. The treatment in study 1 was drawn from a documentary actually broadcast in 2006 for the specific purpose of prejudice reduction. It is similar in content and approach to media messages used to humanize out-groups in communities around the world. The same can be said of the images treatment in study 2. We delivered both treatments in the context in which they are often viewed in real life: online, wherever one decided to open our survey invitation.

To be sure, humanizing media might be an effective way to reach goals not studied in our article. Such messages might, for example, be a way to rally the "choir," even if they do not appear to be an effective way to expand it. However, these goals are not our focus here; we do not have any measure of mobilization among those already committed to humanistic treatment of an out-group. Rather, we focus on the effects of such media on an important goal routinely expressed by those who create and disseminate it for reasons of prejudice reduction: persuasion, or attitude change among those most negative toward the out-group. For this group, our results suggest that media messages that do not directly deal with the dissonance they create are not likely to be very effective.

We expect that media messages are likely to continue be an important part of efforts to humanize out-groups in communities all around the world, where the number of citizens who attend intergroup conflict resolution programs or who have meaningful face-to-face encounters with out-groups on the subject of policies affecting the out-group is small. If dissonance is indeed a correct diagnosis, then finding ways to mitigate or address it in media messages offers the promise of more persuasive messages in the future. Here, previous work on perspective taking is especially valuable and suggests an important possibility for future research. Could the combination of media messages and perspective-taking instructions mitigate dissonance in ways that media messages alone do not? Is there something about perspective taking in particular that makes the exploration of new information less dissonance fraught for individuals hostile to out-groups? Similarly, in-person canvassing efforts focused on perspective taking often involve considerable effort to help people see the connections between the experiences of out-groups and policy views. Perhaps media messages would be more powerful if they drew those connections more directly and explicitly for viewers. Although the results of perspective-taking studies have been mixed, the combination of powerful media messages and perspective-taking instructions needs additional investigation. In this sense, recent research that moves this direction is especially valuable (Sirin et al. 2016).

Our work calls special attention to the ways humanizing messages delivered via media may be received by audience members with differing predispositions about the out-group and how dissonance plays a central role in the response. These results lead us to ask how humanizing messages about out-groups might not only reach those already committed to the choir but also those who linger in the foyer or even on the steps outside the church. These are the audiences to whom humanization messages are often directed, but they are also the ones most predisposed to resist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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