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An investigation into the effects of pro-immigrant and Muslim attitudes on sympathetic reactions towards Syrian immigrants during the Syrian Civil War

Un'indagine sugli effetti degli atteggiamenti pro-immigrati e nei riguardi dei Musulmani sulle reazioni simpatetiche verso gli immigrati siriani durante la guerra civile

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ABSTRACT

Syria has been the scene of a brutal civil war since 2011 and there has been increased media attention on the fate of Syrian refugees who seek to immigrate to more peaceful countries. Sympathy, as a desire to help others in need, could be a powerful motivation to accept and support Syrian immigrants. However, not all individuals will feel sympathy towards these immigrants. Consistent with recent research on attitudes and desires, we hypothesized that positive attitudes towards (1) immigrants and (2) Muslims would predict sympathetic reactions towards a specific Syrian Immigrant family residing in the United States. We found significant main effects for both types of attitude, controlling for personal distress (i.e., a self-focused force that can co-occur with sympathy),political orientation, participants' immigrant status, and demographic variables. A bias against immigrants, Muslims, or both can explain why individuals can react to the plight of Syrian immigrants without sympathy

Keywords: immigration; sympathy; Syria.

RIASSUNTO

La Siria è teatro di una brutale guerra civile dal 2011, con un conseguente incremento dell'attenzione da parte dei media sul destino dei rifugiati siriani che cercano di immigrare in paesi più pacifici. La "*sympathy*", intesa come desiderio di aiutare coloro che si trovano in stato di bisogno, potrebbe rappresentare una forte motivazione per accettare e sostenere gli immigrati Siriani. Tuttavia, non tutti gli individui provano il sentimento di "*sympathy*" verso tali immigrati. Coerentemente con le recenti ricerche sugli atteggiamenti e i bisogni, abbiamo ipotizzato che atteggiamenti positivi nei confronti di (1) immigrati e (2) Musulmani potessero predire reazioni simpatetiche nei confronti di una specifica famiglia di immigrati siriani residente negli Stati Uniti. Abbiamo riscontrato significativi effetti principali per entrambi i tipi di atteggiamento, controllando per il *distress* individuale (i.e., una forza autocentrata che può manifestarsi assieme alla "*sympathy*"), l'orientamento politico, lo status di immigrante dei partecipanti e variabili demografiche. Il pregiudizio verso gli immigrati, i Musulmani, o entrambi, può spiegare perché gli individui possono reagire con assenza di "*sympathy*" alla condizione degli immigrati siriani.

Parole chiave: immigrazione; sympathy; Siria.

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RdP

Introduction

Syria, and its neighboring countries, has been the scene of a brutal civil war since March 2011. Although the United Nations has stopped assessing the number of dead in Syria—in part due to safety concerns—the U.N. Special Envoy to Syria estimated that 400,000 people had been killed as of March 2016 (Hudson, 2016). The closing months of 2015 saw an increased wave of rebel and government-led offensives that left many dead (Syria Conflict, 2015), as well as increased attention from the international media on the conflict (Gilsinan, 2015; Yourish, Lai, & Watkins, 2015). This media attention highlighted important problems, such as the plight of Syrians—and others directly affected by the war—who were caught in the crossfire, as well as what individuals, either acting on their own or in powerful roles in governments and nonprofit organizations, could do to help them. These affected individuals naturally include refugees who seek to immigrate to other countries. Outsiders who observe the plight of these refugees can be motivated by *sympathy*, the "heightened awareness of another's plight as something to be alleviated" (Wispé, 1986, p. 314), to accept and support immigrants from war-affected countries.

Sympathy is a powerful altruistic motivation (see Batson, 2011, for an extensive review) that is also predictive of helping outgroup members (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones, Imhoff, Mitchener, Bednar, Klein, & Highberger, 1997; Hein, Silani, Preuschoff, Batson, & Singer, 2010). However, it is unlikely that everyone who observes people in need will feel sympathy towards them. There has been little research on predictors of sympathy—and to our knowledge none with Syrian immigrants—but to an extent it is possible to observe sympathy towards Syrian immigrants, or the lack thereof, in the actions of American politicians and ordinary American citizens. In 2015, the United States Congress voted against accepting immigrants from Syria (Marcos, 2015); in 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump proposed to prohibit immigration from Syria and neighboring countries (Ainsley, 2017). Among ordinary American citizens there is moderate support for Syrian immigration, although it remains very unpopular among segments of the population (Quinnipiac, 2017). These behaviors likely do not speak to a wave of sympathy towards Syrian immigrants.

Immigrants from Syria and other neighboring countries have two distinct features that can inhibit others' sympathetic reactions: they are immigrants and are (predominantly) Muslim. Perceivers who generally dislike immigrants, Muslims, or both would thus be less likely to view the case of a Syrian immigrant with sympathy. Acceptance and support of immigrants, as well as other forms of help, would thus be much less likely. Consequentially, we expect that pro-immigrant and pro-Muslim attitudes will be predictive of sympathy towards these immigrants.

We investigated sympathy through the framework of Daniel Batson's Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis (e.g., Batson, 2011, see also Batson & Shaw, 1991, for a brief review). Batson referred to sympathy as empathic concern; both constructs reflect a concern for others who are in need. Moreover, previous researchers (Baldner & McGinley, 2016; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987) noted that these terms can be used synonymously; referring to this construct as empathic concern could create confusion between the constructs of sympathy and empathy (e.g., the feeling and understanding of others' general emotions; Decety & Jackson, 2004). Batson also argued that there was a contrary force to sympathy, which he termed *personal distress*. If sympathy is an other-focused desire to help others in need, then personal distress is a desire to help the self in response to others in need (e.g., I might turn away from a homeless person asking for money if it makes me feel uncomfortable). To an extent, sympathy and personal distress can co-occur in an individual when he or she observes another in need (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997), and both reflect a strong emotional reaction to a person in need.

An important consequence of Batson's research (Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995; Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007; see also Batson, 2011, Appendices A-G) is that sympathy can reflect a *desire* for helping others in need. This desire is reflected in helping others, even at a cost to the helper. Desires (i.e., the wanting of something) are at least partially distinct from positive attitudes (i.e., the liking of something) (Berridge, 2004; Berridge & Robinson, 2003). Nonetheless, according to recent research by Kruglanski and colleagues (Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Milyavsky,

Babush, Baldner, & Pierro, 2015; Kruglanski, Baldner, Chernikova, Lo Destro, & Pierro, in press), positive attitudes can be become desires (e.g., we want the things that we like), and consequentially in at least some cases it is possible to predict desires from relevant positive attitudes.

In our case, we expect that sympathy towards Syrian immigrants can be predicted by positive attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims. Of course, there are other potential explanations for individuals' sympathetic reactions towards Syrian immigrants. For instance, political liberals (i.e., proponents of the left-wing) may be more sympathetic than political conservatives (i.e., proponents of the right-wing). Individuals who are themselves immigrants, or who are the children of immigrants, may also be more sympathetic. Even though sympathy and personal distress can co-occur, there remains the possibility that attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims would have a stronger effect on sympathy when personal distress is low. In this case, decreased self-focused reactions towards Syrian immigrants could make sympathetic reactions more likely. Although we do not know of any similar previous research, we will also assess this exploratory hypothesis.

In the following study, we will test the effects of attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims on the sympathetic reaction towards a specific Syrian immigrant family residing in the United States, also taking into account potential interactions with personal distress. We will also assess, and if necessary control for, the effects of political orientation, immigrant status (self and parents), and demographic variables. This research was conducted in late 2015, during a time of increased conflict in Syria and of increased media attention.

Method

Participants. 183 participants (58.5% women, M_{age}=34.2, SD_{age}=11.3) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk; all participants resided in the United States at the time of their participation. 11 participants identified themselves as immigrants (Mean time in the U.S.=15.7 years, SD=7.5 years). 18 participants identified themselves as the children of immigrants. 130 participants (71%) had completed at least some university and the remained were high school graduates. 71.6% of participants identified as White; 8.2% as Black; 8.2% as Asian; 6.6% as Latino; and 5.5% as "Other" or as some combination of these ethnic groups. Data was collected in late November 2015.

Measures

Sympathy/Personal Distress. Our assessment of sympathy and personal distress was based on the Katie Banks vignette, originally developed by Coke, Batson, and McDavis (1978). In the original vignette, participants are presented with a short story about a university student who has lost her parents in a car accident and is seeking funds to take care of her younger siblings. In our research, we presented participants with a vignette about a Syrian immigrant family in the United States who were seeking financial donations after a car accident (for a similar vignette, see Baldner, Pierro, & Kruglanski, 2018, Study 2). After reading the vignette, participants indicated the extent to which they felt the following adjectives towards the Syrian family: sympathetic, warm, compassionate, softhearted, tender, moved, alarmed, worried, uneasy, sad, low-spirited, and heavy-hearted. The first six items constituted the measure of sympathy, and the last six constituted the measure of personal distress. Batson used this vignette in an experimental design and the above items are used as a manipulation check. However, other research (e.g., Negd, Mallan, & Lipp, 2011) has also used these items, after the presentation of a vignette, as a self-report measure. Internal reliability was adequate for both sympathy (α=.96) and personal distress (α=.82).

Attitudes towards Immigrants. Participants responded to three items to assess their attitudes towards immigrants (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997) These items were: "how friendly or hostile are you towards immigrants?"; "how warm or cold are you towards immigrants?"; "how unfavorable or favorable are you towards immigrants?" Ratings were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*hostile, cold, unfavorable*) to 5 (*friendly, warm, favorable*). Items were coded such that higher scores represented more favorable attitudes towards immigrants. Internal reliability was adequate (α=.93).

Attitudes towards Muslims. Participants responded to four items to assess their attitudes towards Muslims (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007). These items were: "Are there so many Muslims here that you sometimes feel like a stranger in your own land?"; "Should Muslim migration to the United States be forbidden?"; "Do you mistrust the beliefs of Muslim people?"; "Muslim culture fits even in our Western World." Ratings were recorded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all agree*) to 5 (*Fully and completely agree*). Items were coded such that higher scores represented more favorable attitudes towards immigrants. Internal reliability was adequate (α=.89).

Political Orientation. Participants responded to a single item (i.e., "How would you describe your political views?") to assess their political orientation. They responded on a 7-point Likert scale from one (*"Very liberal"*) to seven (*"Very conservative"*). This item was previously used by Koleva and colleagues (Koleva, Graham, Iyet, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). The average score in this sample was 3.3, SD =1.6 (i.e., slightly liberal).

Immigrant Status and Other Demographic Variables. After participants completed the above measures, we also asked them to indicate their immigrant status (1=Immigrant; 0=U.S. Native); we asked all participants who indicated that they were immigrants to then indicate the number of years that they have lived in the United States. We also asked all participants to indicate their parents' immigrant status (2=Both parents are immigrants; 1=One parent is an immigrant; 0=Neither parent are immigrants), their gender (1=Male; 0=Female), age, education level, and ethnicity.

Results

Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics are reported on Table 1. Sympathy was strongly and positively correlated with both attitudes towards immigrants (r=.57; p<.001) and Muslims (r=.52; p<.001). However, sympathy and personal distress were also strongly intercorrelated (r=.63; p<.001); consistent with past research (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997), sympathy and personal distress can co-occur, as both represent strong emotional reactions to others in need. Political orientation was significantly correlated with both sympathy (r= -.33; p<.001), attitudes towards immigrants (r= -.41; p<.001), and attitudes towards Muslims (r= -.52; p<.001), such that liberals had more sympathy towards the Syrian immigrant family, and had more positive attitudes towards both immigrants and Muslims.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	*M(SD)*
1. Gender	-									-
2. Age	-.08	-								34.2 (11.3)
3. Imm. Status (self)	-.02	.04	-							-
4. Imm. Status (parents)	.02	-.19**	.33***	-						-
5. Political Orientation	.10	.03	-.03	-.15*	-					3.30 (1.65)
6. Muslim Attitudes	-.13	-.17*	.04	.09	-.52***	(.89)				3.06(.88)
7. Imm. Attitudes	-.01	-.16*	.13	.17*	-.41***	.69***	(.93)			4.18 (1.22)
8. Personal Distress	-.10	-.06	.16*	.12	-.09	.12	.21*	(.82)		3.68 (1.35)
9. Sympathy	-.12	-.04	.14	.15*	-.33***	.52***	.57***	.63***	(.96)	4.83 (1.62)

Note: ***p≤ .001, **p≤ .01, *p≤ .05. In parenthesis (Cronbach's alpha), N = 183

Finally, sympathy was also more weakly correlated or marginally correlated with immigrant self status (r=.14, p=.053) and immigrant parent status (r=.15; p<.038). Neither gender nor age was even marginally correlated with sympathy.

We further tested our hypothesis through linear regression; results are reported on Table 2. Given our hypotheses and correlational results, we regressed sympathy on attitudes towards immigrants, attitudes towards Muslims, personal distress, and the two-way interactions between personal distress with both types of attitudes. Component terms of the interaction variables were centered prior to analysis. Political orientation and immigrant status (self and parent) were entered as control variables. The analysis was conducted with the SPSS PROCESS macro Model 2 (Hayes, 2013).

As expected, there were significant main effects of attitudes towards immigrants (b=.11, SE=.02, t=4.01, p<.001) and attitudes towards Muslims (b=.42, SE=.12, t=3.34, p=.001).

Table 2. Sympathy regressed on Attitudes towards Muslims and Attitudes towards Immigrants

	b	SE	P
Immigrant status (self)	.03	.33	.91
Immigrants status(parents)	.03	.12	.81
Political orientation	-.05	.05	.31
Muslim attitudes	.42	.12	.001
Immigrant attitudes	.11	.02	.001
Personal Distress	.64	.05	<.001
Imm. Att. x PD	-.0005	.01	.97
Muslim Att. x PD	-.10	.08	.20

Results for attitudes towards immigrants and towards Muslims are displayed on Figures 1 and 2, respectively. There was an additional main effect of personal distress (b=.64, SE=.05, t=11.41, p<.001). Neither two-way interaction was significant (Attitudes towards Muslims x personal distress: b= -.10, SE=.08, t= -1.25, p=.20; Attitudes towards immigrants x personal distress: b= -.0005, SE=.01, t= -.02, p=.97); in each case, personal distress had a strong, positive effect on sympathy regardless of the positivity or negativity of attitudes. Neither political orientation nor immigrant status (self and parent) had a significant effect (p>.31). We removed non-significant control variables and interaction models and re-ran the analysis; personal distress was left in the regression equation due to its theoretical association with sympathy. Our results were unchanged.

Fig 1. Partial regression plot; Sympathy towards Syrian immigrants regressed on Attitudes towards Immigrants
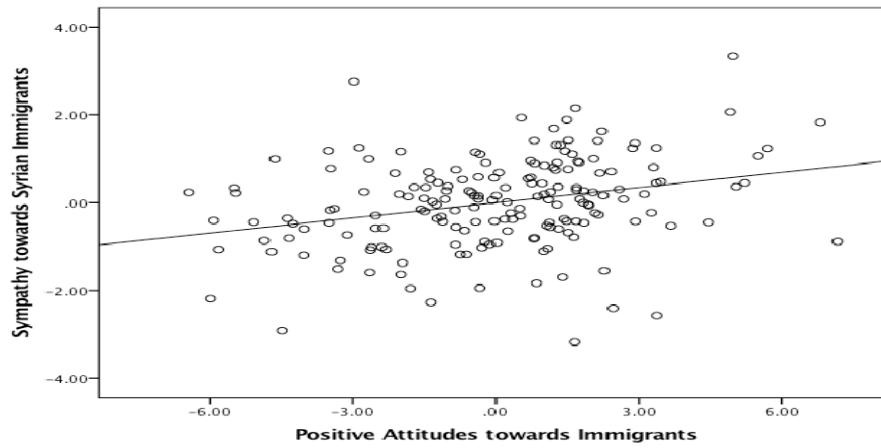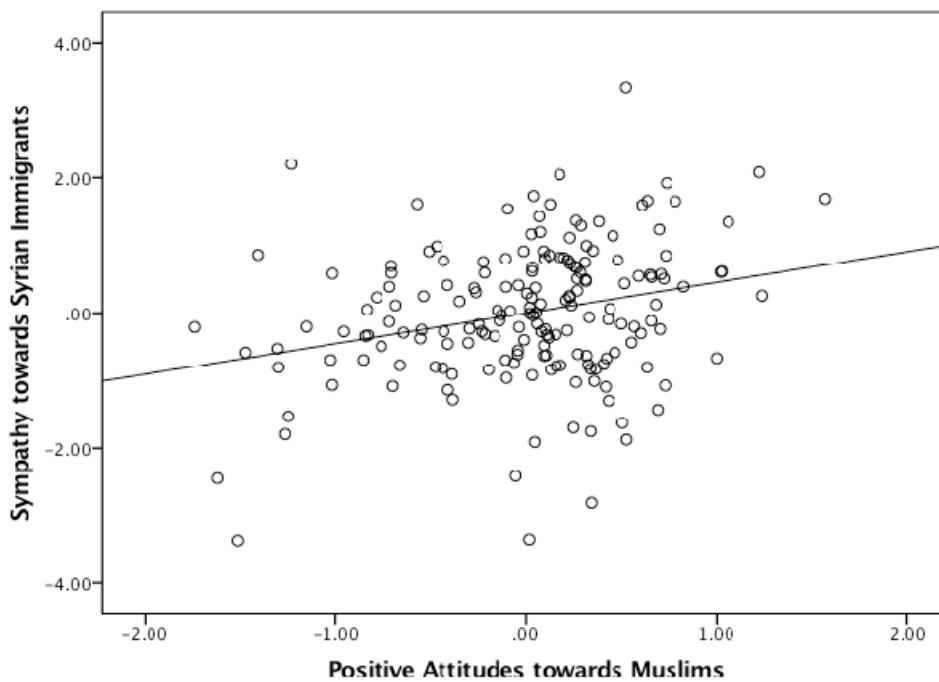

Fig 2. Partial regression plot; Sympathy towards Syrian immigrants regressed on Attitudes towards Muslims

Discussion and Conclusion

Immigrants from Syria, and neighboring countries, have faced extreme hardship since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. They are relatively powerless and need support and acceptance from host nations. Although sympathy can be a powerful altruistic force, naturally not everyone will be sympathetic to the cause of Syrian immigrants. We expected that individuals with more (1) positive attitudes towards immigrants and (2) more positive attitudes towards Muslims would have

stronger sympathetic reactions towards a Syrian immigrant family. We hypothesized that both types of attitudes would be necessary, as Syrian immigrants are (naturally) immigrants and (typically) Muslim. Our hypothesis was supported; both types of attitudes had significant main effects on sympathy, controlling for personal distress, political orientation, and immigrant status—both of our participants themselves, and of their own parents. Even though liberals and immigrants generally had stronger sympathetic reactions, conservatives and natives can also react with sympathy—if they have favorable attitudes to immigrants and to Muslims.

Theoretically, individuals who have more favorable attitudes towards immigrants and to Muslims are more open to the plight of Syrian immigrants; this openness allows them to be sympathetic towards them. On the other hand, individuals who dislike immigrants and Muslims are closed and cut off from the experience of sympathy. Moreover, this relationship is consistent with the relationship between attitudes and desires that was proposed by Kruglanski and colleagues (2015; in press). According to this research, attitudes (e.g., attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims) precede, but more importantly can become, desires (e.g., sympathy, the desire to help others in need).

On the other hand, our exploratory hypothesis—that both types of attitudes would have stronger effects when personal distress was reduced—was not supported. Instead, personal distress had a positive main effect on sympathy that was not moderated by either attitude. Personal distress is a contrary force to sympathy, in that the former is self-focused whereas the latter is other-focused; however, they both represent strong emotional reactions to observing others in need and can co-occur (e.g., if I see someone in need I may feel both sympathy and personal distress). Consistent with past research, we found that individuals who reacted with personal distress were also more likely to react with sympathy; there could be an underlying factor (e.g., emotional reactions to others in need) that can result in two contrary outcomes.

We can offer both a specific and a general conclusion based in our results. The specific conclusion pertains to the plight of Syrian immigrants. It may seem like a good strategy to appeal to individuals' sympathy in order to improve the situation of Syrian immigrants. Our results suggest that this could be a lost cause, and appeals to sympathy would be ineffective among individuals that dislike immigrants, Muslims, or both. This could further explain the reluctance of many American politicians to support Syrian immigration into the United States. Politicians, and voters, who dislike immigrants and Muslims are less likely to have sympathy towards Syrian immigrants; a potential consequence of this is the lack of political support.

Moreover, this is indicative of a more general conclusion. Although sympathy can motivate helping behavior towards others in need, not everyone will feel sympathy for these people. Those who are predisposed to dislike these people in need—whoever they are—are less likely to feel sympathy towards them. Although our results specifically speak to the case of Syrian immigrants, if our results are generally correct then they should apply to any group of people in need. This conclusion implies a limit to the effects of sympathy, in that individuals that inhibit their sympathy would naturally not act in a sympathetic way.

This research had limitations that can be addressed in future research. As with all studies, our findings require further replication. Most importantly, as our data was correlational it is not possible to statistically determine that attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims precede sympathy. It is also possible that sympathy preceded the attitudes. Although we expect that these attitudes and sympathy co-exist in a complex relationship (i.e., these attitudes lead to sympathy which reinforces these attitudes), our model was based on the latest research on the relationship between attitudes and desires (Kruglanski et al., 2015; in press). As our data was collected in late 2015, future research can re-assess this model to ascertain if our results hold over time. Although we controlled for immigrant status, relatively few of our participants were immigrants themselves, or were the children of immigrants. Moreover, we did not assess our participants' religious affiliation. Future research can seek to actively recruit immigrants and Muslims, or ideally, Muslim immigrants. It would strengthen our conclusions if we replicated our results in a sample that included a larger proportion of participants from these groups. Additionally, we recruited participants from a single culture, the

United States; however, these results likely hold in other cultures, or at least those in which either general immigration or Muslim immigration is a popular issue. For instance, immigration is a critical issue in Italy (e.g., Baldner & Pierro, Forthcoming), and this could provide a new context for replication. Despite these limitations, we have provided evidence that sympathy towards Syrian immigrants is not available to all, but that attitudes towards immigrants and Muslims when it is present.

Author Contributions
C.B. designed and executed the study and wrote the paper. C.B. and D.D. collaborated with the design and writing of the study. C.B. analyzed the data and wrote part of the results. C.B. and DD collaborated with the recruitment of participants and with data scoring. C.B. and D.D. collaborated in the writing and editing of the final manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent
Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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