RESEARCH ARTICLE

Television Dramas and Support for Controversial Public Policies: Effects and Mechanisms

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In this experiment, we examine effects of television dramas on support for controversial public policies (gay marriage and the death penalty) and explore mechanisms that may explain such effects. The dramas influenced support for death penalty but not gay marriage. As predicted, exposure to the relevant drama eliminated the relationship between prior ideology (conceptualized as a continuous variable) and death penalty support. Moreover, the valence of the relationship between prior (increasingly liberal) ideology and salience of a relevant value (perceived importance of a safe and crime-free society) went from negative in the comparison condition to positive after exposure to the relevant drama. These and other results suggest that a television narrative can influence policy support by reframing the dramatic situation to reduce the effect of prior ideology and values and by minimizing processing of the story as intentionally persuasive discourse.

Fictional entertainment narratives communicated through mass media, such as novels, television melodramas, and films, can influence readers' and viewers' beliefs about the social world (see Green, Strange, & Brock, 2002, for reviews). Entertainment narratives (usually but not always in the form of television serial dramas) have also been used, sometimes in dramatically effective ways, to influence attitudes and behaviors about topics ranging from safe sex to adult education (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Despite these persuasive effects, narrative entertainment messages have only recently been studied with respect to understanding the influence mechanisms processes involved (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000). Virtually no studies have examined how television dramas might affect viewer support for controversial policy positions. This lack is particularly surprising given the enormous numbers of people viewing such dramas and the fact that controversial issues are sometimes woven into the plot and characterizations portrayed on such dramas (see Dixon, Hill, Borland, & Paxton,

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2001; Iguartua & Paez, 1997; Strange & Leung, 1999, for studies that explore narrative impact from somewhat different substantive and theoretical perspectives based on films or written excerpts, and Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2004, for cross-sectional evidence suggesting associations between crime drama viewing and support for the death penalty).

In this study, we test how such television dramas can impact opinions regarding controversial public policy issues—in this case, support for the death penalty and gay marriage/legal rights. We also explore psychological mechanisms for such effects.

Processing of the potentially persuasive content of entertainment narrative
Typically, audience goals in processing a fictional narrative such as a television drama are hedonic; audience members seek distraction, vicarious excitement, perhaps even illumination (Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). To the extent to which these goals are met, audience members may be absorbed in the narrative with an intensity far exceeding that achieved by the speech maker or writer of an op-ed piece. Empirical studies evidence the power of narrative to engage attention, processing, and memory, the ease and near automaticity of processing narrative information, and the complexity and richness of memories for narrative (Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979; Mandler, 1984; see Green et al., 2002).

According to Slater (1997) and Green, Garst, and Brock (2004), the ability of narrative to absorb attention and engage the recipient should have several implications for processing potentially persuasive content in a narrative. If the narrative succeeds in engaging the reader or viewer, traditional persuasion processing and cognitive elaboration mechanisms as outlined in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) should be disrupted. Counterarguing should be almost eliminated as critical scrutiny of a message is incompatible with the suspension of disbelief associated with processing a narrative if the engagement occurs (Green et al., 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Therefore, we expect, given the above discussion of the compelling nature of narrative, its presumed ability to suppress counterarguing, and evidence regarding entertainment education programs and their effects on attitudes and behavior (Singhal & Rogers, 1999), that we will find a main effect for exposure to a narrative with potentially persuasive content:

> H1: Viewers of a television drama will be more likely to support policies implicitly advocated by the drama compared to viewers of a control drama.

Counterarguing would normally be expected in response to a message about a controversial public policy issue as a function of the extent that the viewer is opposed to or ambivalent about the position supported by the message. Ideology is not a perfect predictor of support or opposition to social policies such as the death penalty or gay marriage, but it is likely that the more liberal a respondent is, the more likely they are to oppose the former and support the latter. The opposite pattern should be expected as conservativeness increases. When we argue that counterarguing

will be suppressed when a controversial position is supported by a dramatic narrative, then we are implicitly proposing a more general phenomenon that the effect of ideology on public policy support may be suppressed immediately following exposure to the relevant drama.

It is important to note that we conceptualize ideology as a continuous variable rather than as a dichotomous, liberal/conservative contrast. The difference (in both a substantive and an operational sense) between someone who is very conservative and one who is slightly conservative is likely to be larger than the difference between a person who is slightly conservative and one who is slightly liberal. For example, we would expect individuals at the extreme conservative end of an ideology scale to most strongly favor the death penalty and oppose gay marriage/legal rights and for such support or opposition to gradually diminish as conservativeness decreases and liberalism increases. To underscore the conceptualization of ideology as a continuum rather than as a liberal versus conservative dichotomy, when we refer to ideology as operationalized and analyzed in this study, we use the term *degree of liberalism/conservatism*; when we refer to the broader construct, we use the more familiar term *ideology*.

Given the tendency of narrative to suppress ideological responses to a controversial issue proposed above, we predict an interaction pattern, in which amount of liberalness (distance from extreme conservatism) becomes less predictive of resistance to a conservative public policy after exposure to a narrative supportive of that policy and amount of conservativeness becomes less predictive of resistance to liberal policies after exposure to a narrative supportive of such policies:

> H2: The effects of degree of liberalism/conservatism on public policy support will be weaker after exposure to a television drama with content consistent with that policy than after exposure to a control drama.

Suppression of counterarguing, alone, provides only a partial or negative explanation. It does not explain in a more active sense how narratives might influence attitudes or support for policy positions. Moreover, support for H2, if found, would be consistent with the argument that counterarguing is suppressed but would not demonstrate that such a mechanism is responsible for effects. Other effects might be responsible, in combination or independently from effects on counterarguing.

Three possible mechanisms for effects of narrative persuasion
Three different (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) paths for narrative effects on beliefs may be posited. One, proposed by Slater (1997) and tested in part by Green and Brock (2000), is that variables describing the degree of immersion in a narrative (e.g., absorption in the story or identification with protagonists) may mediate or moderate potentially persuasive effects of narrative. A second would be via cognitive elaboration—perhaps thoughts that affirm the position or feelings of protagonists or thoughts consistent with the implicit persuasive message, especially if counterarguing or negative cognitive responses are suppressed by an effective narrative. A third, especially relevant in the case of messages that address controversial public policy

issues, involves priming of underlying values associated with both the narrative and the public policy.

Engagement with narrative as a mediator of persuasive effect
The determinants of engagement or involvement with a narrative entertainment message are likely to depend on the extent to which a recipient finds the narrative or characters engrossing. Green and Brock (2000) called this kind of absorption in narrative *transportation* and found that it did predict effects of a fictional narrative on beliefs. More recently, Wilson and Busselle (2004) have found some evidence suggesting that transportation is related to the *perceived realism* of a narrative, suggesting that the role of perceived realism is also worthy of investigation as an indicator of engagement with a narrative.

In addition, research on social learning, and on entertainment education behavioral interventions using narrative entertainment messages, emphasizes that perceived similarity between message recipients and key characters portrayed in the message can be crucial if a message is to influence attitudes or behaviors (Bandura, 2002; Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Slater & Rouner, 2002). This perceived similarity, and associated positive feelings about characters portrayed, is typically referred to as *identification*. Identification has also been found to predict effectiveness of celebrity spokespersons in persuasive messages (Brown & Basil, 1995). Other work in the context of narrative persuasion has suggested that identification can be separated into two variables, *perceived similarity* and *empathy*, which can have distinctive roles in persuasion processes (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Empathy differs from perceived similarity in that it describes sharing the emotions and experiences of a character in a narrative without necessarily perceiving oneself to be similar to that character; as such, it is also arguably more affective than similarity, which may be primarily cognitive. It should be noted that identification processes are believed to be crucial in entertainment education efforts to use narrative to influence behavior via social cognitive means (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). However, social cognitive mechanisms such as observational learning and vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 2002) are much less likely to be relevant in the effect of a single drama on policy support than in the effect of exposure to multiple dramas, such as serial dramas where complex characters are developed and engage in continuous plotlines across many episodes, on enacting social behaviors.

The ways in which variables such as transportation and identification may operate in the context of a television drama relevant to a controversial public policy issue, then, are uncertain. One complicating factor, as we note above, is prior ideological stance. Ideology may, if inconsistent with the policy position implicitly supported by the narrative, lead to reduced transportation, identification, and perceived reality. After all, if a story portrays situations and outcomes that a viewer finds ideologically problematic, the viewer may tend to become less engaged with the characters and the story line. Conversely, of course, the more ideologically sympathetic the viewer finds the narrative, the greater this engagement is likely to be. If this is the case and if the other

necessary criteria for mediation are met (i.e., degree of liberalism/conservatism directly predicts policy stance, the mediating variables also predict policy stance, and inclusion of mediators weakens the ideology/policy stance relation [Baron & Kenny, 1986]), then:

> H3: The effect of degree of liberalism/conservatism on policy support immediately after viewing a relevant television drama should be partially mediated by (a) transportation, (b) identification, and (c) perceived reality.

It should be emphasized that if such mediating relationships are strong enough, they should wipe out the narrative effects on beliefs predicted in H1 and H2, that is, if a viewer responds sympathetically to a story line and characters only insofar as he or she finds them ideologically agreeable, all a narrative could do is reinforce but not change beliefs. Our prediction, then, is that there will be some tendency in this direction that will be statistically detectable—but that it would not be strong enough to eliminate effects of narrative on beliefs.

Consistency of cognitive responses as a mediator

There is, as noted above, good theoretical and empirical reason to believe that effective narrative largely precludes counterarguing in response to implicit persuasive information within that narrative. If H2—dramas reducing the influence of prior ideology—is supported, it certainly suggests (without conclusively demonstrating) that counterarguing based on ideology has been suppressed. However, counterarguing refers only to cognitive elaboration that is inconsistent with an advocated persuasive position. It is possible that the overall valence of elaboration about characters, story, or themes that is consistent with the implicit persuasive position may prove to mediate effects of ideology, given the impact of cognitive elaboration on attitude change in nonnarrative persuasive contexts (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), if all conditions for mediation are met (degree of liberalism/conservatism predicting cognitive responses and policy stance, cognitive response consistency predicting policy stance, and reducing the relation between degree of liberalism/conservatism and policy stance [Baron & Kenny, 1986]):

> H4: Net consistency of cognitive responses with the persuasive theme or about story and characters will partially mediate effects of degree of liberalism/conservatism on policy support.

Framing as a mechanism in narrative persuasive effects

Communication researchers have become increasingly interested in how various media experiences (notably hard news) may be framed in such a way as to increase salience and influence of various prior beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Strange and Leung (1999) found that framing a written narrative about a high school dropout in terms of situational versus dispositional causes influenced the priority given to K-12 education as a public policy relative to health care, and this was linked to increased willingness to attribute dropout problems to social causes rather than individual failure.

However, it is probable among a group of college students that the relative importance of health care versus K-12 education was neither very controversial nor closely linked to prior ideological stance. To influence more controversial and ideological positions, more may be required than to make alternative explanations salient. One approach may be to make specific sets of underlying values more salient. By "more salient," we mean here the perceived relative importance of a given value (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987). Dramatic narratives tell stories that illustrate individual, group, and institutional choices in situations of conflict. To the extent that such choices reflect underlying values, these narratives implicitly are likely to embrace some values and ignore others. In so doing, they presumably activate schemata of values, beliefs, and attitudes, which are hierarchically associated with those perspectives (e.g., Maio & Olson, 1995; Vaske & Donnelly, 1999).

If a drama has impact on salience or perceived relative importance of values consonant with the drama, one possibility is that this impact on values mediates or partially mediates the impact of a television program on policy support. That possibility would be supported if there is a main effect for program exposure on consonant values, if values directly predict policy support, and if inclusion of values in the model reduces the effect of exposure to the drama on policy support:

> H5: Relevant values, at least in part, mediate the effect of television dramas on public policy support.

In H2, we proposed that a persuasive television drama would weaken the effects of prior ideology on public policy support because counterarguing processes were undermined. Another way a television drama could influence public policy support is by weakening the relationship between ideology and relevant values. The relative importance of certain sets of values tends to reflect political and social ideologies (Rokeach, 1973). In H5, we proposed that a drama will make the values inherent in the dramatic situation and conflicts more salient and therefore at least briefly more relatively important in the minds of viewers, independent of prior ideology. This should appear as a weaker relationship between ideology (i.e., degree of liberalism/conservatism) and values relevant to the drama seen by the viewer. Therefore, we test the following interaction:

> H6: Exposure to a television drama will moderate the relationship of degree of liberalism/conservatism with relevant core values so that prior ideology will be less predictive of core values consonant with the implicit persuasive message of the drama.

If a drama weakens ideology-value relationships, it may explain in part the reduced relationship between degree of liberalism/conservatism and policy support as a result of exposure to television dramas predicted in H2. At least temporarily, viewers may give greater weight to values that typically are more secondary given their ideological perspectives, and this shift may weaken the hold that ideology has on support for relevant public policies. Unlike H5, however, this hypothesis does not necessarily assume that message impact on value salience will directly mediate effects on policy support.

Method

Design and procedure

Overview

Given our interest in ideological influences and potential framing effects, we selected one drama that focused on a matter of liberal concern (rights of gay partners) and one on a matter more often associated with conservative concerns (application of the death penalty). Each drama served as a control for the other, in a simple two-level experimental design. The outcome variables were support for gay marriage/partnership rights and the death penalty. Ideology (i.e., degree of liberalism/conservatism) was analyzed both as an exogenous and as a moderator variable; mediation of ideology by character identification, immersion in the story, perceived reality, and cognitive responses was also examined.

Stimuli

The two dramas, videotapes of broadcasted prime-time (approximately 8:00–11:00 p.m.) U.S. television shows, were edited to about 35 minutes by removing commercials and extraneous information. The first drama, a short feature from a Home Box Office series *If These Walls Could Talk II* (*Walls*) presents the story of Edith, an elderly woman who loses her partner of several decades, Abby. Having fallen off a ladder from an apparent stroke, Abby dies in the hospital, where medical professionals prohibit Edith from being with her as she dies. Abby's only living relatives, a nephew and his family, rummage through the house the two women shared, taking items they believe were Abby's and discussing plans to sell the house, which is in Abby's name. Although Edith protests that they shared the mortgage and it is her home, they force her out of the house.

The second drama, an episode of National Broadcasting Company's prime-time police and judicial system dramatic series *Law and Order* (*L&O*), features a brutal murder of a woman and the subsequent investigation and trial. The male suspect, caught in New York where the murder occurred, could be extradited to another state where he kidnapped the woman before murdering her. Conviction in that state would likely lead to capital punishment, but the prosecution keeps the case in New York.

Participants and procedure

Participants were 178 students in introductory communication classes at a large Western university; 47.2% were liberal arts majors, with the other majors scattered across the other campus colleges. With a mean age of 19.4 years, 61% were female and 39% were male. Hispanic ethnicity was reported by 8% of the sample; 3.4% were of Asian origin, 2.8% were African American, and 1.7% were Native American.

A few days following recruitment, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the stimulus conditions, a small group setting in which they were to view one of the dramas. First, they responded to questions about their political ideology and

demographics. Then, they viewed the videotape, after being asked to relax and watch as if they were at home on a quiet evening. Immediately following exposure to the program, they were asked to write down the thoughts that came to mind while viewing the story. Following this, they responded to the questions described below. Participants received extra credit for volunteering.

Measurement and data analysis

Measurement

Questions gauging degree of liberalism/conservatism included a self-report of political, social, and religious ideology ("In terms of my [political affiliation/stance on social issues/religion], I consider myself …" 1 = *conservative*, 11 = *liberal*), α = .87.

Identification questions about the principal characters in each drama gauged how much respondents identified with each protagonist ("How much do you identify with _____," "How much do you think you are similar to _____," 1 = *not at all*, 11 = *very much*, α = .85 for *Walls*, .80 for *L&O* [Slater & Rouner, 2002]). For *Walls*, the protagonist of interest was Edith, the bereaved woman who was about to lose her house; for *L&O*, the target protagonist was Mrs. Bream, the mother of the murdered woman, who most vividly expressed the emotional damage resulting from the murder and the desire for the murderer to face the severest possible consequences. Another set of items operationalized empathy with these protagonists ("I could feel the love that Mrs. Bream had for her murdered daughter," "I could feel the pain Mrs. Bream had at her daughter's death," 1 = *not at all*, 11 = *very much*, α = .93; "I could feel the anger that Edith had toward Abby's nephew and wife," "I could feel the sorrow that Edith felt when Abby died," 1 = *not at all*, 11 = *very much*, α = .62). The order of identification and empathy measures directed at specific characters were counterbalanced to avoid priming the importance of any one character.

Realism items tapped respondents' perceptions that the show, the characters, and the story were realistic (Potter, 1988). Items used after assessing factor structure and internal reliability (in a factor analysis that included transportation items as there was some apparent overlap in item domain) included "The [events/characters] in this story are realistic," "Overall, I believe this story is realistic," α = .93.

We adapted items developed by Green and Brock (2000) to measure transportation or immersion in a narrative realm; their items were designed for a written rather than an audio-visual narrative. A factor analysis indicated that their measures comprised several distinct dimensions. One overlapped with the perceived realism construct and was not further analyzed given its redundancy. Another we called *story involvement*, which we consider the dimension closest to the underlying construct of transportation, which was measured by "I wanted to know what happened later to these characters," "I found myself thinking of ways the story could have turned out differently," and "The story affected me emotionally," α = .74. We also included a dimension we called *story relevance*, measured by "The events in the story are

relevant to my everyday life," and "I could picture myself in the scenes depicted in the story," α = .65.

We selected items from Schwartz and Bilsky's (1987) value inventory that appeared to us relevant to the implicit persuasive topics of these dramas. We slightly adapted the response scales to emphasize relative importance of these values relative to other values of importance ("Compared to other values that are important to you, please indicate the relative importance of the values listed below," 1 = *much less important*, 6 = *about the same*, 11 = *much more important*). We did this for two reasons: it reflected our theoretical concern with the relative salience of given values relative to other values in an efficient way, and it was intended to encourage greater use of the full response scale; if one asks respondents if they agree with most values, one tends to get various shades of agreement. The target values were "Safe, crime-free society," "Civil liberties," "Tolerance," and "Traditional values."

Respondents also noted how many of their friends, acquaintances, or family members were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender and how many were victims of a violent crime; these single-item measures were used as covariates to control for the impact of indirect personal experience on policy support. (Direct questioning about sexuality or crime victimization would have introduced human research complications including the availability of counseling in case of participant upset; we therefore confined ourselves to effects of indirect experience.)

Given our concern with the effects of narratives on support for public policies, we wanted to move beyond attitudinal effects to assess willingness to behave in ways relevant to the political process. Items used to assess support for the death penalty were "How likely or unlikely would you be to perform the following actions: Sign a petition in favor of expanding the use of the death penalty in [state in which the University is located]," and "Vote for a political candidate who favors the death penalty" (1 = *unlikely*, 11 = *likely*, α = .92). Items used to assess support for gay partnership rights, using the same stem, included "Sign a petition for a ballot initiative in favor of extending rights/privileges/benefits, such as health insurance and property ownership rights, to gay partners," "Sign a petition for a ballot initiative in favor of legalizing gay marriage," "Vote in favor of a ballot initiative in favor of extending rights/privileges/benefits, such as health insurance and property ownership rights, to gay partners," and "Vote for a ballot initiative in favor of legalizing gay marriage," α = .98.

Cognitive response coding involved conventional instructions to subjects, following their viewing the drama. They were instructed to list thoughts that came to mind while reading the passage (Cacioppo, Harkins, & Petty, 1981). Coding of these thoughts involved separating the thoughts into the categories of narrative content and theme relevant, narrative presentation and formal features relevant, character relevant, self-relevant, and extensions to real life relevant. Valence of these comments was also coded. Two trained graduate student coders yielded a Cohen's kappa of .73 on categorical placement and .97 on polarity, using a sample of 18% responses. The resulting variables used in the analysis represented the net consistency of topic

(capital punishment or gay rights) responses and the net polarity of plot- and character-related responses. Counterarguments were defined as negative comments about the topic or implicit persuasive theme (death penalty and victims vs. perpetrator rights, or gay marriage and legal rights).

Analysis
The analysis of variance to assess effects of the dramas on public policy support and other outcomes included a term for experimental condition, gender, personal acquaintanceship with victims of violent crime or with gay individuals, degree of liberalism/conservatism, and the interaction of condition with the degree of liberalism/conservatism covariate. The interaction was tested with the continuous covariate in order to better represent the distribution of variability on degree of liberalism/conservatism (this relatively normal distribution would have been distorted by a dichotomous split) and to preserve statistical power (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

Results

Overall persuasive impact of the television dramas on policy support

Counterarguing
As discussed above, the literature suggests that narratives such as television dramas suppress counterarguing. As both conditions involved narrative presentations, this proposition can only be assessed in this study descriptively. For *L&O*, there were only 12 theme-related responses inconsistent with the implicit persuasive message as compared to 259 consistent theme-related responses. Similarly, for *Walls*, there were 17 inconsistent theme-related responses versus 346 consistent responses. The relative suppression of counterarguments by dramas is impossible to gauge without a direct comparison to responses to an overtly persuasive message (and even then it would be difficult or impossible to vary messages only in terms of narrative structure and not argument content). However, controversy associated with these policy issues normally might be expected to result in counterarguing. In particular, one would expect that without such interference, the more liberal the participant, the more counterarguing of the death penalty would be expected, and the more conservative the participant, the more counterarguing of the gay marriage/rights theme would be expected. In a post hoc analysis, we found no evidence for such an interaction. Our interpretation, therefore, is that the dramas tended to interfere with production of counterarguments.

Impact of dramas on policy support and the ideology-support relationship
As noted above, participants responded to policy-support items relevant to both dramas regardless of which drama they saw. Therefore, each drama served as a control for the other with respect to assessing the outcome measures. In the case of *L&O*,

H1 was supported by a test of the main effect of program exposure: Viewers of the drama were more likely to report willingness to support the death penalty ($M = 6.36$, $SE = .30$) than viewers of the control drama, mean = 5.26, $SE = .29$, $F(1, 157) = 5.62$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .031$. It was not supported with respect to *Walls*: Viewers of this drama ($M = 6.98$, $SE = .31$) were not more likely than viewers of the control, $M = 7.10$, $SE = .31$, $F(1, 157) = .20$, *ns*, to support gay marriage and legal rights. Gender × Condition interactions were checked to see if they might provide an alternate explanation of these differential effects; these interactions did not approach significance.

H2 predicted that the relationship between degree of liberalism/conservatism and policy support would be weaker for the treatment than for the control drama. As described earlier, this hypothesis was tested by examining the interaction of the continuous covariate degree of liberalism/conservatism with the two-level treatment factor (the *Walls* episode supportive of gay rights and the *L&O* episode with narrative elements supportive of the death penalty). H2 was supported for the death penalty outcome, $F(1, 157) = 11.81$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .065$, but not for gay marriage support, $F(1, 157) = .14$, *ns*. In the comparison condition (*Walls*) for the death penalty outcome, the more liberal the viewers, the less likely they were to support the death penalty ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$); after viewing *L&O*, this relationship became nonsignificant ($\beta = .09$, *ns*) (see Figure 1).

Assessing possible mechanisms for persuasive impact

Engagement with narrative variables
We suggested (H3) that effects of degree of liberalism/conservatism on policy support might be partially mediated by engagement variables such as transportation, identification or empathy with key protagonists, and perceived reality. We examined relationships for each drama separately, given the pattern of results described above.
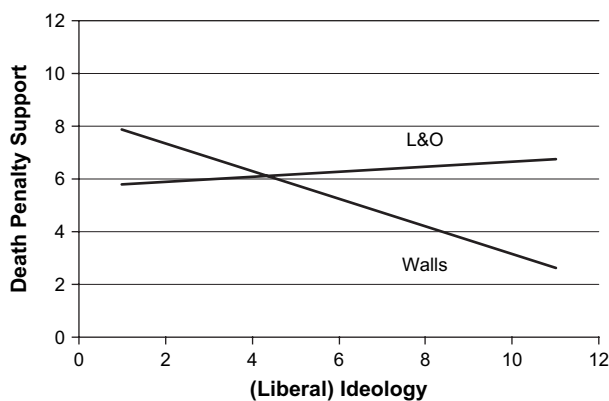
Figure 1 Death penalty support as a function of ideology (degree of liberalism/conservatism): Moderating effects of exposure to *L&O* versus comparison episode.

The results provided considerable insight into the differential impact of the two dramas. Death penalty support was regressed on the engagement variables for *L&O*, and no statistically significant relationships were found. (It should be noted that in these subanalyses, we had sufficient power to detect only moderate effects with confidence; e.g., with an $N = 84$, we should be able to detect correlations of .30 and above with a power of .80. Therefore, one can infer only that if these relationships existed, they were not robust enough to show statistical significance.) In the parallel analysis for *Walls*, story involvement ($N = 94$, $\beta = .29$, $p = .012$) and identification with Edith ($\beta = .24$, $p = .031$), the gay woman whose partner died, were related to support for gay marriage and partnership rights.

Similarly for *L&O*, degree of liberalism/conservatism was unrelated to the engagement variables at statistically significant levels. For *Walls*, degree of liberalism/conservatism predicted virtually all the engagement variables: identification with Edith ($\beta = .30$, $p = .004$), perceived realism ($\beta = .21$, $p = .043$), story involvement ($\beta = .27$, $p = .008$), and story relevance ($\beta = .27$, $p = .009$). In other words, it appears that the successfully persuasive narrative (*L&O*) led viewers to respond to the story and characters with much less regard to prior ideological stance than did the unpersuasive narrative (*Walls*), consistent with the interaction described earlier.

It can be argued that H3 is partially supported with respect to *Walls*, in that story involvement and identification with Edith do meet the criteria for partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Degree of liberalism/conservatism was directly related to story involvement (transportation) and identification, which in turn were related to support for gay marriage/partnership rights. Degree of liberalism/conservatism was also directly related to the policy-support outcomes. However, because exposure to this drama did not directly influence support for gay marriage/partnership rights, we cannot be confident in this case in placing the measure of policy support at the end of a causal chain. It may well be that endorsement of support for gay marriage/partnership rights reflected a sympathy and concern about gay couples that was also reflected in greater identification with the gay protagonist and greater involvement in the story of her personal tragedy. Therefore, it is not appropriate to infer that responses to the story and characters had a causal influence on policy support.

In fact, we propose a different interpretation. In the narrative that influenced beliefs, *L&O*, the relationships one would otherwise expect between degree of liberalism/conservatism and response to story and characters were successfully suppressed. In the case of *Walls*, more liberal participants who already agreed with the message responded more positively to the character and stories and more conservative participants responded less positively; this narrative did not succeed in eliminating an ideological response to the characters and situation and thus failed to do more than preach to the converted.

In a post hoc analysis, we compared means for the engagement variables between conditions, to see if the greater persuasive impact of *L&O* could be readily attributed to differences in these variables apart from their relationship to ideology. In other words, was *L&O* simply a better show, resulting in greater persuasive impact? The

Walls episode appeared to be higher in story involvement (transportation) and story relevance but lower in perceived realism. Identification and empathy with a key protagonist were slightly higher for *Walls*. Unless perceived realism is substantially more influential than the other variables (unlikely given the lack of relationship of perceived realism with the policy-support variables for either drama), it seems implausible to argue that *L&O* had greater persuasive impact because it simply was better TV.

*Consistency of cognitive responses with implicit persuasive theme*
In H4, we explore the possibility that the net number of cognitive responses consistent with the persuasive theme will mediate the effects of degree of liberalism/conservatism on public policy support. For *Walls*, the net number of consistent comments about theme is associated with public policy support, $R(90) = .27$, $p = .011$, though the net number of consistent comments about characters does not, $R(90) = .13$, *ns*. For *L&O*, neither net consistent comments about theme, $R(78) = .08$, nor comments about characters, $R(78) = -.09$, were related to support for the death penalty at statistically significant levels. In other words, cognitive response processes do not meet minimum criteria for mediation for the drama that appears to have a persuasive impact, and H4 is not supported. It appears that persuasive impact of a drama on policy support, at least in this instance, bypasses traditional cognitive response processes at least with respect to countering the effects of prior ideological stance.

Framing mechanisms
H5 and H6 explore an alternative way that television narratives might have a persuasive impact, despite potential ideological resistance on the part of the viewer: through increasing the salience of values that are consonant with the implicit persuasive theme of the drama and decreasing the impact of prior ideology on such salience.

Because H5 predicted that a drama's impact on consonant values would in part mediate drama effects on policy support, only results concerning the death penalty outcome—for which significant treatment effects were found—were analyzed. Only marginally significant bivariate relationships were found between death penalty support and the two most consonant values, a safe and crime-free society ($\beta = .14$, $p = .059$) and traditional values ($\beta = .14$, $p = .064$)—relationships with the other two values were nonsignificant. Therefore, the conditions for testing mediation were not met in these data and H5 was not supported.

Findings did support H6, which suggested that television dramas would reduce the relationship of ideology with core values. There were robust Condition × Ideology effects on importance of a safe and crime-free society, $F(1, 157) = 14.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .072$, and on importance of traditional values, $F(1, 157) = 7.90$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .037$. In the case of *Walls*, greater liberalism was, as one would expect, negatively related to the importance of a crime-free society ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$). For viewers of *L&O*, the relationship reversed ($\beta = .22$, $p = .044$; see Figure 2; possible reasons why
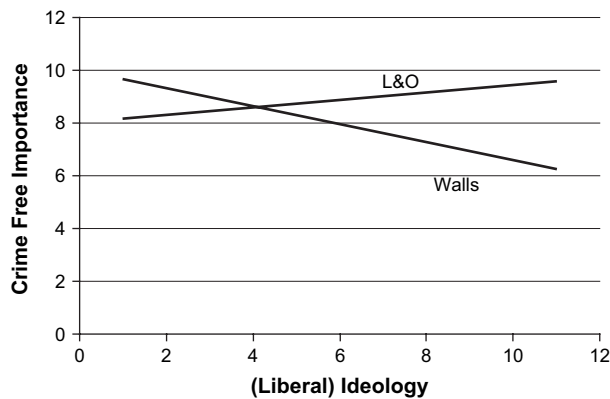
Figure 2 Relative importance of a crime-free society as a function of ideology (degree of liberalism/conservatism): Moderating effects of exposure to *L&O* versus comparison episode.

the relationship went to positive rather than simply flattening are explored in Discussion). Effects on the relationship between liberalism and traditional values were similar, though less dramatic: The negative relationship was stronger in the case of *Walls* ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$) than it was for *L&O* ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .027$).

Significant main effects on values were also found, although these were smaller in size and were preempted by the significant interactions with ideology. Viewers of *Walls* assigned higher relative importance to tolerance ($M = 7.86$, $SE = .21$) than did viewers of *L&O*, mean = 7.63, $SE = .22$, $F(1, 157) = 4.35$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .022$, and lower relative importance to a safe and crime-free society, *Walls* mean = 7.79, $SE = .19$, *L&O* mean = 8.94, $SE = .19$, $F(1, 157) = 4.45$, $p = .037$, $\eta^2 = .022$. Differences regarding traditional values and civil liberties were also in the expected direction, but only at marginal levels for traditional values, and at nonsignificant levels for civil liberties.

Discussion

The results of this study support the proposition that television dramas can influence support for controversial public policies. These effects, however, were found for only one of the two dramas studied. One of the most intriguing aspects of this study, then, is to look at differences between the pattern of responses to the persuasive versus the unpersuasive drama in order to identify possible reasons for persuasive success or failure.

Viewing both these dramas, consistent with prior theory and evidence (Green et al., 2004; Slater, 1997; Slater & Rouner, 2002), resulted in a minimum of counterarguing, despite the presentation of controversial topics. Clearly, though, this was not sufficient to produce persuasive effects alone. For *Walls*, which did not have a persuasive effect, respondent liberalism was predictive of greater net positive cognitive responses about the theme (gay rights and marriage), and these responses were

predictive of policy support. Ideology appeared to drive policy support, and the program did not influence this relationship. Moreover, response to the program, as indicated by measures of story involvement, realism, relevance, and identification with characters, was associated with prior ideology as well; the narrative failed to overcome ideological response to character and story.

The *L&O* episode, in contrast, increased viewer support for the death penalty relative to that among viewers of *Walls*. Viewing the episode eliminated the relationship between greater liberalism and opposition to the death penalty that could be seen among viewers in the comparison condition. Paralleling this was the finding that the episode increased the relative importance of a safe and crime-free society for more liberal viewers—the association with liberalism and the importance of this value was strongly negative for viewers of *Walls* and positive for viewers of *L&O*. Likewise, the negative relationship between liberalism and the importance of traditional values was attenuated (though not reversed) for viewers of the *L&O* episode. Further evidence for persuasive effectiveness with respect to policy support being dependent on reducing the policy–ideology relationship was seen in the analyses of cognitive responses and the engagement variables. For viewers of *L&O*, unlike *Walls*, degree of liberalism/conservatism did not predict story involvement, relevance, realism, or identification with key characters, or net positive responses about the persuasive theme.

Such a pattern of results, of course, strongly suggests that suppressing the effects of ideology on support is a central mechanism for effects of drama on public policy support. However, these data cannot answer the question as to why one drama had such an effect and another drama, reasonably comparable in terms of overall audience reception, did not. It might be that ideological investment in the issue of gay marriage and legal rights was at the time of this study (prior to the 2004 elections in which this issue was highly salient) too great to expect any message to have a measurable persuasive effect. It may be that *Walls* was less subtle with respect to addressing these controversial issues and so signaled less liberal viewers to remain cautious and skeptical in their responses. It may be that certain aspects of *L&O* were especially well suited to suppressing the relationship between liberalism and death penalty opposition. The focus on brutal crimes against women—traditionally a touchstone issue for liberals—may have reframed the issue of the death penalty in terms of protecting the safety of women for some liberal viewers. This reframing interpretation is supported by the positive slope of the relation between liberalism and support for a safe and crime-free society. Narrative effectiveness can only explain flattening that relation (as is found for death penalty support and traditional values), not a reversal of direction. Some affirmative influence such as reframing must account for this reversal. The effect of a narrative on changing policy support, then, may depend at least in part on providing an alternative frame for considering an issue that is attractive to those for whom the message would normally be counterattitudinal.

The effect of *L&O* on support for the death penalty is especially interesting given recent evidence (Holbert et al., 2004) in a national cross-sectional survey that crime drama viewing is associated with support for the death penalty. The results of this

experiment suggest mechanisms (e.g., value salience) that may help explain that association in causal terms.

This study examines only two messages, selected to emphasize liberal or conservatively oriented concerns. We believe that this contrast is an ecologically valid one, given that a variety of programs and perspectives may be seen in a single evening by a television viewer. Moreover, in the context of a single-exposure experiment, it would be challenging to find impact on support for policies without providing contrasting stimuli. At the same time, we acknowledge that the use of a program reflecting liberal values as the comparison condition for examining death penalty support might have strengthened these outcomes: A program that primed liberal viewers to be thinking about tolerance and civil rights would likely at least slightly decrease the salience of a safe and crime-free society. Nonetheless, this does not explain the ability of the *L&O* episode to actually reverse the direction of the association of greater liberalism with concern about a safe and crime-free society and support for the death penalty, as discussed above.

Certainly, this study supports key hypotheses suggesting that drama must override ideology in order to influence policy beliefs. A study such as this—comparing real-world television dramas—illustrates the potential impact of such dramas with relatively high ecological validity. The price of such validity, of course, is the loss of clean experimental control of differences between conditions in acting, production, story elements, and so on. Replication of such patterns of results with other dramatic narratives—both those that have a persuasive impact and those that do not, and with less ecologically valid but more tightly controlled differences—would of course increase confidence in the generality of these results, as would replication with study populations other than undergraduate students.

The lack of effect of transportation as a mediator of persuasive effects is initially surprising given Green and Brock's (2000) findings. However, these authors had difficulty obtaining enough variability in transportation as a result of their manipulations when a high-quality popular narrative (i.e., a best-seller excerpt) was used; their cleanest results occurred when they used a written excerpt from a story for young adults that was considerably less immersive than the excerpt from the popular novel. It may be that transportation involves a threshold effect: Once viewers or readers are deeply engaged or transported, variability in transportation matters little. These well-produced television dramas in all probability both crossed that threshold.

Measurement in this study was quite extensive. Nonetheless, we regret not having two types of measures in particular. One is a measure of perceived persuasive intent. It may be that part of the lack of impact of *Walls* was that many viewers may have perceived the program as having a persuasive or propagandistic intent, which would certainly make it difficult for it to suppress effects of prior ideology. A direct measure of this construct would help us account for such a mechanism. Another set of measures that we would seek to include in subsequent research are measures of various discrete emotions (Nabi, 2002). It may well be that the extent to which certain emotions are engaged may predict suppression of ideology effects—or it may prove that

viewers can permit experience of vicarious emotion while maintaining skepticism about the larger implications of the drama, when they suspect persuasive intent. In either event, such measures would be informative. We also regret not having delayed posttest measures; it may be that different mechanisms (e.g., cognitive response, identification with characters, or transportation) might differentially predict durability of belief impacts. We also should note that some of our mediation tests involved associations within a single experimental condition; therefore, lack of support may be a function of limited power and weak to moderate effect size, rather than because the effects were truly trivial or nonexistent.

Given the amount of television viewed by most Americans and the potential suggested by this study for television dramas to influence public policy support despite prior ideology, we hope to see a great deal more research on this topic in coming years. It may well be that the values and priorities implicitly, and often inadvertently, communicated by television dramas may have a nontrivial influence on the policies that do or do not receive substantial public support, at least in the United States, and perhaps in other countries as well.

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