Family Matters: How Immigrant Histories Can Promote Inclusion

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Abstract

Immigration is a highly polarized issue in the United States, and negative attitudes toward immigrants are common. Yet, almost all Americans are descended from people who originated outside the country, a narrative often evoked by the media and taught in school curricula. Can this narrative increase inclusionary attitudes toward migrants? We draw from scholarship showing that perspective-taking decreases prejudice toward outgroups to investigate whether priming Americans on their own immigration history increases support for immigrants and immigration. We propose that perspective-taking can extend beyond the individual's own experience to incorporate those of a family member, and test this with three separate survey experiments conducted over two years. Our findings show that priming family history generates small but consistent inclusionary effects. These effects occur even among partisan subgroups and Americans who approve of President Trump. We provide evidence that increased empathy for immigrants constitutes one mechanism driving these effects.

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The idea of the United States as an immigrant nation has long been a powerful component of American identity, featuring prominently in both elite and popular discourse across the ideological spectrum (e.g. Schildkraut 2007; Shiffman 1996; Smith 2012). Nonetheless, opposition to immigration also pervades American public opinion and has grown more polarized in recent years (Wong 2016). Perhaps in response, scholarship increasingly explores strategies that increase immigrant inclusion (e.g. Adida et al. 2018; Hopkins et al. 2019).

Our paper evaluates whether the immigrant histories of American families can generate more favorable views of immigration. We argue that reminding Americans of their families' immigration history increases empathy for current migrants to the United States.[1] In turn, this heightened empathy improves views of immigrants as people, and increases acceptance of open immigration policies.

We test this argument with evidence from three survey experiments in which respondents were reminded about their immigrant pasts either before or after answering questions about their views of immigration. Across three separate samples acquired online between 2017 and 2019, we find that the treatment increased support for open immigration policies and improved favorability towards immigrants. These effects occurred among Republicans and Democrats, among supporters and opponents of President Trump, and regardless of when respondents' families came to the United States. In the third study, we investigate empathy as a mechanism driving our results, and find evidence that it is.

Our paper makes empirical contributions to three strands of literature in social science.[2] First, the literature on perspective-taking demonstrates its effectiveness at inducing empathy using intensive treatments in the lab or field, with explicit instructions to consider the other's perspective (Todd and Galinsky 2014). We contribute to this literature by showing that a light-touch intervention embedded in an online survey with no explicit perspective-taking instruction can increase empathy as well. Second, by focusing on the role

[1]This theory cannot generalize to Native Americans, who were forcibly displayed by such immigration; furthermore, it does not capture the experiences of African Americans whose ancestors were forcibly brought to the United States. We considered these implications in designing our third study.

[2]We describe these contributions more fully and review the literature in Appendix K.

of family history, we add to the empirical evidence that family connections shape political attitudes (Glynn and Sen 2015). Third, we extend a growing literature on increasing migrant inclusion (Adida et al. 2018; Dinas et al. 2019). The robustness of our findings stands in contrast to the limited effects of information provision on attitudes towards immigration policy (Hopkins et al. 2019). Finally, these contributions complement the strategies of politicians and advocates who seek to increase popular support for immigration by emphasizing Americans' immigrant roots.

Family History and American Support for Immigration

Nearly all Americans are descended from people who came from elsewhere, whether by force or by choice. This history is an important component of American identity: narratives of an American "melting pot," in which individuals of various nations and creeds merge to become Americans, have existed since the 1700s (Fraga and Segura 2006). While emphasis on the melting pot has at times meant prioritizing White and Protestant cultural norms, advocacy for a more explicitly multicultural American identity gained strength in the mid-twentieth century (Vecoli 1996), and today a large majority of Americans perceive "incorporationism" – respect for cultural difference – as a key component of American identity (Schildkraut 2007). This concept of American identity is reflected today in politician rhetoric and school curricula alike (Hilburn et al. 2016).

However, the importance of immigration to American identity also coexists with anti-immigrant attitudes (Wong 2016), which are motivated by perceived threats to the economy (Dancygier 2010) and cultural identity (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Scholars interested in understanding how to reduce migrant exclusion have evaluated the effects of providing information to weaken perceptions of such threats, with mixed results (Facchini et al. 2016; Hopkins et al. 2019).

An alternative strategy to reduce anti-migrant sentiment involves leveraging emo-

tions – especially empathy, the ability to feel another's mental state and/or concern for their plight. People with greater empathy toward out-group members tend to hold more inclusive attitudes toward that group. For instance, research indicates that more empathetic individuals hold more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Hartman and Morse 2018). An individual is most likely to feel empathy for another when they are capable of reflecting on that person's perspective (Batson and Shaw 1991), and an extensive literature investigates how interventions that encourage perspective-taking reduce out-group prejudice (Kalla and Broockman 2020; Simonovits et al. 2018), including toward migrants (Adida et al. 2018).

Many perspective-taking studies explicitly instruct research subjects to reflect on out-group members' experiences, whether by imagining themselves in their shoes or imagining their feelings.[3] However, perspective-taking can also be induced indirectly via shared experience or connection (Batson and Shaw 1991, Dinas et al. 2019, Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000). It follows that priming family connections to an out-group should facilitate perspective-taking and induce empathy toward that group. Indeed, several studies demonstrate that familial relationships affect individuals' decision-making and attitudes. Washington (2008) finds that having a daughter increases a congressperson's likelihood of voting liberally. Glynn and Sen (2015, 37) show that U.S. Courts of Appeals judges who have daughters "consistently vote in a more feminist fashion on gender issues than judges who have only sons," and Sharrow et al. (2018) demonstrate that men become more supportive of sex-equity policies when their first child is female.

We argue that the immigrant stories within many American families can generate empathy – and thus more inclusive attitudes – toward migrants. When Americans are encouraged to remember why their families came to the United States, and the hardships they may have faced when doing so, this shared family experience with contemporary immigrants makes it easier to take their perspective and empathize with them. Likewise, when Americans

[3]Todd and Galinsky note that imagine-self and imagine-other treatments do not produce meaningful differences, suggesting that how perspective-taking is activated may not be crucial for impacting attitudes (Todd and Galinsky 2014, 375).

are reminded that they have a personal connection to immigration, they should feel closer to contemporary migrants, facilitating perspective-taking and strengthening empathy.

Research Design

We designed an experiment to test whether priming Americans on their own immigrant histories increases support for open immigration policies and improves views of immigrants. The experiment was implemented in three separate studies using online surveys between 2017 and 2019 (Online Appendix B). The first two studies were not pre-registered: that they consistently showed an effect of priming family history led us to develop an explicit test of empathy's role as a mediator on new data. We developed our third study with that objective in mind and pre-registered it with REDACTED.[4]

Research design details, summary statistics, balance tests, tests of heterogenous treatment effects, and the pre-analysis plan are in the Online Appendix. In each survey, respondents were randomly assigned with equal probability to receive a question about their family history either before or after the outcome questions. The family history question asked: *Which was the first generation in your family to arrive in America?*[5]

The first outcome question – *Do you agree or disagree that the United States should limit the number of immigrants entering the country?* – gauges respondent support for more open immigration policies. On the second and third surveys, we included an additional outcome question: *On a scale from 0 to 100, how do you feel about immigrants in the United States?* For the third survey, we also ask – prior to the outcome questions – to what extent respondents agree with the statement: *I empathize with the reasons people want to immigrate*

[4]The pre-analysis plan can be found here: REDACTED. The study was approved by IRB at REDACTED.

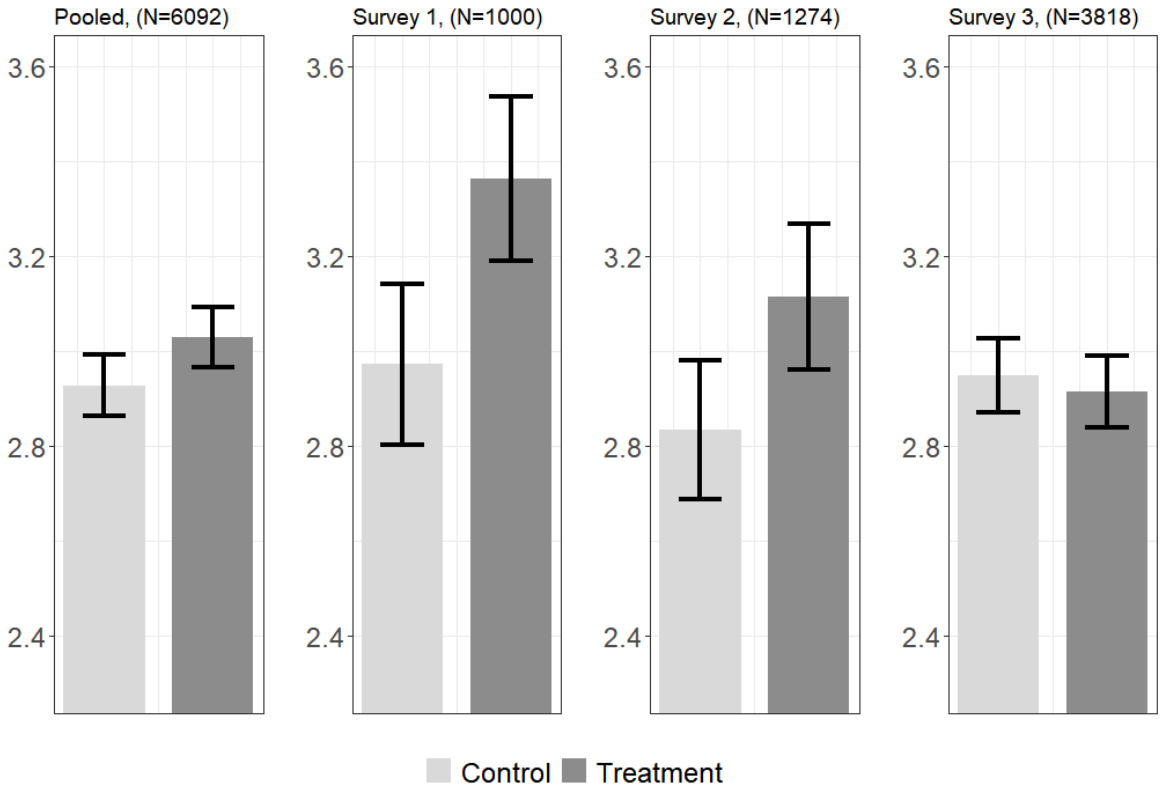
[5]The first study asked about the first generation to immigrate. The second and third studies used the language above to reflect the experiences of African American descendants of slavery as well. Native Americans were not included in the experiment. In the third survey, the question included an additional sentence: *Take a moment to think about your own family history. Which was the first generation in your family to arrive in America?* Respondents were also asked in the third survey if they knew why their families had come to the United States. These slight variations in design allow us to check whether the treatment is robust to different wording.

to the United States, as well as the hardships they face when coming to this country. We use these responses to conduct a mediation analysis of empathy with the methods proposed in Baron and Kenny (1986) and Imai et al. (2010).

Results

We estimate main effects by assessing the difference in means with two-sample t-tests. In the Online Appendix, we show that the results are consistent when using OLS regression with control variables and robust standard errors.[6]

Figure 1: Priming Family History Increase Support for Open Immigration

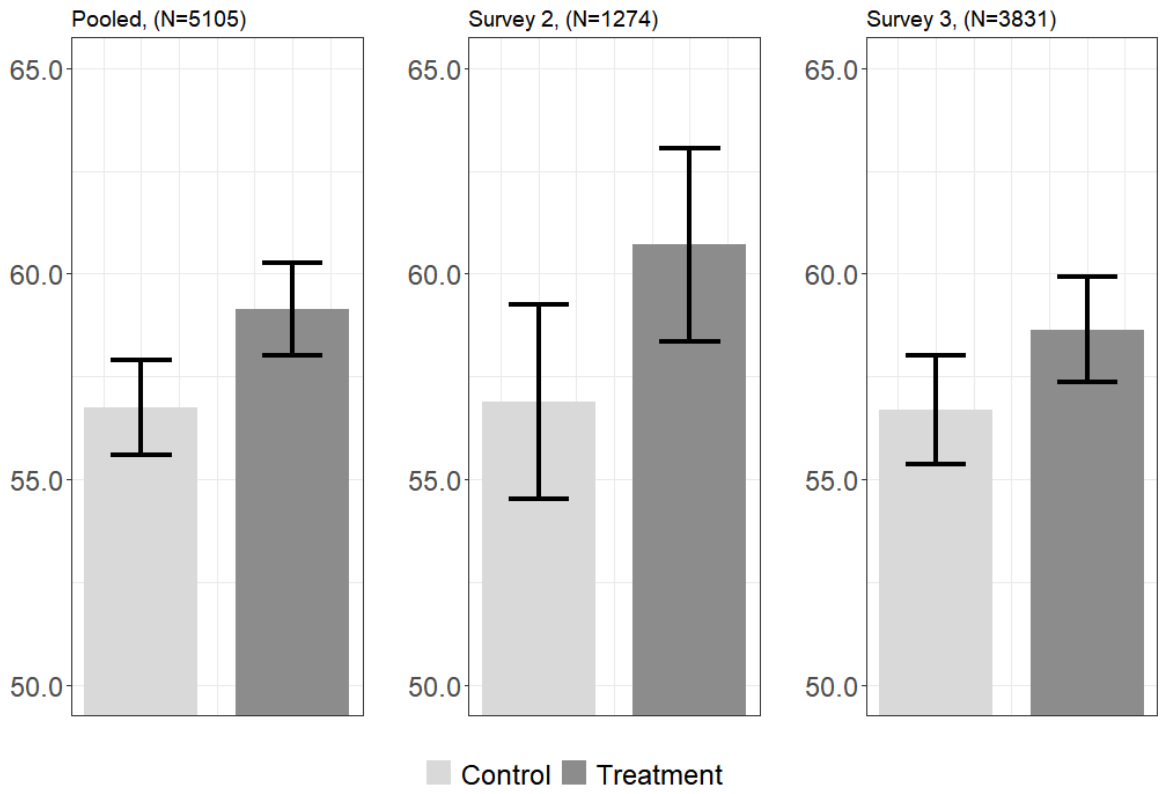


Note: Displays mean responses by treatment group for question: Do you agree or disagree that the United States should limit the number of immigrants entering the country? Scale ranges from 1 to 7, with 7 indicating support for more open immigration. 95% c.i.

[6]Both analyses were pre-registered for the third study.

Figure 1 presents the difference in means for the open immigration outcome. Across all three studies, the family history treatment increased support for more open immigration policies from an average 2.93 in the control group to 3.03 in the treatment group ($p = 0.025$), a change of 0.06 standard deviations. This treatment effect is statistically significantly different from zero in Studies 1 and 2, but not in Study 3.

Figure 2: Priming Family History Improves Favorability of Immigrants



Note: Displays mean responses by treatment group for question: On a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means "completely unfavorable" and 100 means "completely favorable," how would you describe your views of immigrants in the United States? 95% c.i.

Figure 2 displays the difference in means for the feeling thermometer outcome included in the second and third studies. For the pooled data, the average response increased from 56.74 in the control group to 59.15 in the treatment group ($p = 0.003$), a 2.40 point increase equivalent to 0.08 standard deviations. This result holds in both individual studies.

The effects appear relatively small, but they are similar in magnitude to those iden-

tified in related experiments (e.g. Dinas et al. 2019; Grigorieff et al. 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2020), particularly in the first and second studies.[7] They also represent meaningful shifts. The effect on the policy outcome is equivalent to one-third of the baseline difference between Republicans and Independents in the first study and one-fourth of the difference in the second study, while the effect on the thermometer outcome is equivalent to one-third of the baseline difference between Republicans and Independents in the second study and more than two-thirds of the difference in the third study.

Our treatment was less effective in the third study. This difference may have occurred because the survey was significantly longer than the other two, and entirely about attitudes toward migrants: answering prior questions about migrants may have anchored respondent attitudes.[8] But it could also be a function of the fact that a perspective-taking treatment is less likely to impact preferences about immigration policy, and more likely to shape explicit evaluations of the "specific person whose perspective is taken" (Todd and Galinsky 2014, 375), which is precisely what we capture with our thermometer outcome.

Finally, our average treatment effect is not driven by specific subgroups, but rather seems to be general and shared. Indeed, the effect is not conditional on partisan identity, support for President Trump, racial identity, baseline levels of empathy, or immigrant generation (Appendix E).

Testing the Empathy Mechanism

Did our treatment generate effects, at least in part, by increasing empathy toward immigrants? In an exploratory test of this argument, we analyze open-ended responses to our question from the third survey in which respondents were asked as part of the treatment to explain why their families came to the United States. Recall that perspective-taking can be

[7] Dinas et al. report effect sizes of 19.3 percent (Germany) and 18.6 percent (Greece) of a standard deviation. Grigorieff et al. report effect sizes of 13 percent and 15 percent of a standard deviation.

[8] We evaluate the likelihood of finding our Study 3 effect if the true effect were the one uncovered in Study 2. In Appendix I, Figure I9, we show that the coefficient in Study 3 falls within the 95% coverage interval.

induced through shared prior experience and attachment with the other (Batson and Shaw 1991). If so, we might expect that respondents would be able and willing to describe the specific motives behind this migration. If priming family history also encouraged perspective-taking by reminding Americans of their personal connection to immigrants, we might expect many of them to mention specific family members who migrated.

We find this to be the case. More than 40 percent of respondents were willing to answer the open-ended question, with frequent responses including seeking "a better life," and "opportunity," in addition to "escaping" situations such as "persecution." Likewise, many respondents mentioned family-oriented terms such as "grandfather" and "children," especially if they reported more favorable attitudes toward migrants on the feeling thermometer. By priming Americans to think about their family history, our treatment reminded respondents of shared familial experiences and attachments with immigrants (Appendix J).

We also implement more systematic tests of the empathy mechanism. To our knowledge, no other study has explicitly tested whether empathy mediates the relationship between a perspective-taking treatment and attitudes toward migrants.[9] Our third study does just that. This section reports on our mediation analysis, relying on Baron and Kenny's (1986) analytical approach as well as the method designed by Imai et al. (2010). While the Imai et al. analysis was not preregistered, it constitutes a more generalized version of Baron and Kenny, and importantly it allows us to conduct sensitivity analyses.[10]

The Baron and Kenny approach requires that three conditions be met: (1) The treatment (T) must have a statistically significant effect on the outcome (Y); (2) The treatment (T) must have a statistically significant effect on the mediator (M); and (3) the effect of the treatment (T) on the outcome (Y) has to be significantly reduced when the mediator (M) is included. The first condition is met for the thermometer outcome, which was significantly

[9]Vescio et al. (2003) test whether empathy mediates the relationship between perspective-taking and attitudes toward outgroups among undergraduate students. Todd and Galinsky (2014) provide an overview of the mechanisms linking perspective-taking to out-group attitudes. Beyond empathy, perspective-taking can encourage a shift in attributional thinking (respondents are less likely to blame migrants for their own plight) or it can increase self-outgroup merging (respondents are more likely to see migrants as themselves).
[10]See Online Appendix F for the analysis of the parallel encouragement design we pre-registered.

affected by our treatment. Table 1 shows that the second and third conditions are met as well: the treatment (T) increases empathy for immigrants (M), and this empathy eliminates the treatment effect on the thermometer (Y) when incorporated into the regression model in column 3.

Table 1: Empathy for Immigrants Mediates Family History Treatment Effect

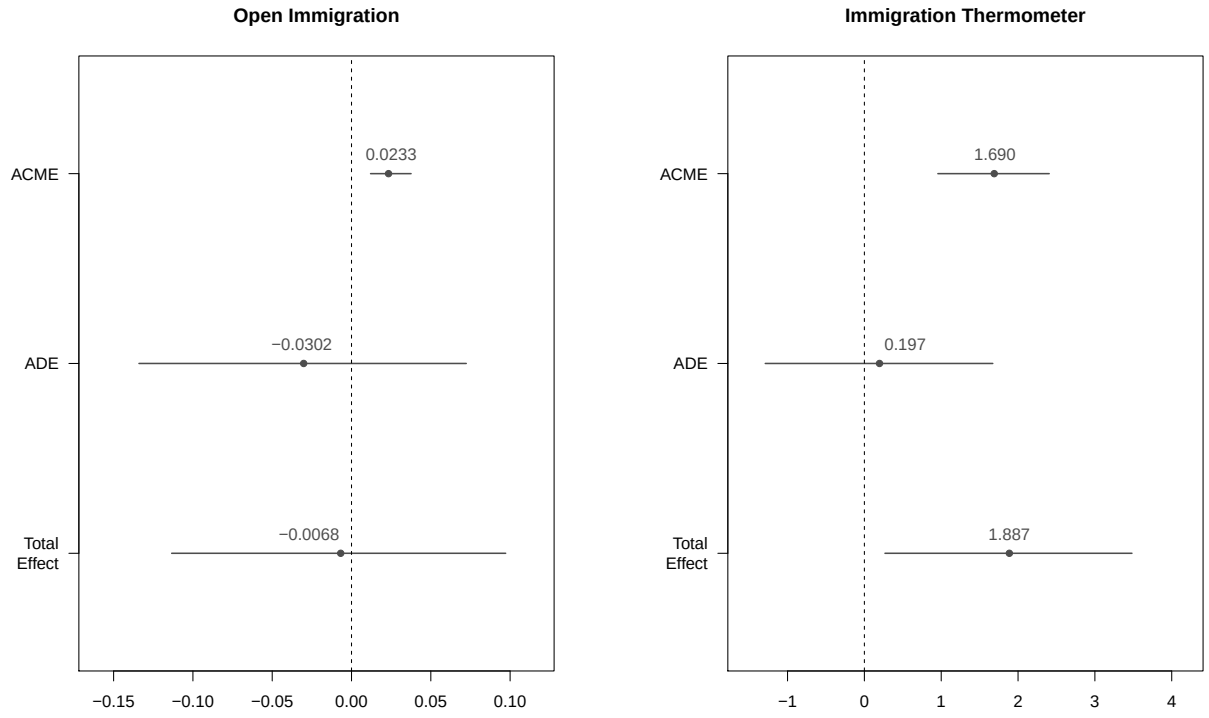
	Stage 1: Treatment Effect on Thermometer	Stage 2: Treatment Effect on Mediator	Stage 3: Treatment Effect Controlling for Mediator
Outcome Variable:	Thermometer	Empathy Mediator	Thermometer
Family History Treatment	2.08*	0.19***	0.29
	(0.85)	(0.04)	(0.76)
Empathy Mediator			9.09***
			(0.35)
Constant	40.10***	4.91***	-3.86
	(2.75)	(0.15)	(3.07)
Controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,810	3,795	3,795

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † < 0.10 - OLS regressions with robust standard errors.

But this approach also requires that two key assumptions hold: there must be no omitted variable bias in either column (2) or (3) in Table 1. We know that this is the case for column (2), since our family history treatment is randomly assigned. But for column (3), the sequential ignorability assumption is not directly testable. Instead, we offer two solutions. First, we control for all possible observable confounds, including gender, partisanship, age, education, as well as respondent baseline empathy, the last of which might most reasonably affect both the mediator and outcome. Second, we implement the more generalized method proposed in Imai et al. (2010) allowing us to conduct sensitivity analyses to assess just how large the omitted variable bias would have to be to completely erase our average causal mediation effect.

In Figure 3, we present results from Imai et al.'s generalized approach. It shows

Figure 3: Empathy Mediation of Family History Treatment



a statistically significant average causal mediation effect for the immigration thermometer outcome (ACME), indicating that the treatment effect on favorability of immigrants is mediated by empathy.[11] Our sensitivity analyses suggest that confounders as strong as baseline empathy are not sufficient to explain away the observed estimate.[12]

Conclusion

This paper presents evidence that priming Americans on their family histories can increase support for open immigration policies and improve favorability of immigrants. These effects occur across a range of subgroups, including Republicans and supporters of President Trump. We also provide evidence that the treatment changes attitudes in part by increasing empathy

[11] We present sensitivity analyses (Cinelli and Hazlett 2020; Imai et al. 2010) in Appendix F.

[12] In Appendix J, we rely on the coding of our open-ended treatment question ("In one or two sentences, please tell us why your family came to the United States") to further probe whether any of other the mechanisms highlighted by Todd & Galinsky (2014) might underlie our treatment effect.

for immigrants.

These results contribute to a nascent body of research suggesting that individuals who possess a shared connection to the migrant experience are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward migrants (e.g. Dinas et al. 2019). We show that even a light-touch treatment can meaningfully shift attitudes. Additionally, we provide direct evidence that this relationship is, at least in part, rooted in heightened empathy for migrants. These results align with prejudice reduction studies indicating that more positive attitudes toward an outgroup can be induced by drawing attention to shared experiences between different communities (Motyl et al. 2011).

While our studies show compelling evidence that a family history narrative can shape attitudes toward migrants – suggesting that the power of perspective-taking can extend via family relationships – they cannot adjudicate between the various mechanisms identified in the social psychology literature (Todd and Galinsky 2014). Indeed, we find evidence for one mechanism: empathy. But we do not test alternative mechanisms, such as shifting attributional thinking or self-outgroup merging. Future studies should directly test the full menu of mechanisms in a real-world setting. Additionally, our treatment is unlikely to produce longer-term effects, given that it was designed to remind respondents temporarily about their own immigration histories. Nonetheless, even relatively small and short-term effects could be relevant for practitioners prior to an election or an important vote in Congress, and high-profile politicians who emphasize this message in their rhetoric may be capable of moving the needle for a large number of Americans. Furthermore, the evidence in this paper can inform efforts to create larger-scale interventions capable of generating more lasting changes. And, combining our findings with those of Feigenbaum et al. (2019) suggests that this type of priming could directly impact legislation by shaping the voting behavior of legislators themselves.

Finally, our findings have implications for the comparative study of migrant exclusion. Despite the polarization in public opinion toward migrants in the United States,

Americans tend to hold more favorable attitudes than do citizens of many other countries (e.g. Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor 2019). The commonality of immigrant family histories in the United States may partially explain this pattern.

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