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Exploring Mechanisms of Narrative Persuasion in a News Context: The Role of Narrative Structure, Perceived Similarity, Stigma, and Affect in Changing Attitudes

Daniel J. Tamul and Jessica C. Hotter

Two exploratory studies demonstrate, for the first time, that narrative persuasion can diminish the stigma attached to social groups featured in journalistic narratives. Study 1 shows narrative format improves stigma toward Syrian refugees indirectly through narrative engagement, perceived similarity, and meaningful affect. Decreases in stigma also improved attitudes toward refugees. Study 2 replicates these findings against a separate participant pool, an additional story topic, and compares changes in engagement, stigma, and attitude to a non-narrative fact sheet and a control condition. A preregistered third study seeks to validate the finding that narratives can elicit destigmatization and disentangle the roles of story exemplars from story structure.

Keywords: Narrative persuasion; refugees; stigma; attitude; journalism

Although refugees resettled in the United States have undergone the most stringent security and background checks of any traveler (Ardalan, 2017), federal legislative and executive bodies have attempted to bar refugees from entering the country on the grounds refugees pose a threat (Barnes, 2017; Collins et al., 2016). The Trump administration has been especially restrictive on immigration policy generally and refugee resettlement in particular despite the prior administration’s pledge to take in additional Syrian refugees as the Syrian Civil War escalated (Ostrand, 2015). In the first of several unilateral actions to bar refugees from entrance to the United States, the current administration first issued an executive order in January 2017 that temporarily suspended the refugee resettlement program, lowered the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. annually from 110,000 to 50,000, indefinitely suspended the entry of Syrian refugees, and banned citizens from several countries—including Syria—from entering the United States (Exec. Order No. 13769, 2017). The first order resulted in widespread protests in U.S. cities, e.g. New York City (Rosenberg, 2017), Atlanta (Gehlbach, 2017), Raleigh-Durham (Grinberg & Park, 2017), and Portland (Brosseau, 2017). The second executive order, issued in March 2017, replaced the first but removed the permanent ban on Syrian refugees and allowed citizens of the banned countries who also hold U.S. citizenship to enter the United States (Exec. Order No. 13780, 2017). In September 2017, Trump issued Presidential Proclamation 9645 (2017) that expanded the list of countries whose citizens were barred from entry and, importantly, made the travel bans permanent. Finally, a memorandum for the Secretary of State further lowered the number of refugees to be allowed entry for the 2018 fiscal year to 45,000 (Presid. Determination 2017–13, 2017), the lowest number of refugees admitted since 1980, the same year the U.S. passed the Refugee Act of 1980 (Cepla, 2018). As of this writing, Syrians are still barred from entering the United States despite overwhelming evidence that refugees pose little threat to natives. Independent, non-partisan analyses indicate that fatal terroristic attacks in the United States are almost universally the product of domestic radicalization (Bergen, Ford, Sims, & Sterman, n.d.) and that the odds of being killed by such an attack are exceedingly low—about 1 in 3.64 billion (Nowrasteh, 2016). The average American is several times more likely to be struck by lightning in a given year—a 1 in 8.98 million chance (Insurance Information Institute, 2018)—than to be killed by a refugee.

Using the state apparatus to curtail legal immigration has ramifications beyond merely denying entry to individuals since such institutional practices and policies more broadly implicate popular conceptions of immigrants and refugees. Kundnani (2001) examines how over the course of several years the asylum application screening mechanisms in the United Kingdom were made more stringent in an effort to “solve” the refugee problem; this process cultivates popular racism by increasing the difficulty of completing a successful asylum application, which in turn results in an increase in asylum denials, which politicians can then
persuasion—eliciting story consistent attitudes (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Although experiencing a narrative may have several possible outcomes, such as a positive reflection (Hart 98), engagement in the narrative, and emotional reactions. It is our contention that narrative engagement, as a first order outcome of experiencing the narrative, is a promising staging point for examining how emotion shapes the actions taken by individuals in the world. For example, Lovel and Oliver (2009) showed that if emotions are enhanced, participants are more likely to engage in costly behavior. Emotional reactions can also be effective in reducing stigma. While both narrative engagement and cognitive processes can be effective strategies for reducing stigma, we argue that narrative engagement can be more effective in reducing stigma because it can occur across an assortment of stigmatized groups. In the following section we establish a theoretical framework for examining narrative engagement as a mediator between narrative persuasion and stigma reduction.

Integrating Narrative Persuasion and Stigma Reduction Theories

Before linking narrative persuasion and stigma reduction theories, it would be prudent to delineate between the two theoretical perspectives. As previously stated, we place narrative engagement as a unidirectional relationship between these two theoretical perspectives. However, we argue that there is a unidirectional relationship between these two theoretical perspectives and it is entirely possible that shifts in attitude stemming from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition is to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel in a given context (see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 518). Empathy goes beyond relatedness as it is “feeling connected to and cared about by others” (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008, p. 135) and compared to sympathy, empathy is a better mediator in narrative persuasion models (Wirtz, Sar, & Duff, 2016). Insofar as stigma reduction is concerned, experiencing empathy toward stigmatized groups can potentially decrease negative affective reactions. The following section will examine the relationship between stigma and empathy as well as provide possible strategies to reduce stigma.

This distinction between attention and stigma is also practically important since stigma is particularly pervasive: stigmatized individuals are seen as socially deviant and unacceptable throughout much of the history of humanity (Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). In light of these findings, it is necessary for individuals to understand the mechanisms that can elicit positive responses (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

As previously stated, we place narrative engagement as the first order outcome of experiencing a narrative (see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Bilandzic and Busselle, 2011) and experience discrimination against individuals in the group (R. A. Smith, 2007). Perceiving an individual as stigmatized then can therefore shift our cognitive, affective, and behavioral inclinations—attitudes—to be unfavorable compared to a non-stigmatized individual. That said, we do not mean to argue that there is necessarily a unidirectional relationship between these two theoretical perspectives or that shifts in attitude would necessarily change to stigmatizing behaviors. In fact, research suggests that such cognitive dissonance via direct messaging (e.g. Cao & Latner, 2012) or possibly behavior changes (Devine, Plant, & Major, 1989). This change in the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel in a given context (see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 518). Empathy goes beyond relatedness as it is “feeling connected to and cared about by others” (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008, p. 135) and compared to sympathy, empathy is a better mediator in narrative persuasion models (Wirtz, Sar, & Duff, 2016). Insofar as stigma reduction is concerned, experiencing empathy toward stigmatized groups can potentially decrease negative affective reactions. The following section will examine the relationship between stigma and empathy as well as provide possible strategies to reduce stigma.

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Stigma reduction and perceived similarity

Given that stigmatization involves perceptions of intergroup differences and avoidance of stigmatized groups, heightening perceived similarities plays an important mediating role in persuasion processes (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Miller & Brewer, 1986; R. A. Smith, 2007). We argue news narratives may offer a form of mediated contact and are thus promising venues for narrative persuasion as they can help individuals to the character's perspective. A narrative better articulates the idea or behavior of the other and facilitates audience perspective taking via narrative engagement and thereby move the audience to feel greater connection to other racial or ethnic groups (Abbott, 2002; Chatman, 1978). Furthermore, a narrative text or story can still serve as "means to encourage social acceptance by increasing perceptions of similarity, increasing social attraction, and decreasing social distance for highly stigmatized prototypes" (Mitchell & Mendenhall, 2009). The takeaway is that there is broad support in the field of narrative persuasion research, but our present work can only lay the groundwork for future scholarship to determine whether news narratives are as effective as the early narrative persuasion literature. As we stated earlier, our purpose in this study is to introduce new avenues for integrating the bodies of stigma and narrative persuasion research, but our present work can only lay the groundwork for future scholarship to determine whether news narratives are as effective as the early narrative persuasion literature.

Narrative, Story, and Plot

Many narrative persuasion scholars treat narrative, story, and plot interchangeably, but this has created some muddling of what characteristics of a narrative elicit a narrative persuasion effect. Here, we provide a brief overview of the structural components of a narrative (E. L. M. D. Slater & Rouner, 2002) in order to inform our investigation of how readers "become aware of what happened" (Chatman, 1978, p. 20). For example, a description of Frank feeling ill, leaving work early, skipping dinner, and going to bed at 6 p.m. could be considered a minimalist narrative because it is a story sequence (plot) and character emphasis, which might be more accurately described as story perspective—a change to discourse. Bringing the structuralist perspective into the mix affords us the opportunity to isolate a structural component of narrative and manipulate it to increase or decrease its persuasiveness, which we begin to do in our second study. Specifically, we aim to understand how manipulations of variables that are interrelated with narrative structure, such as plot, story sequence (plot) and character emphasis, which might be more accurately described as story perspective—a change to discourse.

The Difficulty of Establishing Mediational View; stated earlier, our purpose in this study is to provide evidence that the narrative persuasion process can indeed influence perceptions of stigma and not merely attitude. We argue that news narratives are a promising venue for integrating the bodies of stigma and narrative persuasion research, but our present work can only lay the groundwork for future scholarship to determine whether news narratives are as effective as the early narrative persuasion literature. As we have argued, we then expect such engagement to lead to changes in perceived similarity and empathic affect.
rule out alternative explanations for the observed indirect effect. As Bullough et al. (2010) points out, this requires painstaking piloting and validation. We only aim for our efforts here to lay the groundwork for future scholarship to more definitively build the case for similarity, affect, and stigma to serve as mediators within a narrative persuasion framework.

Pilot Work
This registered report contains two pilot studies that, while theoretically driven, deviated from the planned analysis as our original screening criteria were too strict and we opted to use unidimensional scales for two key concepts (narrative engagement and stigma) which we originally planned to use them as multidimensional constructs, thus necessitating a respecification of our original path model. Therefore, study 1 and study 2 should be treated as exploratory and drawn upon with caution until the findings are validated.

Study 1
In our initial examination of the role of stigma in the narrative persuasion process, we expected the narrative story format to elicit higher levels of narrative engagement, but respected the structure of the model among perceived similarity, stigma, and meaningful affect. We report on our exploratory analysis here.

All stimuli, measures, participant data, SPSS syntax, and expanded details can be found on the Open Science Framework (osf.io/vey6D).

Method
Procedure
In the fall of 2016 we recruited participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. We employed a two condition between-subjects experimental design with random assignment to conditions. Participants were assigned to either a narrative or non-narrative condition similar to Oliver et al. (2012). After accessing the study from their MTurk accounts, participants indicated their acceptance of the consent form and then filled out several basic demographic and background items (age, sex, race, empathic tendencies, and political ideology). Participants were then exposed to one of two versions of the story (narrative or non-narrative). Then, they filled out measures for affect, narrative engagement, transportation, and behavioral intentions and were removed from the data. We screened the remaining participants based on the time spent with the stimulus materials to ensure that they had spent a reasonable amount of time with the story. Participants who spent between 45 and 300 seconds with the stimulus materials were retained for data analysis. This was enough time to quickly read the stimulus materials while also affording participants the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time with the stories. Rather than weeding out all but the most engaged participants, we thought the liberal low end of the screening procedure would increase the external validity of the study as people do not always fully attend to the content they are reading. We retained 159 participants (58.6% female) with an age range of 18 to 52 years, M = 22.16, SD = 14.26. The screening procedure resulted in 83 participants in the narrative condition and 76 participants in the non-narrative condition.

Measures
Descriptives and scale correlations for all measures can be found in Table 1a and 1b displays descriptives by experimental condition. Unless otherwise stipulated, all measures employed rating scales ranging from 1 to 7.

Narrative engagement
We employed Busselle and Bilandzic’s (2009) narrative engagement scale in this study, which conceptualizes engagement as a multidimensional construct composed of attentional focus, narrative understanding, narrative presence, and emotional engagement. Attentional focus and narrative understanding items were reverse coded so that higher values indicate greater levels of narrative engagement. In analysis, we used the scale as an indicator of overall narrative engagement rather than as a multidimensional construct (see Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). The scale had an acceptable Cronbach’s alpha (α = .77).

Stigma
We used the stigma scale developed by Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, and Kubik (2003), which consists of personal responsibility beliefs, pity, anger, fear, helping, and coercion-segregation. The pity and helping scales were reverse coded such that higher scores indicate higher degrees of stigma. Like the narrative engagement scale, we were interested in measuring the overall stigma attached to social groups in this study. As such, we first created subscales identically to Corrigan et al.’s (2003) operationalization of stigma, which are sufficiently reliable when treated as itemized items (α = .89). Then these subscales were averaged together to create the overall stigma measure.

Perceived similarity
The scale we employed was adapted from McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly (1975) and asked participants to rate their agreement with the following statements: “Refugees think like me,” “Refugees act like me,” “Refugees are similar to me,” “Refugees are like me,” and “Refugees behave like me.” The five items were used as a single scale (α = .97).

Affect
We asked participants to rate the degree to which they experienced a range of emotions while reading each of the stories (tender, inspired, warm, compassionate, joyful, touched, aggravated, mellow, soft-hearted, guilty, happy, sympathetic,moved,and sad). We conducted an exploratory factor analyses to construct our affect scale. The analysis employed principal axis factoring with promax rotation, eliminating items with low communalities i.e. less than .30. Then we assessed the pattern matrix for factor loadings and retained items for the final factor structure that loaded higher than .60 and that did not cross load greater than .40. Items on the resulting scales were created by averaging items together. The analysis eliminated three items with low communalities (aggravated, guilty, and mellow) and two items for cross loading on more than one factor (warm and inspired). The remaining items converged into a two factor solution that accounted for 80.97% of the variance. The first factor, which we took to indicate meaningful eudaimonic affect, consisted of seven items: sad, sympathetic, compassionated, moved, soft-hearted, touched, and tender (α = .95). No items were reverse coded. The second factor we named positive affect and consisted of joyful and happy. Positive affect was not used in subsequent analyses.

Results
We used multiple analysis of variance tests to examine the main effect of narrative format on the dependent variables (narrative engagement, stigma, perceived similarity, meaningful affect, and attitude). None of these individual tests resulted in a direct main effect on any outcomes (see Table 2).

To examine the relationship between narrative format, narrative engagement, and the second order outcomes, we built a path analysis using the narrative condition as the exogenous variable, which was coded such that = 0 (non-narrative format and = Narrative format). Attitude toward refugees was used as the outcome variable. We
specified that narrative engagement would predict perceived similarity, meaningful affect, and stigma. Error terms between the meaningful affect and perceived similarity variables were allowed to covary. Stigma was also predicted by meaningful affect and perceived similarity. We developed a baseline model containing acceptable fit to the model $\chi^2 (5) = 2.94, p = .709$, RMSEA < .001, 90% CI [0.00, 0.081], RMSEA = .045 (see Figure 1), and indicates a weak relationship between narrative format and narrative engagement. We used bootstrapping procedures to calculate standardized effects and 5,000 bootstrapped samples to construct bias corrected 95% confidence intervals for standard errors to estimate significance levels. We found a significant indirect effect of narrative engagement on attitude via meaningful affect and stigma, and perceived similarity. Our exploratory path analysis also indicated that perceived stigma is driven by narrative engagement, meaningful affect, and perceived similarity. Most importantly, this analysis indicates support for the notion that not only can narrative engagement be predicted from the meaningful affect, stigma, and perceived similarity, but also that it can be used to predict changes in attitude.

**Table 2:** Univariate Effects of Refugee Narrative on Dependent Variables by Condition, Study 1.

| Dependent variable | $F$ | $p$ | Condition | $M$ | $SE$ |
|--------------------|-----|-----|-----------|-----|------|
| Narrative engagement | 3.85 | .051 | Non-narrative | 4.78 | 0.78 |
|                      |     |     | Narrative  | 5.05 | 0.92 |
| Meaningful affect | 0.41 | .523 | Non-narrative | 4.47 | 0.18 |
|                      |     |     | Narrative  | 4.63 | 0.12 |
| Homophily | 0.14 | .713 | Non-narrative | 3.81 | 0.21 |
|                      |     |     | Narrative  | 3.91 | 0.19 |
| Stigma | 0.13 | .718 | Non-narrative | 2.44 | 0.13 |
|                      |     |     | Narrative  | 2.38 | 1.03 |
| Attitude | 0.04 | .843 | Non-narrative | 4.42 | 0.18 |
|                      |     |     | Narrative  | 4.36 | 0.20 |

Note: $df_{1} = 1, df_{2} = 157$.

**Figure 1:** The effect of narrative story format on the dependent variables, study 1. Narrative format is coded such that 1 = Narrative and 0 = Non-narrative. * $p = .049$. All other paths are significant at $p < .001$.

**Discussion**

Our first study provides preliminary evidence that narrative engagement is indirectly related to attitude via meaningful affect, stigma, and perceived similarity. Our exploratory path analysis also indicated that perceived stigma is driven by narrative engagement, meaningful affect, and perceived similarity. Most importantly, this analysis indicates support for the notion that not only can narrative engagement be predicted from the meaningful affect, stigma, and perceived similarity, but also that it can be used to predict changes in attitude.

**Method**

**Procedure and design**

This data was collected in the spring of 2017 using a department participant pool. The design features a 2 x 4 partially within subjects design where participants were assigned to both a foreign aid and refugee narrative condition, within which each subject is randomly assigned to view a narrative, randomized narrative, randomized fact sheet, or control condition. The full stimulus materials are provided in a supplement along with the text of all measures (see osf.io/y6vt2).

After indicating their consent to participate in the study, participants provided identical demographic information, completed a tutorial that had no bearing on the dependent variables, and then received a supplement along with the text of all measures (see osf.io/y6vt2).

As indicated in our discussion of study 1, here we present a study that provides additional evidence that attitudes may change from exposure to narratives about stigmatized groups is driven—at least in part—through increased perceptions of perceived similarity, diminished assessments of stigma, and meaningful affect. To isolate the effect of narrative structure on attitude, we employed a similar narrative format to our initial study against identical content presented in a randomized order such as to only manipulate plot. We also include a fact sheet condition that presents participants with broad issue-related information to establish the superior persuasive influence of a structured narrative to more factually-oriented accounts and a control condition to show changes in outcomes from baseline levels. Finally, in addition to testing variants on our original stimulus materials about Syrian refugees resettled in the United States, we included a second story topic to determine whether the relationships observed in study 1 were idiosyncratic to the stimulus employed there. We also use a control condition to establish baseline levels of outcome variables for comparison to the narrative conditions.

**Stimulus materials**

In addition to the Syrian refugee stimulus used in study 1, we also employed a second stimulus about a foreign aid recipient. The foreign aid story features a Mexican farmer who has benefited from a locally administered aid program funded by the United States. The farmer was provided with assistance in the form of livestock, farm equipment, and education. As a result, his family broke out of its hand-to-mouth existence.

The manipulation employed in our first study conflated a focus on character with a narrative story structure. Here, we aim to disentangle these two concepts from one another and to test effects across more than one stimulus topic. We assigned participants to read one of the following for each of the topic (refugee and foreign aid): a story that is well-structured that also focuses on a specific individual's lived experiences (the narrative condition), a story that is randomly structured that focuses on individuals (the randomized narrative condition), one that is randomly structured that features information about the broader issue without mentioning a specific individual (the fact sheet condition), or a tutorial that had no bearing on the dependent variables (the control condition) to establish baselines for the outcome variables. Being able to compare the effect of each of these stimuli on outcomes is meaningful. The
comparison between the two stories that focus on a character but vary on story structure can show us whether plot elements like story structure are consequential in narrative persuasion. While narratologists would contend that a better or more coherent plot would possess greater levels of narrativity (Prince, 1987, 2008), it is as of yet unclear whether this directly translates into greater persuasive effects. Furthermore, comparisons between the structured narrative condition and the fact sheet can demonstrate that a narrative emphasizing a character’s lived experience is a superior persuasive tool compared to a raw information devoid of narrative qualities. Practically this is also important for communication professionals who may be faced with a choice between investing resources in either narrative or informational appeals. Finally, comparisons between the control group and any other condition will allow us to assess changes from baseline levels.

The first author on this manuscript wrote the stimulus materials for each of the conditions. The randomized narrative is identical in content to the narrative condition, however, the story’s paragraphs were presented in a randomized order. The story appeared to be an authentic news account, although it was never explicitly identified as such. The fact sheet condition featured broad information about the topic but was not illustrated through a specific individual. For example, while the refugee narrative condition shows how the mediated character cannot find a job because his credentials from Syria did not transfer to the United States, the fact sheet condition states that many Syrian professionals take entry level jobs for the same reason. In both the randomized narrative and randomized fact sheet condition, all participants were presented with the information in a random order. The control condition presented participants with a coherent structure but a separate topic (how to make a French press cup of coffee or variants on how to tie running shoes).

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 1,034 participants, but one participant dropped out of the study before reaching the stimulus and was removed from the data. Similar to Study 1, participants who spent between 45 and 300 seconds with the stimulus material either in their initial viewing or upon review were retained. The screening procedure was conducted independently for the refugee and foreign aid portions of the data as participants might have spent time with the refugee stimuli as appropriate.

Measures

All measures except behavior, attitude, and meaningful affect are identical to those in study 1 and can be found in the supplemental materials (see osf.io/yo612). The attitude scale was a rating of the farmer substituted “Mexican farmer” as appropriate. Like the first study, narrative engagement (α = .72), perceived similarity (α = .96), stigma (α = .81), and attitude (α = .91) were sufficiently reliable. We constructed the meaningful affect scales following a similar procedure to study 1. First, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using just the narrative and randomized narrative conditions. The analysis resulted in a two-factor solution accounting for 75.54% of the variance in the items. The first factor, positive affect, consisted of happy, joyful, and warm but was not used in subsequent analyses. The second factor, meaningful affect, consisted of sympathetic, compassionate, moved, and sad (α = .91).

The altruistic behavior measure was presented to participants as a question unrelated to the study in which they had just participated. They were told a campus organization that had raised $3,000 to donate to a charity and was seeking advice for where the money should be donated so the funds would have the largest positive impact on people. Participants were directed to indicate the proportion of the funds that should go to each organization. The participants were presented with descriptions for six local organizations. Two organizations, HireMe and Football Injury Legacy Foundation, were designed to allow participants to draw on self-serving motivations. Two other organizations, Welcome Home-VA and Virginians for Restricting Weeds were described to allow participants to engage in altruistic behavior unrelated to the story topics. Finally, two organizations, Virginia Refugee Assistance and International Agricultural Outreach Council (IAOC) were described to allow participants to engage in altruistic behavior toward one or both of the story subjects to which they may have been assigned, but the proportion of the funds the students indicated should be donated was not mentioned to these organizations as we used as the behavioral measure. Descriptions for measures can be found in Table 3a and by condition in Table 3b. Because participants were given two opportunities to view the stimulus to which they had been assigned, we report descriptives for their minimum and maximum times spent with the stimuli.

Results

Like the first study, we conducted several ANOVAs to examine the main effect of the narrative manipulation on the outcome variables by topic condition. Main effects for the refugee stimuli are presented in Table 4a and main
effects on outcomes for the foreign aid condition are presented in Table 4b.

We built a path analysis testing the fit of the data in similar to study 1 with the primary difference being the addition of a behavioral measure. The exogenous variable, narrative format, is coded such that zero corresponds to our randomized narrative condition and 1 is the (structured) narrative. The models show how the presence of structure influences narrative engagement, which in turn elicits varying levels of perceived similarity, stigma, and meaningful affect. We pooled participants from both the refugee and foreign aid conditions and found the model was an acceptable fit to the data $\chi^2(10) = 18.18, p = .052, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .034, 90\% CI [0.00, .058], pclose = .848$. Additionally, we constructed 95% bias corrected confidence intervals using 5,000 bootstrapped samples found a significant indirect effect of narrative condition on behavior ($\beta = .026, p < .001$). The same analysis also indicated that a significant indirect relationship via perceived similarity ($\beta = .005, p < .001$), affect ($\beta = .011, p < .001$), and stigma ($\beta = .009, p < .001$).

To assess whether the path weights were invariant between the two sets of stimuli, we conducted a multiple group analysis in AMOS by constraining the regression paths between variables to be invariant between conditions. This procedure indicated that the model fit was significantly worse by constraining the weights $\chi^2(10) = 78.37, p < .001$. We examined pairwise parameter comparisons and found the paths between narrative engagement and affect, perceived similarity and stigma, stigma and attitude, and attitude and behavior to be significantly different at $p < .05$. Therefore, we also constructed separate models for each of the story topics in AMOS and while both the refugee model $\chi^2(10) = 7.93, p = .636, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA < .001, 90\% CI [000, .073], pclose = .962$ and the foreign aid model $\chi^2(10) = 14.03, p = .372, CFI = .984, RMSEA = .034, 90\% CI [000, .073], pclose = .708$ are a good fit to the data, there are some notable differences between the two indicated in Figure 2).

We examined the indirect effect of narrative format on behavior in each of the individual story topic models and

Table 4a: Univariate Effects of Refugee Narrative on Dependent Variables by Condition, Study 2.

| Dependent variable | F  | p   | Condition | M   | SE  |
|--------------------|----|-----|-----------|-----|-----|
| Narrative engagement | 80.36 | <.001† | Narrative | 4.25 | 0.07 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 3.96 | 0.06 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 3.56 | 0.07 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 2.89 | 0.07 |
| Meaningful affect  | 2578 | <.001† | Narrative | 5.04 | 0.09 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 4.72 | 0.09 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 4.80 | 0.10 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 1.88 | 0.09 |
| Similarity         | 0.42 | 0.739 | Narrative | 3.73 | 0.11 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 3.55 | 0.11 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 3.61 | 0.11 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 3.61 | 0.10 |
| Stigma             | 10.02 | <.001† | Narrative | 1.92 | 0.06 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 2.09 | 0.06 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 2.30 | 0.07 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 2.35 | 0.06 |
| Attitude           | 1.09 | 0.354 | Narrative | 4.78 | 0.10 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 4.68 | 0.11 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 4.77 | 0.11 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 4.54 | 0.11 |
| Behavior           | 0.46 | 0.709 | Narrative | 26.84 | 1.71 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 25.64 | 1.72 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 25.56 | 1.80 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 23.99 | 1.67 |

Note: $df_1 = 3, df_2 = 709$. Starred significance values survive a Bonferroni correction of $\alpha/6$ or $p < .0083$. Means that do not share a common subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ or lower using Tukey’s HSD.

Table 4b: Univariate Effects of Foreign Aid Narrative on Dependent Variables by Condition, Study 2.

| Dependent variable | F  | p   | Condition | M   | SE  |
|--------------------|----|-----|-----------|-----|-----|
| Narrative engagement | 60.17 | <.001† | Narrative | 3.79 | 0.08 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 3.45 | 0.07 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 2.73 | 0.08 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 2.59 | 0.07 |
| Meaningful affect  | 16.27 | <.001† | Narrative | 3.99 | 0.09 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 4.11 | 0.09 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 3.39 | 0.1 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 1.59 | 0.09 |
| Similarity         | 0.27 | 0.846 | Narrative | 3.46 | 1.44 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 3.40 | 1.45 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 3.33 | 1.46 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 3.44 | 1.42 |
| Stigma             | 11.64 | <.001† | Narrative | 2.29 | 0.06 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 2.35 | 0.06 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 2.62 | 0.07 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 2.74 | 0.06 |
| Attitude           | 0.07 | 0.974 | Narrative | 3.97 | 0.08 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 3.99 | 0.09 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 3.96 | 0.09 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 4.02 | 0.09 |
| Behavior           | 0.61 | 0.61 | Narrative | 11.10 | 1.07 |
|                    |     |     | Random narrative | 11.07 | 1.2 |
|                    |     |     | Random fact sheet | 12.72 | 1.33 |
|                    |     |     | Control | 12.52 | 0.61 |

Note: $df_1 = 3, df_2 = 676$. Starred significance values survive a Bonferroni correction of $\alpha/6$ or $p < .0083$. Means that do not share a common subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ or lower using Tukey’s HSD.

† Equal variances are not assumed and post hoc tests are conducted with Dunnet’s T3.

Figure 2: The effect of narrative story format on the dependent variables, study 2. News narrative structure is coded such that $1 = $Structured narrative and $0 = $Randomized narrative. Dashed lines indicate path weights are critically different at $p < .05$ between the refugee and foreign aid groups. Fact sheet and control conditions are excluded from this analysis.

† $p = .054, *p = .046, **p = .002, ***p = .001$. All other paths are significant at $p < .001$. 

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found that in the refugee condition there is a significant overlap in pools, p = 0.02) through perceived similarity (β = .003, p = .001) affect, (β = .010, p = .001), and stigma (β = .035, p = .001). The foreign aid data also indicated an overall indirect effect (β = .008, p = .001) via perceived similarity, (β = .003, p = .001), affect (β = .003, p = .001), and stigma (β = .002, p = .001). Importantly, the effect of a structured narrative on engagement, the second order outcomes, and finally on behavior is in the theoretical direction of engagement, and consistent between the refugee and foreign aid stimuli. That said, the effect is a small one and should be drawn upon cautiously due to the exploratory nature of this study.

Discussion for Study 2

Our goal in the second study was to show first that narrative structure is not inconsequential, which we accomplished in part by showing that the structured narrative elicited significantly higher levels of narrative engagement, than the randomized narrative, a fact sheet, or a control condition. Importantly, our examination of main effects also shows that a well-structured narrative, that is to say one with a coherent plot, is superior to a fact sheet at reducing stigma, but we found mixed results in panning out the importance of plot in reducing stigma.

In the refugee condition the randomized narrative did not significantly lower perceptions of stigma attached to refugees but in the foreign aid condition the randomized narrative did only lower perceptions of stigma for impoverished farmers.

The path model also indicated that narrative structure was positively related to narrative engagement and indirectly to prosocial behavior. However, we should caution researchers from interpreting the findings here as evidence for mediation of the effect of narrative on outcomes. We did not directly manipulate our mediators and as such the effects we observed here may be spurious (see Bullock et al., 2010).

Second, we were able to show that the narrative format in both the foreign aid and refugee stimuli was able to predict differences in levels in the control condition and was more effective at reducing perceived stigma than an issue-relevant fact sheet. This finding provides preliminary support for concluding that narrative structure plays a role in eliciting narrative engagement. However, the small indirect effect sizes provide only cursory support for structure’s role in altering stigma and attitude.

In our knowledge, this is the first time empirical work within the context of narrative persuasion has shown that narrative format decreases perceived stigma attached to a social issue. A recent extension of the work of Oliver et al. (2012), which found that narrative format can improve participants’ attitude toward stigmatized groups but could not conclude that the same process describes prosocial behavior. More broadly this work highlights the value of narrative persuasion work as an avenue for understanding how journalism can have prosocial ends beyond its watchdog and informational structure plays a role in eliciting narrative engagement.

Hypothesizing the importance of validating the findings of the first two studies as our work thus far has been exploratory and the need to examine separately the effect of story structure and the presence of a story exemplar.

Study 3 Registered Report
Research Questions and Hypotheses

While our previous finding that narrative influence engages the importance of validating the findings of the first two studies as our work thus far has been exploratory and the need to examine separately the effect of story structure and the presence of a story exemplar.

In addition to the direct effects we propose above, we also hypothesize that the interrelationships identified in the first two studies will be reproduced here. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H3a: Narrative engagement will be positively related to perceived similarity.
H3b: Perceived similarity will be positively related to stigma.
H3c: Perceived similarity will be positively related to attitude.
H4a: Narrative engagement will be positively related to affect.
H4b: Meaningful affect will be negatively related to stigma.
H4c: Meaningful affect will be positively related to attitude.
H5a: Narrative engagement will be negatively related to stigma.
H5b: Stigma will be negatively related to attitude.

In addition to the proposed relationships listed above, we will also validate the path model from the previous two studies and the indirect effect of the manipulations on attitude. We also therefore propose:

H6a: The story structure condition will have a significant overall (indirect and direct), positive relationship on attitude.
H6b: The story exemplar condition will have a significant overall (indirect and direct), positive relationship on attitude.
H7: The model will be a good fit to the data.

All hypotheses, the analysis plan, and the preregistered manuscript are on the OSF (https://osf.io/d3mwn). The preregistered manuscript can be accessed directly through this link.

Method

The questionnaire for this preregistered report and stimuli can be found on the OSF (osf.io/y6v22). The study was approved by the authors’ home institution IRB (VT IRB# 18-450).

Procedure

Although some of the path weights were significantly different between the foreign aid and refugee stimuli from study 2, the exploratory model was structurally identical between the conditions and we thus we opted to employ only the refugee topic in study 3. We used a 2 x 2 between-subjects experimental design where participants were randomly assigned to read a story that varies on the character emphasis (exemplar vs. expert) and the story structure (structured vs. randomized). Character emphasis was manipulated by having the story vary from the perspective of the refugee—as was the case in study 1—or that from the perspective of an expert that uses generalized knowledge about refugees. Participants accessed the study through their MTurk account and filled out basic demographic information (age, sex, race, and political ideology). Then participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. After reading the story, participants filled out measures for knowledge (as an avenue for understanding how journalism can have meaningful affect), similarity, perceived stigma, and attitude toward Syrian refugees.

Participants

Participants over 18 years of age that reside in the United States were recruited through MTurk. Participants needed to have a 90% HIT approval rate to participate. A power analysis for the main effect on narrative engagement required to collect 925 participants (df = 10, power = .90, a = .05, null RMSEA = .05, alternative RMSEA = .01) (see Preacher & Coffman, 2006). Participants were compensated with $5.00 for their involvement in the study, and the number of data collection we left with the requisite number of participants. The final, screened sample was 52.5% female (n = 486) with three participants declining to indicate their sex. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to over 80 (M = 42.65, SD = 13.71).

As a contingency against being unable to recruit a sufficient number of participants from MTurk, we planned to collect the difference required from a department participant pool, identical to study 2. This turned out not to be necessary, but because of the timing of the study, we were not able to run these data collections consecutively but instead had to run them one at a time. The participants collected through the department pool are not included in the results reported as part of the planned analyses here.10

Measures

With the exception of story knowledge and meaningful affect, all measures employed were identical to study 2. The knowledge questions, like items used in the previous studies, are listed on the OSF (osf.io/ya15a). To determine the content of the meaningful affect scale, we built a confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS that had the meaningful affect items from study 1 as indicators on a latent factor. We planned to conduct an EFA using principal axis factoring and promax rotation if we found unacceptable fit statistics for the CFA (CFI < .90 and RMSEA > .05), which we did not. We then examined the factor structure of all the affect items including those that did not previously load on meaningful affect. Items with communalities less than .3 or that failed the 60/40 rule were eliminated individually
that there is evidence to support the claim that there is a main effect on the outcome tested. We also constructed the path analysis from study 2 with two differences: story structure (0 = Unstructured) and exemplar (0 = Expert) were used as predictors of narrative engagement and behavior will not be used as the link between attitude and behavior well established (see M. Kim & Hunter, 1993). We planned to add multiple meaningful affect scales to the model if an EFA resulted in multiple affect scales. We planned to assess the model fit as a good fit to the data if the RMSEA < .05 and CFI > .95, the lower RMSEA bound was = .00 and the upper bound was <0.05. We planned to assess the model as an acceptable fit if the CFI > .90 and the RMSEA 90% confidence interval includes .05 but was below .10 (see Kline, 2015). The same model fit tests were used to examine the model fit of the theoretically proposed path analysis (H7). If the data were not a good fit to the model (RMSEA > .05 and CFI < .90) then we planned to conclude that the proposed path model was misspecified. We tested H3-7 in AMOS. To test H3-5, we examined the individual path weights in AMOS and interpret significance levels identically to those described in our ANOVA analysis. We examined H6a-b with an indirect effects test by using 5,000 bootstrapped samples to construct bias corrected confidence intervals in our estimation of an effect. We considered the effects independently and significantly different at p < .05. If the effects were not statistically significant, then we planned to conclude that there was no indirect relationship between the manipulated variables and attitude.51 If we found evidence for a good or acceptable model fit (H7) and H1a, H2a, and H3-5 were supported but did not find evidence for concluding that there is an indirect effect between the experimental variables and attitude (H6a-b), then we would have interpreted this finding as providing evidence in support of the general theoretical model—that narrative persuasion can reduce stigma and improve attitude. However, we would conclude that our manipulations failed.

### Table 5: Descriptiveis and Correlations, Study 3.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N | 925 | 925 | 925 | 925 | 925 |
| M | 5.05 | 4.99 | 4.26 | 2.17 | 4.61 | 138.7 |
| SD | 0.93 | 1.4 | 1.53 | 0.92 | 1.41 | 59.18 |
| Cronbach’s α | 0.83 | 0.94 | 0.95 | 0.94 | 0.93 | N/A |
| 1. Narrative engagement | 1 | | | | | |
| 2. Meaningful affect | .59** | 1 | | | | |
| 3. Similarity | .28*** | .36*** | 1 | | | |
| 4. Stigma | -.52*** | -.41*** | -31*** | 1 | | |
| 5. Attitude | .39*** | .57*** | .48*** | -.51*** | 1 | |
| 6. Time with stimulus | .11* | .08* | 0 | -.12*** | 0.05 | 1 |

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

### Table 6a: Main Effects of Structure Condition on Dependent Variables.

| Dependent variable | F | p | Condition | M | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Narrative engagement | 17.61 | <0.001 | Structured | 5.17 | 0.04 |
| Unstructured | 4.91 | 0.04 |
| Meaningful affect | 4.38 | 0.037 | Structured | 5.08 | 0.06 |
| Unstructured | 4.88 | 0.07 |
| Similarity | 0.91 | 0.342 | Structured | 4.21 | 0.07 |
| Unstructured | 4.31 | 0.07 |
| Stigma | 0.314 | 0.575 | Structured | 2.15 | 0.04 |
| Unstructured | 2.18 | 0.05 |
| Attitude | 0.843 | 0.359 | Structured | 4.66 | 0.06 |
| Unstructured | 4.57 | 0.07 |

Note: df1 = 1, df2 = 923.

### Table 6b: Main Effects of Exemplar Condition on Dependent Variables.

| Dependent variable | F | p | Condition | M | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Narrative engagement | 32.39 | <0.001 | Exemplar | 5.21 | 0.04 |
| Expert | 4.86 | 0.04 |
| Meaningful affect | 4.53 | 0.034 | Exemplar | 5.08 | 0.06 |
| Expert | 4.88 | 0.07 |
| Similarity | 1.93 | 0.165 | Exemplar | 4.33 | 0.07 |
| Expert | 4.19 | 0.07 |
| Stigma | 9.22 | 0.002 | Exemplar | 2.08 | 0.04 |
| Expert | 2.26 | 0.05 |
| Attitude | 0.08 | 0.782 | Expert | 4.62 | 0.06 |
| Expert | 4.6 | 0.07 |

Note: df1 = 1, df2 = 923.
To test H6a, we conducted an indirect effects test of story structure on attitude. Using 5,000 bootstrapped samples to construct bias corrected 95% confidence intervals for standard errors to estimate significance levels, we found partial support for the hypothesis in that there was a significant total indirect effect of structure attitude ($β = .15, p < .001$). Using the same approach, we also found support for H6b in that the total indirect effect of exemplar on attitude was significant ($β = .20, p < .001$). Both hypotheses were only partially supported because the ANOVA tests for direct effects did not produce significant results for a main effect of story structure or exemplar on attitudes toward refugees.

**Study 3 discussion**

This study is important because, to date, no work has demonstrated empirically that the narrative persuasion process can lead to decreased in perceived stigma attached to a social group. In our final, registered report, we were also able to show a direct effect of narrative exemplar on stigma. Both story exemplar and story structure were indirectly related to changes in attitude via stigma. This is an important extension of the work of Dovidio et al. (2012), which found that narrative format can improve participants' attitude toward stigmatized groups but could not conclude that the same process desigmatized the story characters. We do not mean to imply that past works may not have similarly accomplished a reduction in stigma. Rather this is, to our knowledge, the first empirical study that has integrated stigma into a narrative persuasion framework. As we outlined in our review of extant work, stigma is a pernicious combination of beliefs and stereotypes that, for example, can result in prejudicial behavior toward the stigmatized individual (Dovidio et al., 2000) become an internalized and manifest as result in low self-esteem (Murakami & Latner, 2015). Because we were able to demonstrate stigma reduction across two separate target groups in our second study we are hopeful that these effects can be replicated for other social groups. Furthermore, this work proposed a theoretical model to account for how stigma, and subsequently attitude, can be altered through a narrative persuasion stimulus. We argued that as elicited through news accounts, narrative engagement—specifically the emotional engagement and cognitive perspective taking into the narrative world—can elicit meaningful affect and build perceptions of similarity with stigmatized individuals, thereby reducing stigma. Finally, this study sought to better understand the formal features of a narrative that can drive narrative persuasion effects. We were able to show that in addition to focusing on an exemplar in our final study, story structure—an element of plot—is also consequential in that a well-structured narrative was shown to elicit greater levels of narrative engagement and was indirectly related to changes in attitude. Notably, we did not find a main effect of narrative structure on attitude or on several of the other key outcomes. Like story structure, we also did not find a main effect of exemplar on attitudes although we did find a main effect of exemplar on stigma. Perhaps this is because attitude is a “convenient summary of a wide variety of beliefs” (Pettic & Cacioppo, 1981, p. 8) with stigma serving as just one input into more general attitudes toward a stigmatized individual. Alternatively, the null finding is possibly the result of unidentified moderators. We address this possibility shortly in our general discussion’s limitations and future work sections.

**General Discussion**

Overall, this series of studies provides evidence in general support of the notion that narratives can be used to reduce stigma toward a target population and that meaningful affect and perceived stigma may play a role in such reduction. However, as we point out shortly in our limitation section, the precise role of the proposed mediators warrants further investigation. A secondary purpose of this study was to put scholarship on narrative persuasion into conversation with that of narratology. Similar to past work, we examined how narratives were differentially persuasive compared to a non-narrative text, such as the fact sheet we used in our second study. Where our work departs from how narrative is typically studied in this field is that we conceptualized narrative as existing along a continuum, from non-narrative to narrative whereas past work often treats texts as either dichotomously as non-narrative texts or narratives. We manipulated story, plot, and discourse elements deliberately to examine how these formal features of a narrative factor into the narrative persuasion process. Our first study employed two conditions, which varied emotionally engage and cognitively immerse themselves in the order in which story elements appeared to alter a discourse element, character emphasis, and so doing also altered plot (i.e., the order in which story elements became known to the reader). Thus, we did not find a main effect of character emphasis on outcomes but the data did support our overall theoretical model through a path analysis. The second study sought to disentangle the discourse element of character emphasis from plot by showing participants a news narrative with a coherent plot, the same narrative with a randomized/incoherent plot, a fact sheet, or a control condition. Participants were exposed to one condition that featured a Syrian refugee or a foreign aid recipient. For both subject conditions (Syrian refugee or foreign aid), the news narrative randomized plot elements resulted in a less narratively engaging text, but was still superior to the fact sheet or control conditions. This indicates that a coherent plot does make a to which narrative elements are engaged and narrative persuasive theory would then predict that such engagement indirectly impacts persuasive outcomes. Even in the absence of a good plot, the story elements (what happens and what was expressed to the audiences) still results in a higher level of narrative engagement than a fact sheet. The randomized news narrative/incoherent plot also reduced stigma for Syrian refugees compared to baseline levels but was not statistically different from the well-structured news narrative or the fact sheet conditions. Importantly, participants who were exposed to the news narrative with a coherent plot perceived Syrians as less stigmatized than the fact sheet or control conditions, indicating that a poor plot does not preclude the desigmatizing effect of a narrative from occurring. For the foreign aid recipient news narratives, we instead found that the narrative conditions, regardless of plot coherence, reduced stigma to a greater degree compared to baseline. Indeed, the fact sheet condition was no different from baseline levels. We took this to mean that there is something other than plot alone that drives the narrative persuasion process.

In our final study we focused on parsing out the influence of plot coherence and character emphasis individually. We manipulated plot coherence similarity for audiences who were told that we randomly varied the order or paragraphs shown to participants. Character emphasis was altered by either showing participants a story told from the perspective of a refugee—the exemplar condition—or having them read the story as told by an expert. Our findings are promising in that while plot/story structure was shown to be important in altering narrative engagement directly, it only had a marginal effect on meaningful affect, which we would caution readers not to rely on in their own work but instead to focus on plot coherence. The exemplar condition, however, showed a main effect on narrative engagement, meaningful affect, and perceived stigma. The findings from our three studies taken together seem to indicate that plot coherence is not inconsequential as it directly bears on narrative engagement. However, it is the use of an exemplar that affords readers the opportunity to better relate to the story characters and emotionally engage and cognitively immerse themselves into a narrative and thereby alter the stigma they attach to refugees. Perceived similarity and attitudes were not impacted directly by the experimental manipulations, but when examining the overall effects across our studies, the interrelationships between the variables were congruent with our predictions, indicating general support for our theoretical model. We discuss the limitations to these findings shortly.

While we were able to validate our earlier exploratory path models against an independent sample and an a priori model, readers should draw upon the findings from the path analysis cautiously for two reasons. First, our final study validated our prior model against an independent sample, which is a necessary aspect of conducting such analyses (see Altman & Altman, 2015), but we were unable to examine this effect over time to establish temporal order of the processes as could be done in a longitudinal study. Second, relatively recent advancements in the field indicate that careful manipulation of proposed mediators is necessary to determine whether the model only applies to certain participants and whether the studied relationships are spurious (see Bullock et al., 2010). The findings of this study also bear on the practice of journalism. In addition to its gatekeeping watchdog, and informational roles, this study shows that the effect of narrative coherence may be an additional role journalism may play in fostering an informed public service of the democratic. As Sunstein (2007) argues, news media organizations can help to expose us to perspectives, ideas, and peoples that we would otherwise not have sought out, thereby reducing polarization. Our findings indicate that news media may also encourage audiences to perspective take and empathize with story subjects with whom audiences would be unlikely to take a supportive role. As the link between attitudes, behavioral intentions, and actual behavior is well established (M. Kim & Hunter, 1993), it is possible that exposure to news media content might promote merely fostering a well-informed public in the service of democracy. As Sunstein (2007) argues, news media organizations can help to expose us to perspectives, ideas, and peoples that we would otherwise not have sought out, thereby reducing polarization. Our findings indicate that news media may also encourage audiences to perspective take and empathize with story subjects with whom audiences would be unlikely to take a supportive role. As the link between attitudes, behavioral intentions, and actual behavior is well established (M. Kim & Hunter, 1993), it is possible that exposure to news media content might promote merely fostering a well-informed public in the service of democracy.
concerned that actively drawing from these findings may put into question the objectivity in their role in arbitrating the truth and informing the public of newsworthy happenings (McChesney, 2004; Schudson, 2011). However, journalists should remember that by sharing knowledge about controversial issues or social groups they are inherently also shifting attitudes (see Allaracín, Johnson, Fischbein, & Muellerleile, 2001). Journalists concerned with creating accurate views should therefore be aware of not always providing accurate information but also storytelling that is well-written, coherently organized, and emotionally engaging in service of their informational duties. Therefore, integrating the findings of this study into professional practice is not necessarily antagonistic to the function of journalism within a deliberative democracy. Journalists who are of the opinion that the professional field needs to return to its roots and more actively engage in advocacy are more likely to be comfortable with the notion of deliberately crafting news accounts to be more narratively engaging and therefore have greater indirect bearing on attitudes (see Garcia Martinez, 2019).

The findings of this study are especially timely especially in light of the xenophobic rhetoric employed by the Trump administration and its ongoing efforts to curb refugee admissions into the United States. As of this writing, the Trump administration has effectively stymied the flow of refugee fleeing violence in Syria, El Salvador, and elsewhere in the United States (Hernández & Miroff, 2019; Zezima, 2019). While these xenophobic attacks and policies might be politically calculated, the findings of this study seem to indicate that public opinion on the issue of refugees is plastic and may, perhaps, undergo change. The public calculus might also be altered as public policy is drafted in response to changes we found in stigma could reset to baseline levels if they degrade or are susceptible to counter messaging. Another limitation of our final study is that we cannot be sure that we changed attitudes or stigma from baseline levels since we did not include a control group. Although we controlled for sociodemographic and attitudinal variables, the results of our study should not be taken to support the notion that public opinion on the issue of refugees is plastic and may change. However, we are confident that the changes in attitude measured by this study are reliable and valid and account for high degrees of stigma and negative attitudes toward refugees. Yet, for participants who were narratively engaged—in part because of a lack of xenophobia in this example—the theoretical model functions as predicted. For this reason, we cannot stress enough the need to only cautiously draw on the findings without additional confirmatory work. This subsequent work may be of special importance for narrative persuasion scholars because it is the case that only some participants can be influenced within the narrative persuasion model—such as participants who do not harbor xenophobic beliefs or attitudes when the messaging deals with refugees or immigrants—then the utility of narratives as persuasive tools may be limited or contingent on the roles of these variables in the narrative persuasion process.

As we pointed out in our limitations, this study could not examine the long-term effects of a narrative on stigma or attitudes toward refugees. However, we believe that our findings show promise regarding the roles of these concepts in reducing stigma and negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups. While we believe that our findings show promise regarding the roles of these concepts in reducing stigma and negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups, we also believe that they need additional confirmatory work. This subsequent work may be of special importance for narrative persuasion scholars because it is the case that only some participants can be influenced within the narrative persuasion model—such as participants who do not harbor xenophobic beliefs or attitudes when the messaging deals with refugees or immigrants—then the utility of narratives as persuasive tools may be limited or contingent on the roles of these variables in the narrative persuasion process.

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Another limitation of our final study is that we cannot be sure that we changed attitudes or stigma from baseline levels since we did not include a control group. Although we controlled for sociodemographic and attitudinal variables, the results of our study should not be taken to support the notion that public opinion on the issue of refugees is plastic and may change. However, we are confident that the changes in attitude measured by this study are reliable and valid and account for high degrees of stigma and negative attitudes toward refugees. Yet, for participants who were narratively engaged—in part because of a lack of xenophobia in this example—the theoretical model functions as predicted. For this reason, we cannot stress enough the need to only cautiously draw on the findings without additional confirmatory work. This subsequent work may be of special importance for narrative persuasion scholars because it is the case that only some participants can be influenced within the narrative persuasion model—such as participants who do not harbor xenophobic beliefs or attitudes when the messaging deals with refugees or immigrants—then the utility of narratives as persuasive tools may be limited or contingent on the roles of these variables in the narrative persuasion process.

As we pointed out in our limitations, this study could not examine the long-term effects of a narrative on stigma or attitudes toward refugees. However, we believe that our findings show promise regarding the roles of these concepts in reducing stigma and negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups. While we believe that our findings show promise regarding the roles of these concepts in reducing stigma and negative attitudes toward stigmatized groups, we also believe that they need additional confirmatory work. This subsequent work may be of special importance for narrative persuasion scholars because it is the case that only some participants can be influenced within the narrative persuasion model—such as participants who do not harbor xenophobic beliefs or attitudes when the messaging deals with refugees or immigrants—then the utility of narratives as persuasive tools may be limited or contingent on the roles of these variables in the narrative persuasion process.
Just as the breadth of the subjects featured in our news narratives varies, our stimuli across all three studies were also carefully designed to elicit a specific affective response. Obviously, journalists and public advocates are going to face constraints when depicting or designing their own texts, which may elicit partially or wholly different affective reactions from their audiences. Although we drew from extant theory in forming our hypotheses that meaningful affect would be more likely to influence and understanding responses from participants (e.g. Bailey & Wodajnisky, 2015; E. L. Cohen, 2016; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012), we do not yet know whether meaningful affect is the same across the MTurk. Therefore, some recommendations based on these supplemental analyses, researchers should interpret these findings cautiously. First, we should point that that the overall trend of the data was not significantly different than what we reported in the preregistered manuscript. As we screened out more than half of the participants who accessed the study. Participants were removed for having failed one or more of the screening methods, but most participants who were eliminated across several criteria, indicating that there is some redundancy among participants for spending an inappropriate amount of time with the stimulus and the other screening methods. This is not surprising as participants who engage in problematic study participation behavior in one manner may be likely to do so in a multitude of ways. This also shows the need for alternative screening methods. More broadly, researchers should examine other formal features of narrative such as medium in eliciting attitude change. Although a meta-analysis of this particular formal feature (text’s video) found that there is no meaningful difference between the two in narrative persuasion work (Buddock & Dillard, 2016), it may be worth exploring whether video or text may be more effective at eliciting changes in stigma since no studies to our knowledge have done so.

Although we set out to reduce stigma toward our target population, it is possible that the psychological process described here could be used to increase stigma for prosocial ends. Public problems such as texting while driving (TWD) have been shown to be difficult to address (Harrison, 2011; Hashani, Rivera, Medico, Foreman, & Wirth, 2017; Kim, Russo, & Wirth, 2015; Prat, Gran, Planes, González-Iglesias, & Sullivan, 2015; Seiler, 2015) and researchers have proposed using a social norms approach to decrease texting while driving (TWD) rates (H. L. Cohen, 2016). t-tests, ANOVAs, and regression analyses. This change was approved. However, nearly all of the department had expressed concern with the quality of data collected in this way. We then petitioned the editorial board at Collabir to allow us to collect the data from a departmental participant pool through an online survey identification for the final round, resulting in a nonsensical text analysis. From the original, preregistered manuscript we had initially stated that we would collect data from a “SONA” participant pool. This description is unclear since SONA is the name of the software package that the department uses to manage data collection. While we did not register any analyses of the screening procedures other than one of the three knowledge questions. A total of 44% of the participants who were eliminated across several criteria, indicating that there is some redundancy among participants for spending an inappropriate amount of time with the stimulus and the other screening methods. This is not surprising as participants who engage in problematic study participation behavior in one manner may be likely to do so in a multitude of ways. This also shows the need for alternative screening methods. More broadly, researchers should examine other formal features of narrative such as medium in eliciting attitude change. Although a meta-analysis of this particular formal feature (text’s video) found that there is no meaningful difference between the two in narrative persuasion work (Buddock & Dillard, 2016), it may be worth exploring whether video or text may be more effective at eliciting changes in stigma since no studies to our knowledge have done so.

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