Changing Attitudes Toward Prison Reform: Effects of Similarity to Prisoners on Attraction and Rejection[1]

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Article:

Human-rights organizations and prisoner advocacy groups try to create positive attitudes toward liberal prison reform by emphasizing similarities between the public and prisoners. Theories of similarity and attraction, however, suggest that this strategy can backfire. Although it commonly increases liking, similarity can increase rejection when the similar other is stigmatized. An experimen1 tested the efficacy of appeals to similarity in changing prison reform attitudes. Republicans and Democrats listed aspects of themselves that made them similar to or different from prisoners, and then they completed a measure of prison reform attitudes (Silvia, 2003). Emphasizing similarity between the participant and prisoners did not always cause positive attitudes. After focusing on similarity to prisoners, Democrats reported more liberal prison reform attitudes, and Republicans reported more punitive attitudes. Implications for changing attitudes toward prison reform are discussed.

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The United States leads the world in incarceration (Christie, 2000). It imprisons a greater proportion of its citizens than any other country, and the number of citizens under correctional control is higher than ever (Harrison & Beck, 2002). The prison population, however, fails to reflect the overall population. At the end of 2000, 9.7% of African American men between the ages of 25 and 29 years were in prison, compared to 2.9% of Hispanic males and 1.1% of White males in the same age range (Beck & Harrison, 2001).

The quality of incarceration has changed along with the quantity. Controversial trends include hiring private companies to operate for-profit prisons (Sentencing Project, 2002) and building "supermax prisons" (Riveland, 1999) in which prisoners spend as few as 3 hours per week outside of their cells.

Attitudes toward prison reform represent how punitive people wish the prison system to be (Silvia, 2003). Many people would like prisons to become tougher for prisoners. The rise of supermax prisons and the return of chain gangs reflect these attitudes. Other people would like prisons to become less tough for prisoners. Developing alternatives to prisons and enhancing vocational training for prisoners reflect such attitudes (Davies, 1993).

Not much research has addressed the public's attitudes toward prison reform. In his survey research, Flanagan (1996) found that "Americans' opinions about correctional policy and practices were much less fully developed than views about law enforcement or other components of the criminal justice system" (p. 75). According to a recent survey (Belden Russonello & Stewart, 2001), most people are at least somewhat favorable toward alternatives to prisons, but the variability in attitudes is substantial.

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In their attempts to influence the public's attitudes toward the prison system, human-rights organizations and prisoner advocacy groups often point out similarities between the general public and prisoners (Christie, 2000). Commonly, such appeals point out fundamental similarities, such as the shared humanity of prisoners and nonprisoners. Human Rights Watch (2000), for example, argued that supermax prisons involve "a stunning disregard of the fact that all prisoners are members of the human community." The notion that people feel more favorably toward similar others is intuitive. Thus, it is no surprise that appeals to similarity appear in many attempts to change prison reform attitudes.

Does this work? Do people feel more favorably toward prison reform when they feel similar to prisoners? The present experiment examines the efficacy of appeals to similarity for changing prison reform attitudes. According to theories of similarity and attraction, similarity has complex effects on attitudes. In some conditions, feeling similar to prisoners will promote positive attitudes toward humanizing reforms. In other conditions, however, feeling similar to prisoners will backfire, leading to less favorable attitudes toward such reform. Our goal is to identify these conditions, examine the effects of similarity empirically, and consider the implications for research and applied practice.

Similarity, Attraction, and Rejection

Social psychology has a long tradition of research on the consequences of interpersonal similarity. Byrne's (1971, 1997) research on similarity and attraction forms the cornerstone for this literature. The *similarity—attraction effect,* in which feeling similar to another person increases liking for that person, appears in diverse dimensions of similarity, such as attitudes (Byrne, 1961), personality characteristics (Byrne, 1971), *first* names (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992), and birthdays (Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998). Similarity on important dimensions has a greater effect than similarity on trivial dimensions (Byrne, London, & Griffitt, 1968), but relatively unimportant dimensions of similarity still affect liking significantly. Moreover, the similarity—attraction relationship appears to be linear (Byrne, 1971).

Given this large literature, similarity seems like a sensible way to change prison reform attitudes. If people feel similar to prisoners, they should like them more and thus prefer less punitive forms of incarceration. A catch, however, complicates this analysis. Similarity increases rejection when people feel similar to someone who is stigmatized, aversive, or negative (Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995; Lerner & Agar, 1972; Mettee & Wilkins, 1972). In Novak and Lerner's (1968) study, people were similar or dissimilar to another person. In one condition, the other person was stigmatized (a former mental patient). Similarity increased rejection when the other person was stigmatized. Taylor and Mettee (1971) manipulated personality similarity to a confederate, who later acted considerately or obnoxiously. Similarity increased liking of the friendly confederate, but increased rejection of the obnoxious confederate.

Parallel effects appear when people judge members of in-groups and out-groups. The *black-sheep effect,* a pattern of in-group favoritism and in-group rejection (Marques & Paez, 1994), appears when people evaluate in-group members. Overall, people like members of their in-group more than members of out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). An exception, however, is when an in-group member has a negative feature. In this case, people prefer an out-group member over an in-group member, even when the out-group member has the same negative feature (Eidelman & Biernat, 2003). Once again, we see that similarity—in this case, similarity based on group membership can cause attraction or rejection.

In short, similarity can have opposing effects on liking. Feeling similar to someone polarizes attitudes toward the person. Similarity increases rejection if the similar other is initially disliked or seen as negative. Similarity increases liking if the similar other has no apparent negative qualities. We expect, then, that similarity is not the royal road to more favorable prison reform attitudes. Prisoners have characteristics that could lead to similarity—rejection effects. The status *of prisoner* is inherently stigmatizing. Perceiving someone as personally responsible for a negative event, such as a crime, leads to disliking that person (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1995). Moreover, incarceration represents one way that a society officially rejects people who fail to meet the society's standards (Christie, 2000).

The Present Research

We conducted an experiment to test the efficacy of appeals to similarity as a means of changing attitudes toward prison reform. Given the research on similarity, attraction, and rejection, similarity should have opposing effects on prison reform attitudes. We expect political ideology, represented by a person's political party identification, to moderate the effects of similarity on prison reform attitudes.

Republicans and Democrats are known-groups that hold different attitudes toward prison reform (Silvia, 2003). Relative to Democrats, Republicans prefer prison reforms that are significantly more punitive. This difference appears in a diverse sample of adults who responded to an Internet-based survey *(d = .73)* and in a sample of undergraduates from the same university as the participants in the present experiment *(d = .72).* Given that Republicans have relatively negative attitudes toward prison reform, they should respond to high similarity b_y further supporting punitive reforms. Conversely, given that Democrats have relatively positive attitudes toward liberal prison reforms, they should respond to high similarity by further supporting liberal reforms.

The present experiment extends past research by examining the effects of similarity on general policy attitudes. Past work has manipulated similarity and measured attitudes with regard to a specific target person, such as liking or disliking for a deviant group member (e.g., Begue, *2001;* Eidelman & Biernat, *2003).* Our experiment, in contrast, measures attitudes toward a target-relevant policy issue (i.e., attitudes toward prison reform), rather than the specific target (i.e., attitudes toward prisoners themselves).

From an applied standpoint, it is important for similarity's effects to extend beyond specific people and to generalize to attitudes regarding social policies. According to theories of the organization of attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, *1993),* evaluations and beliefs regarding a target tend to form coherent structures. Heider's (1958) balance theory, for example, predicts that liking another person leads to liking what the person likes as well as liking things that promote the other person's welfare. Attraction to and rejection of prisoners, therefore, should affect attitudes toward policies that affect the welfare of prisoners, such as prison reform attitudes.

Method

Participants and Design

A total of *131* undergraduates enrolled in General Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) participated in the study and received credit toward a research participation option. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-person conditions (Similarity to Prisoners: similarities vs. differences). Political party identification (Republican vs. Democrat), a quasi-independent variable, was measured.

Procedure

People participated in groups ranging from 4 to 9 participants. After completing an informed consent form and a questionnaire related to another study, participants received a questionnaire entitled "Opinions About American Prisons." Ostensibly a survey of opinions, the questionnaire began with a manipulation of perceived similarity to prisoners. Participants received one of two versions of this questionnaire. In the similarities condition, participants were asked "What are three basic things about you that you have in common with prisoners?" Three slots for their responses followed the question. In the differences condition, participants were asked "What are three basic things about you that make you different from prisoners?" Again, three slots for their responses followed the question.

Perceptions of similarity stem from perceiving that the self and another person have overlapping features (Srull & Gaelick, 1983; Tversky, 1977). This experiment's manipulation requires an active consideration of overlapping features, so it should be a reasonably strong manipulation of interpersonal similarity. Alternative one-size-fits-all manipulations—such as reading essays about how prisoners do or do not resemble the general public—may be less effective because they are relatively passive.

After the similarity manipulation, participants completed the Prison Reform Attitudes scale (Silvia, 2003). This attitude scale contains 12 items (5 that are reverse-scored) that form a single factor of attitudes toward making the prison system softer or tougher for prisoners (e.g., "More money should be spent on alternatives to prisons"; Silvia, 2003). Participants responded to each item using 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 *(strongly disagree)* to *7 (strongly agree).* The items do not measure the goals of incarceration (e.g., retribution vs. rehabilitation), beliefs about the efficacy of rehabilitation, attitudes toward prisoners themselves, or beliefs about the causes of crime (e.g., poverty). Factor analysis supports the proposed single-factor model, and several studies have suggested that the scale has solid known-groups and predictive validity (Silvia, 2003).

After completing the Prison Reform Attitudes scale, participants completed a series of demographic questions. Embedded among filler questions (e.g., number of semesters spent at UNCG) was the measure of political party affiliation. Participants were asked "Which political party do you most prefer?" from a set of three options: *Republican, Democrat,* or *Other.* After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation in the study.

Results

Data Reduction

We excluded 9 participants because they did not complete the writing task (6 in the similar condition and 3 in the different condition). Of the remaining 122 participants, 51 identified as Republicans, 50 identified as Democrats, and 21 selected the Other option or did not select any option. Only participants who identified themselves as Republican or Democrat were included in the final sample because these two parties dominate the political debate about prison reform policies, most voters and politicians belong to one of these two parties, the Other
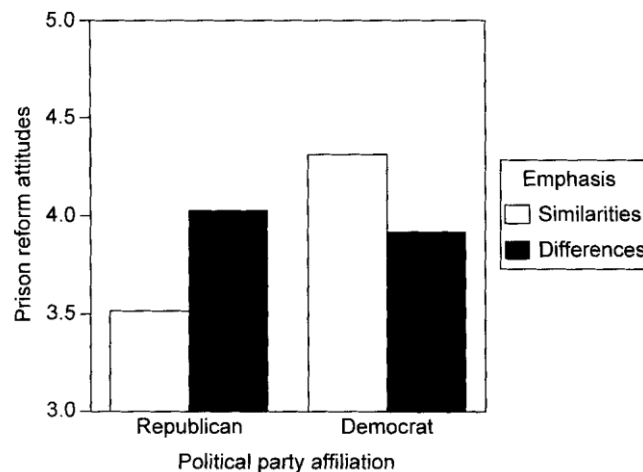

Figure 1. Perceptions of similarity, political party affiliation, and prison reform attitudes.

category contains heterogeneous ideologies, and the number of participants in the Other category was too small to allow reliable data analysis.

The final sample consisted of 101 participants. Men and women made up similar proportions of each political party. The Republican group had 18 (35%) men and 31 (65%) women, while the Democrat group had 13 (26%) men and 37 (74%) women. Initial analyses found no main effects or interactions involving gender, so it is not discussed further.

Responses to the 12 items in the Prison Reform Attitudes scale were averaged, forming a single attitude score for each participant. Higher scores indicate positive attitudes toward liberal prison reform. The scale's internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .79$) and equivalent to reliability levels in past research with underwas high ($\alpha = .79$)

and equivalent to reliability levels in past research with undergraduates (α = .82; Silvia, 2003). Effect sizes were computed with MINSIZE 2 (Morse, 1999).

Attitudes Toward Prison Reform
A factorial ANOVA on prison reform attitudes found no main effect for the similarity manipulation *(F < 1)* and a marginally significant main effect for political party, $F(1, 97) = 3.87$, $p < .052$. A significant interaction between the similarity manipulation and political party qualified this main effect, $F(1, 97) = 6.74$, $p < .011$. Focused comparisons examined the pattern of this interaction, which is shown in Figure 1. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics.

How did Democrats and Republicans respond to writing about their similarities and differences to prisoners? Democrats showed a similarity—attraction

Table 1

Effects of Perceptions of Similarity and Political Party Affiliation on Prison Reform Attitudes

Political party	Emphasis	M	SD	Mdn	n
Republican	Similar	3.52	0.78	3.50	22
	Different	4.03	1.09	4.00	29
Democrat	Similar	4.31	0.76	4.37	26
	Different	3.92	0.75	4.00	24

Note. Scale values range from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward liberal prison reform.

effect. For Democrats, writing about similarities caused more humanizing prison reform attitudes, $t(48) = 1.85$, $p < .071$ *(d = 0.52)*, relative to writing about differences. Republicans, in contrast, showed a similarity—rejection effect. For Republicans, writing about similarities caused more punitive prison reform attitudes, $t(49) = 1.85$, $p < .07$ *(d = 0.52)*, relative to writing about differences. Our predictions were thus supported.

After writing about their similarities to prisoners, Republicans and Democrats showed significantly different prison reform attitudes, $t(46) = 3.56$, $p < .001$ *(d = 1.03)*. Writing about similarities caused Democrats to show more positive attitudes toward prison reform, relative to Republicans. Writing about differences from prisoners did not cause Republicans and Democrats to show significantly different prison reform attitudes, $t(51) = 0.42$, $p < .68$ *(d = 0.12)*.

Discussion
Critics of the American prison system point out its racial inequality, unusual size relative to countries with similar crime rates, and controversial use of for- profit prisons and supermax facilities (e.g., Christie, 2000; Johnson, 2002). In their attempt to change the public's attitudes about prison reform, many reformers emphasize similarities between prisoners and the general public. This strategy seems sensible and intuitive.

Theories of similarity, however, indicate that similarity has complex effects on attraction (Byrne, 1971). Overall, people like similar others. When others have negative features, however, people reject similar others (Eidelman & Bierrat, 2003; Novak & Lerner, 1968; Taylor & Mettee, 1971). Many people view prisoners negatively, so similarity to prisoners should cause both attraction and rejection.

The present experiment tested the effects of similarity on attitudes toward prison reform. People described basic ways in which they resembled or differed from prisoners. The effect of emphasizing similarities and differences depended on the person's political ideology. Democrats, a group with positive attitudes toward liberal prison

reform (Silvia, 2003), became even more positive when they considered their similarities to prisoners. Republicans, a group with negative attitudes toward liberal prison reform, became even more negative when they considered their similarities to prisoners. The polarizing effect of similarity replicates past work on attraction and rejection (Lerner & Agar, 1972; Taylor & Mettee, 1971) and demonstrates that similarity is not always an effective way of creating positive attitudes toward stigmatized groups.

Political ideology, a complex concept, can be measured in many ways (Knight, 1999). For example, people can note their degree of liberalism or conservatism on Likert-type scales. We operationalized political ideology with political party affiliation because this measure of ideology has several advantages for our research. Republican and Democrat party affiliations are meaningful categories in everyday life, as most politicians and voters affiliate with one of these two parties. Representing political ideology with party affiliation thus increases the experiment's ecological validity. Moreover, the experiment's findings—that Democrats and Republicans respond differently to similarity information— translate easily into everyday applications.

The present experiment builds on past research in several ways. First, past work has examined similarity's effect on liking and disliking for specific people, such as confederates of the experimenter or deviant in-group members (e.g., Eidelman & Biernat, 2003; Lerner & Agar, 1972), whereas we manipulated similarity to a class of people (prisoners in general) rather than to a specific target (a single prisoner). Second, we measured attitudes toward a general policy issue that affects the target of similarity, rather than liking and disliking for the target.

Apart from assessing the generality of similarity's effects on attraction and rejection, these extensions enhance the applied value of our findings. To be practical, similarity to prisoners needs to affect broader policy preferences that involve prisoners in general, not only attitudes toward specific people in prison. If perceptions of similarity did not translate into endorsement of policies that would change the prison system or enhance the welfare of prisoners as a group, then similarity to prisoners would not be a useful way of changing prison reform attitudes.

Some implications of this research are straightforward. Similarity is not necessarily the best way to promote positive prison reform attitudes. Among people who are inclined toward positive attitudes, such as persons with liberal political ideologies or experience in prisons (Silvia, 2003), illustrating similarities to prisoners should cause more positive attitudes toward humanizing prison reforms. Among people who are inclined toward negative attitudes, illustrating similarities may backfire.

Other approaches may be more effective in changing the attitudes of people with conservative political ideologies. For example, showing how alternatives to prison serve traditional values ("Convicts should be working hard to improve the community instead of sitting around in a cell") or conservative economic ideals ("Reducing the prison population will reduce the government's need for taxes") might be more effective than pointing out interpersonal similarities.

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