SPEAKING MY TRUTH:
WHY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES CAN BRIDGE DIVIDES BUT MISLEAD

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Introduction

Facts are not what they used to be. Whether you are checking the news or opening the latest journal article, there is increasing evidence that people are more susceptible to misinformation and less receptive to factual arguments than we might hope (Van Bavel et al., 2021). While fact checks can be effective in some domains (e.g., health), they prove to be a very weak antidote for misinformation when it comes to politics (Walter & Murphy, 2017). This problem is exacerbated by increasing polarization in the U.S. and abroad, where partisans express a growing sense of distrust and moral animosity (Finkel et al., 2020). But a new paper offers a strategy for bridging political divides (Kubin, Puryear, Schein, & Gray, 2021). In an impressive series of 15 studies, they detail how expressions of personal experience can garner respect from people across the political aisle.

A majority of people mistakenly assume that basing their stand about a polarized issue, like same-sex marriage or abortion, on facts will garner the respect of someone who disagrees with them (Kubin et al., 2021). In reality, people are more likely to respect their political opponents--and even see them as more rational--if they base their moral positions on personal experience. This pattern was observed in comments about YouTube videos that discussed abortion, in face-to-face conversations about guns, in reactions to New York Times op-eds, and transcripts of interviews between political opponents on CNN and Fox News. Sharing a personal experience of harm seems to be a potent way to get our political opponents to accept our positions as rational and generate greater respect for our position.

The power of experience

There can be great power in sharing personal experiences or stories which can humanize people who have otherwise been marginalized or forgotten. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which relayed the brutal experiences of a long-suffering slave and the possibility for Christian love to overcome such atrocities (Stowe, 1998), fundamentally altered whites' attitudes toward Black Americans and helped end slavery in the U.S. The power of personal experience and narrative also pervades our everyday lives. We rely on other people's experiences when shopping, donating, navigating social relationships, or learning to parent. We read fables as children and memoirs as adults. And weaving personal anecdotes into scientific research makes it more compelling and digestible (Jones & Crow, 2017).

When we discount people's lived experiences, we are stripping them of a core aspect of what it means to be human. At best we overlook them, and at worst it can lead to treating people as animals or objects, and as justification for enacting severe harms. Indeed, "*Victims of genocide are labeled as vermin by perpetrators…. Immigrants are likened to invasive pests or infectious diseases... The poor are mocked as libidinous dolts...[and] Degrading pornographers depict women as mindless, pneumatic objects*" (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014, pg. 400).

Fortunately, we can avoid dehumanizing people through engaging with others in meaningful ways, seeing them as individuals, and recognizing superordinate identities such as our common humanity (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Engaging with outgroups and hearing their first-hand accounts can bridge divides and build coalitions (Hassler et al., 2020), especially between people with differing moral views. People often assume that those who morally disagree with us are irrational or stupid. But if that person has a personal story, we can understand where they are coming from. Such anecdotes can elicit sympathy, build respect,

and at times sway the moral pendulum (Bloom, 2010; Broockman & Kalla, 2016). At the very least they are a good place to start productive conversations.

Why experience matters

The power of experience is itself, hardly novel. Even Joseph Stalin seemed to apprehend the power of a great narrative when he famously said that "A single death is a tragedy; A million deaths is a statistic".[1] The identifiable nature of a single personal experience is often more emotionally compelling than simply conveying facts. This phenomenon is known as the *identifiable victim effect*, in which victims who have vivid identifiable features elicit stronger effects on emotions, judgments, and behavior than victims who are generally described as part of a group suffering harm (Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Identifiable victims garner greater sympathy (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007), distress (Kogut & Ritov, 2005), as well as increased donations (Small et al., 2007).

Moral emotions, such as those elicited by identifiable victims, are potent. For instance, messages on social media containing these moralized words both capture our attention and motivate our actions (Brady, Crockett, & Van Bavel, 2020). In addition, the identity of the storyteller or victim in moral narratives is one of the most important features that influences social judgments (Hester & Gray, 2020). In other words, personal experiences might help imbue our political conversations with a feeling of respect because they evoke an identifiable victim in a moral universe we can suddenly apprehend and respect.

What we don't know

Building respect might be a good first step towards starting a conversation, but it remains unclear if people find personal experience persuasive. For example, if you hold a positive stance on vaccination and in meeting someone else, learn that they are an avid anti-vaxxer because their child expressed symptoms of autism after getting vaccinated, it could lead you to view their logic as rational (i.e., understand why they became an anti-vaxxer) and respect her position, while remaining completely unmoved from your own beliefs about vaccination. In this case, it would also be irrational to shift one's beliefs about vaccination on the basis of a single experience since it flies in the face of extensive scientific evidence.

One potential solution would involve the provision of facts after a personal story to increase respect and perceived rationality while ensuring that any changes in beliefs are grounded in reality. While it is intuitively tempting to assume that a personal narrative bolstered with data would be more powerful than a personal narrative alone, the identifiable victim literature suggests the opposite hypothesis: that facts would neutralize the impact of story, reducing respect and perceived rationality. Indeed, some work has found that when the story of one identified victim was accompanied by statistical information about the scope of the problem, the participants *decreased* their donations, compared to when only the story of the identified victim or the statistical facts were presented (Erlandsson et al., 2016). This indicates that facts may not be effective in increasing perceived rationality and respect when they are presented with a harm-based personal story.

[1] While this quote is widely attributed to the Soviet dictator, this fact is itself disputed.

There is also an important distinction between respecting *the individual* and believing that their reasoning for their position is rational, versus respecting *the position itself* and perceiving it as rational. Returning to the vaccination example, one could hear that personal story and still view the anti-vaxxer position as immoral, irrational, and unworthy of respect in society. Your beliefs about vaccination have not changed, even if you respect and humanize the particular anti-vaxxer. More research is needed to determine how hearing the personal experiences of someone might influence one's own attitude change.

The downside of stories

The power that story has over facts to capture the imagination and create respect for an individual's position is easily exploited. Whether it is Willie Horton's early release from a Massachusetts prison or the stories of children trafficked in the basement of a pizza parlor, narratives are easily weaponized by propagandists and other bad actors (Krieg, 2019). From this perspective, Kubin and colleagues (2021) may not have uncovered a feature in human discourse that might bridge moral divides, but rather a bug that could be easily exploited. While Study 14 shows that presenting facts garners more respect than claims with no backing at all, these studies still find that narratives beat out facts in creating a greater perception of rationality and even perceived truth (Study 13). Yet a position backed by one personal anecdote is no more objectively true than one backed by no anecdote or facts at all. More crucially, a position backed by a personal narrative is not more true than a position backed by facts.

While both narratives and facts can be cherry-picked to support a position, personal narratives, as the authors point out, are unimpugnable. A conclusion drawn from facts, on the other hand, can be disputed and disproven and, thus, science and society should prefer fact-based positions. Yet, when it comes to respect, feelings are prioritized over facts. As these studies show, what is true gains less respect than what one might *feel* to be true.

Are we to get into a battle of cherry-picked narratives of harm to promote our policy positions, amplified by social media and the ease with which these narratives can spread? How can such narratives be combated? The counter to a story of harm is, by definition, a story of lack of harm (e.g., a vaccine that reduced future infection). But the larger problem is that the real counter narrative for any anecdotal evidence is found in the data (e.g., a peer reviewed paper showing the benefits of vaccination for the treatment condition). A particularly troublesome implication of this work, then, is that a personal story that is false will have more power to create respect than facts, including those facts that would serve to correct the narrative.

Conclusion

Understanding how to communicate across political divides is a critical issue in a post-truth era. Several recent structural shifts have enabled unscrupulous actors to increasingly circulate misinformation (Iyengar & Massey, 2019). As such, understanding how to communicate across political divides will be an increasingly important topic not only for politicians, journalists and policy makers, but also for scientists. Learning how to do this effectively, without weaponizing misinformation, will require great care and nuance. We hope our paper has helped move this conversation forward with the aim of promoting public discourse grounded in reality.

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