Similarity Focus and Support For Redistribution

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Despite unprecedented levels of inequality in the US, redistribution support is not widespread. Four studies show that prompting a cognitive focus on similarity (vs. dissimilarity) can effectively boost support for redistribution by changing perceptions of individuals’ dispositional inputs (hard work, motivation), justification of unequal outcomes, and perceived fairness of inequality.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The inequality of wealth in the US has reached record high levels, which has sparked a debate about the role of inequality in the economic instability and the erosion of the middle class (Piketty 2011). But despite wide agreement that wealth inequality in the US is too high, support for redistributive policies has not been widespread, and there has been much debate about the effectiveness and the optimal level of redistribution (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Preferences for redistribution stem from individuals’ distinct beliefs about the fairness of unequal outcomes (Bénabou and Tirole 2006). Resistance to redistribution is driven, to a significant extent, by individuals’ belief that the unequal distribution of outcomes is fair because it results from natural differences in individuals’ dispositional inputs such as hard work and effort (Alesina and Angeletos 2005). Whereas what drives support for, and resistance to, redistribution has been abundantly researched, little work has examined the strategies that can effectively shift redistribution support (Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2014; Chow and Galak 2012).

The present research examines a new strategy to boost redistribution support – focus on similarity (vs. dissimilarity). We build on prior studies which showed that prompting individuals to focus on similarity (vs. dissimilarity) in an unrelated task (e.g., while evaluating pictures) can increase their perception of similarity of stimuli in subsequent judgments (e.g., the height of Mount Everest in relation to a numeric anchor, Mussweiler 2001). We hypothesize that prompting a similarity focus in an unrelated task (e.g., evaluation of pictures) will lead people to perceive greater similarity within the social environment while they determine their preferred level of redistribution. Specifically, we predict that focusing on similarity (vs. dissimilarity) will boost individuals’ perceptions of how similar people are in their dispositional inputs (motivation and hard work), which will, in turn, weaken the justification of unequal outcomes and the perceived fairness of an unequal distribution, ultimately leading to greater support for redistributive policies. Four studies tested this prediction.

Study 1A manipulated similarity focus in a picture task. US participants were shown two pictures used in previous research (Markman and Gentner 1997), and they were asked to list the similarities between the two pictures (similarity focus condition), dissimilarities between the pictures (dissimilarity focus condition), or to describe one picture in detail (control condition). Afterwards, participants indicated the extent to which they would support or oppose two redistributive tax policies (creating a new tax for individuals earning more than $1 million, creating a new tax for individuals earning more than $5 million). To check if the similarity effect was contingent upon individuals’ political ideology, participants also completed a multi-item scale (Nail et al. 2009) and a single-item scale (Jost 2006) of political ideology. Support for redistributive tax policies was stronger in the similarity condition than in the dissimilarity and control conditions (there was no difference between the dissimilarity and control conditions). This effect remained significant when political ideology was added to the analysis, and it did not depend on (i.e. was not moderated by) ideology.

Study 1B showed that the effect of similarity (vs. dissimilarity) focus generalized beyond tax policies to Americans’ support for redistributive spending policies (expanding programs that improve the poor’s economic opportunities, expanding programs that improve the poor’s living standards, and investing in initiatives that improve public services for the poor).

Study 2 tested the psychological process behind the effect. After listing the similarities or dissimilarities between the two pictures, participants indicated their support for redistributive tax and redistributive spending policies (as in Studies 1A and 1B). We then measured several factors that could mediate the effect of similarity. Specifically, we measured the three hypothesized mediators including the perceived similarity of individuals’ dispositional inputs (motivation and hard work), justification of unequal outcomes (operationalized through just-world beliefs), and perceived fairness of an unequal distribution. We also measured additional factors that could provide alternative explanations, including the perceived similarity of external circumstances (good luck, opportunity), the perceived similarity of individual outputs (income, wealth), the personal gain (self-interest) from redistribution, subjective inequality (the perceived inequality of the wealth distribution), and commitment to the equality principle (that all individuals deserve equal rewards regardless of their contributions). The mediation analyses showed that the hypothesized factors, and not the alternative ones, mediated the effect of similarity (vs. dissimilarity) focus on redistribution support. Specifically, the serial mediation analysis confirmed that focusing on similarity (vs. dissimilarity) boosted individuals’ perceptions that people are similar in their dispositional inputs (motivation and hard work), which, in turn, reduced the justification of unequal outcomes and the perceived fairness of an unequal distribution, ultimately resulting in stronger support for redistribution.

Study 3 tested if the similarity effect would hold with a more practical manipulation of similarity focus (rather than a theoretical manipulation involving abstract black-and-white pictures), which policy makers could potentially adapt to shift public preferences for redistribution. US participants listed all the ways in which they thought they were similar to other Americans (similarity focus condition) or different from other Americans (dissimilarity focus condition), after which they indicated their support for redistributive tax and spending policies. The similarity effect generalized to this more practical manipulation of similarity focus, thereby offering policy makers one potential route (e.g., in their communication efforts) to, at least temporarily, shift redistribution support.

Our findings propose an effective strategy to boost support for redistribution. They thereby add to the emerging view that redistributive preferences and beliefs that underlie them may, to some extent, be malleable and changed by environmental stimuli (Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2014; Chow and Galak 2012). Our work also furthers the understanding of prior findings that redistribution support is low from redistribution, subjective inequality (the perceived inequality of the wealth distribution), and commitment to the equality principle (that all individuals deserve equal rewards regardless of their contributions). The mediation analyses showed that the hypothesized factors, and not the alternative ones, mediated the effect of similarity (vs. dissimilarity) focus on redistribution support. Specifically, the serial mediation analysis confirmed that focusing on similarity (vs. dissimilarity) boosted individuals’ perceptions that people are similar in their dispositional inputs (motivation and hard work), which, in turn, reduced the justification of unequal outcomes and the perceived fairness of an unequal distribution, ultimately resulting in stronger support for redistribution.

**REFERENCES**


