

Dr. James Dennison

Communicating on Migration: Description, Explanation, Intervention

E-Mindful Kick-off seminar, 15 June 2021, Vienna

1. Thank you for the kind invitation to have me speak here today to such an esteemed audience on what I'm sure we all agree is a vitally important topic.
2. I'll be discussing how we can communicate effectively on migration topics, in a way that depolarises the debate and discourages misinformation and dangerous narratives and behaviour.
3. Crucially, lessons on how to communicate on migration issues requires three steps
  - a. The first is description, i.e. understanding what people currently think about migration, who thinks what and when.
  - b. The second is explanation, i.e. testing various theories of how attitudes and beliefs about migration are formed so that we know what affects such attitudes.
  - c. The third is intervention, i.e. understanding what we can do to affect attitudes to immigration that are factually incorrect or likely to lead to dangerous behaviour or threats to fundamental rights or law.
4. So starting with description, we can see here that attitudes to immigration are fairly stable across time and across most European countries since 2014. This graph shows the net positivity—defined as the percentage of the population favourable minus the percentage of the population unfavourable—across time in all EU27 countries and the EU itself, both regarding attitudes to immigration from other EU member state and immigration from outside the EU. Overall, in most countries attitudes to both types of immigration are stable and becoming gradually more positive over time and that attitudes to immigration from EU member states tends to be more positive than attitudes to immigration from non-EU member states.
  - a. Though we do see after the red line, which represents the outbreak of Covid, a slight downturn.
5. This all creates a puzzle, however. If attitudes to immigration are stable and generally have been becoming more positive since 2014 in Europe, how can we explain the emergence and rapid growth of anti-immigration parties and electoral results since then?
6. One key explanation lies here: the rapid change in the *salience* or *importance* that Europeans place upon immigration as an issue. As we can see, the proportion of Europeans listing immigration among the top two issues affecting their country spiked rapidly after 2014, up to 80% in the case of Germany compared to less than 10% before. This meant that European citizens that *already had* anti-immigration views had their priorities changed and were willing to change their vote to anti-immigration parties.
  - a. Since then, the salience of immigration has fallen, as has voting for anti-immigration parties, as voters turn back to other issues like the economy or, more recently, health and Covid.
7. This is not to say that there is no variation in European attitudes to immigration. If we change the perspective from variation across countries and across time to just

consider the *distribution* of attitudes—from very negative to very positive—we see a pretty *normal* distribution, with few individuals at the extremes but most individuals choosing a side, either slightly negative or slightly positive. This is the case in this graph of the perceived effect of immigration on the economy in 2002 and 2015 – we also see slightly greater positivity using this data source, like elsewhere.

- a. This normal distribution, skewing decreasingly negative over time, is also the case for the perceived effect of immigration on quality of life, culture, government accounts, and crime (though the latter in particular remains highly negative).
8. Overall then, attitudes are *fairly* stable, though in many places actually improving. However, there isn't a vast amount of temporal variation (besides salience). However, individuals vary between each other a lot! Why? A lot of work has gone into this ...
9. The number of suggested (and tested) theories for why individuals vary in their attitudes to immigration is vast. Here I outline four categories, those that are: psychological, socialisation, attitudinal, and contextual.
  - a. Within these four categories exist dozens of specific proposed causal mechanisms—the things that actually affect attitudes and why they are suggested to do so. Amongst psychological explanations, these include personality traits, moral foundations, and values. Amongst socialisation explanations, they include parent's views, schooling, early peer group, whether one has lived abroad, their own history of mobility, whether they live in an urban or rural environment and job sector. And so on.
10. What should we do with so many findings? How can policymakers design interventions when there are so many—even competing arguments—about how attitudes to immigration are formed. Some social scientific principles help:
  - a. First, there's no reason to necessarily believe that not all of these are right
  - b. Multiple causal mechanisms are related, and often indeed reliant upon one another.
  - c. All have both direct and indirect effect
  - d. Some are distal (*big effects, hard to change*)
  - e. Some are proximal (*small effects, easier to change*)
11. As such, all of these findings can be placed in a so-called “funnel of causality”, with strong and stable effects that are “distal” on the left and weak and unstable effects that are most “proximal” to attitudes to immigration on the right.
  - a. The deep-seated distal effects, such as from personal values, both affect attitudes to immigration directly and via the more proximal effects, such as those relating to context and information.
  - b. Moreover, the effect of the proximal effects can be made lower or higher, or even change in direction, according to the deeper effects.
    - i. For example, two people may read the same news story, but be driven to entirely different conclusions about immigration, according to their deeper beliefs, according to their own early life socialisation and psychological profile.
12. Let's take a look at one of these in detail: personal values
  - a. What are values?
    - i. *Broad motivational goals in life, guiding principles*
    - ii. *Many ways to measure them. All ways suggest:*

- iii. Values are stable, identifiable, drawn from specific set, vary a lot between individuals
  - iv. Can predict attitudes and behaviours well
  - v. Deeply rooted in individuals
13. One social psychologist, Schwartz, studied values across 50 countries and showed that ten can be found to a largely equal extent across the world, suggesting that they are universal and not culturally or nationally dependent.
  14. These ten “basic human values” have been used to predict attitudes to immigration, with four of them shown to be particularly powerful:
    - a. Whereas valuing universalism—everyone being treated the same above all else—increases positivity to immigration—three are shown to increase negativity—valuing conformity, tradition and security.
  15. In a recent article, I have argued that we can use this knowledge to intervene by using values to promote a balanced approach. For example, if we want to make attitudes to immigration more positive, we should appeal to those values—not of those already converted, who value universalism—but those opposed or in the middle, who value conformity, tradition and security.
  16. There are many ways to do that, here are some examples in which immigrants are shown dressed in uniform (conformity), being apprentices (tradition), responsible for firefighting (security).
  17. Anti-immigration campaigners have also done this—appealing to their own supporters using conformity, tradition and security but also appealing to those in the middle using other values like universalism and benevolence and even self-direction.
  18. And we can end here with a video from Berlin in which a pro-immigration message is offered using the values of conformity, tradition and security.