News headlines or ideological beliefs: What affects readers' interpretations of news stories about immigration, killing in the name of religion and other topical issues? A cross-cultural analysis

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The tragedy that shook the entire nation on 15 March, 2019, compels researchers to try and understand the factors that perpetuate stereotypes and prejudice against minority groups. While in the past, New Zealand was thought of as a welcoming and inclusive nation, events in Christchurch challenge that view. Anti-immigrant prejudice is rooted in attitudes captured by self-report scales measuring mindsets such as a Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) across various age groups and ethnicities (Matić & Bratko, 2018; Caricati, Mancini & Marletta, 2016). In New Zealand, RWA is found to be most strongly related with anti-immigration attitudes and SDO with low warmth toward people of Chinese origin (Satherley & Sibley, 2016).

SDO and RWA are closely related to prejudice (e.g., Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), but the underlying motive varies for each (Halkjelsvik & Rise, 2014). RWA is based on the belief that the world is perilous and encourages orthodoxy, whereas SDO views the world as a fight for power and a struggle to sustain or increase hierarchical inequities (Duckitt, 2001). These ideological beliefs also affect how incoming information, including news, is processed. Tausch and Hewstone (2010) found that SDO was negatively associated with stereotype change. This suggests that people are more likely to process information in line with their pre-existing beliefs and can discard any contradictory information presented to them. In contrast, when individuals lack prior information about an event, they are more likely to depend on headlines and story content when interpreting news information (Blair & Banaji, 1996; Bodenhausen et al., 1999).

Sensational headlines have long been a topic of interest for researchers. In 1949, Steigleman called American readers "a shopper of headlines" (p.389). Tannenbaum (1953) found that using positive, negative or neutral headlines affected the views of the reader regarding the guilt of a defendant in a murder trial. Participants who viewed a positive headline most commonly rated the accused as 'innocent' while those who read negative headlines rated him 'guilty'. Those who viewed the neutral headline said they had 'no opinion'. However, this effect was not observed consistently and mostly occurred when the participants quickly scanned through the news article. Pfau (1995) obtained similar results when the use of 'black riot' instead of 'union riot' resulted in an event being perceived as more violent by American students. Additionally, Pfau found increased prior knowledge about the outgroup appeared made participants susceptible to stereotypical distortion.

In contrast, some other studies have found that headlines have not affected news story interpretation. For instance, Leventhal and Gray (1991) found that when crime articles were paired with headlines that were either neutral or positively framed towards the accused or the victim, the manipulation had no effect on assessment of crimes or memory for the article. Similarly, Condit et al. (2001) found that varying the headline had no role in shifting beliefs regarding genetic determinism.

These ideas are relevant to the Christchurch attack in that the alleged perpetrator is thought to have been radicalised through a combination of meetings while travelling abroad as well as through online sources. For instance, the alleged perpetrator posted his "manifesto" on 8chan, "a popular website where many right-wing users discuss 'white genocide,' among other apocalyptic concerns" (https://www.theringer.com/2019/3/15/18268015/christchurch-new-zealand-shooter-social-media-internet). The implication is that information on the web can distort thinking in new directions. An alternative is that one seeks information on the web that simply confirms or intensifies pre-existing views.

We examined these ideas in the present study by presenting news stories about topical issues in four conditions. The stories were preceded by headlines that were positive, negative, both positive and negative, or were not preceded by a headline. Nearly all prior research studies used news articles constructed purely for the experiment, with no studies that we are aware of exploring the effect of SDO and RWA on 'real' headline perception. Thus, we aimed to fill this gap in literature, that is, to understand what happens when a reader is exposed to a strongly-worded, real headline about a familiar topic. For example, this set of contrasting headlines was published on the website *Stuff* (https://goo.gl/R8exBT) and *The Telegraph* (https://goo.gl/ci2gTM), respectively: 'Immigration good news for NZ business' versus 'Immigration damages house prices, say Home Office advisers'. The question was whether the headline changes their opinion or do readers interpret the news in line with their pre-existing beliefs?

We tested participants in two countries: America and Pakistan. These countries were chosen because participants were expected to have divergent opinions about the four issues we examined (killing in the name of Islam, honour killing, Donald Trump's travel ban for certain countries and immigration). For this reason our initial analyses examined cultural differences in attitudes about the four topics.

METHOD

Participants

American and Pakistani undergraduate students $(N = 429)$ completed the experiment using the Qualtrics© online survey (212 from Pakistan and 217 from the USA). Six attention questions were included in the experiment to ensure that the respondents were paying attention to the presented stimuli. Two hundred participants from the USA and 122 from

Pakistan demonstrated an acceptable level of attention and comprehension (at least 5 of 6 attention questions correct). Only these 322 participants were included in the data analysis to ensure accuracy of the results while retaining the maximum number of participants. On average, participants were 22.99 years old (*SD* = 4.99). There were 137 male, 183 female and 2 gender fluid participants. In the entire sample, there were 151 who reported they were religious (92 who identified as Muslim, 53 as Christian and 6 from other religions).

Materials Participants completed 6-item versions of the RWA (α =.70; M =1.11, SD = 0.80) and SDO scales (α = .79; *M* = 1.06; *SD* = 0.90) by rating

items on a 7-point scale (0, *strongly disagree*; 6, *strongly agree*; Pratto et al., 1994; see Appendix A). After this, the participants were presented with four news stories that focused on political, religious and social issues, with the stories preceded by headlines as described above (positive, negative, both, no headline) (see Appendix B). The crux of all the news stories was to highlight the difference between the ideas of two groups or individuals. Since the experiment was conducted in America and Pakistan we chose stories of relevance to each country: Donald Trump, honour killing (justifying killing a young woman accused of bringing dishonour to a family), killing in the name of Islam (justifying taking another

person's life because they belong to or support a different religion), and immigration. Each of the four stories had two different headlines that were presented in four conditions: positive headline, negative headline, both, or no headline. When there was a headline, it (they) always preceded the text. In each condition, the text for a particular story was exactly the same. For each story, after reading the headline and article, participants were given three questions in which they reported their feelings towards the story characters or issue on a feelings thermometer (see Appendix C) from 0 (highly unfavourable) to 10 (highly favourable).

RESULTS

First, we used univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the effects of gender, age, nationality and experimental group on the participant's outcome feelings (4 stories x 3 questions each). Only the effects of nationality were significant (see Table 1), so we analysed American and Pakistani participants separately for all further analyses.

Effect of headline manipulation

For each story, we then examined whether assignment to an experimental group had an effect on reported outcome feeling towards the main subject (question a in Table 1) using a one-way ANOVA with condition as the between-subjects variable (4 levels). The experimental group did not affect outcome feelings towards Donald Trump, Asian Immigrants, Qandeel Baloch (the woman killed by her brother for posting "scandalous" videos on social media), or Mumtaz Qadri (the man who killed the governor Salman Taseer to take

revenge for supporting a Christian) (see Table 2). For each story, we then used identical one-way ANOVAs for the two other questions (questions b and c in Table 1), with the results indicating no significant effect of experimental group for any of the eight questions (all *p*s >.05).

Next, we used multiple regression to examine whether SDO and RWA affected feelings for the main subject of each story (question a in Table 1). To be as thorough as possible, we also included whether the headline had been positive or negative (see Table 3). As above, the valence of the news headline (whether positively worded or negatively worded) was not a significant predictor of the outcome feelings for any of the four stories. In contrast, SDO significantly predicted 3/4 outcome feelings in the USA and 1/4 in Pakistan. Likewise, RWA significantly predicted 3/4 feelings in the USA and 2/4 in Pakistan.

Next, we created question composites by summing the three questions for each story into an overall scale measuring feelings (Appendix C), making sure to reverse questions that were negatively worded. There were four subscales measuring feelings towards: Donald Trump (α = .443; *M* = 8.66; *SD* = 5.83), anti-immigration (α = .799; *M* = 8.58; *SD* = 5.59), positive attitudes toward killing a woman for family honour (α = .448; *M* = 5.04; *SD* = 4.41), and positive attitudes towards killing in the name of religion (α = .674; *M* = 8.05; *SD* = 6.33). Pearson's correlations indicated that all four topical issues were significantly correlated with SDO and RWA in the USA. This result is similar to that obtained for the main topic (Table 3) but indicated a more consistent relation for the composite. In Pakistan, two issues (positive attitudes toward killing a woman for family honour and killing in the name of religion) were significantly correlated with RWA and one with SDO (see Tables 4a and 4b).

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of all 12 outcome feelings, as well as SDO and RWA in Pakistan and the USA

	Pakistan	USA		Pakistan	USA
Feelings towards:	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	Feelings towards:	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
1a. Donald Trump	1.70 (2.60)	1.16 (2.27)	3a. Qandeel	4.66[a] (2.86)	7.26[b] (2.45)
1b. Muslim countries	3.34[a] (3.66)	4.99[b] (3.15)	3b. Qandeel's brother	1.14[a] (2.19)	0.69[b] (1.55)
1c. Ban	1.80 (2.61)	1.59 (2.48)	3c. Honour killing	0.50 (1.60)	0.44 (1.28)
2a. Asian Immigrants	6.91 (2.38)	7.29 (2.26)	4a. Qadri	3.37[a] (3.50)	1.15[b] (1.78)
2b. Immigration	7.01 (2.14)	7.22 (2.32)	4b. Salman Taseer	4.25 (3.26)	5.49 (2.77)
2c. New Zealand	7.11 (2.17)	7.09 (2.60)	4c. Killing for religion	2.25[a] (3.04)	0.46[b] (1.31)
SDO	1.33 (.80)	1.05 (.90)			
RWA	2.75 (.688)	1.10 (.80)			

Note. For each of the 12 questions, means in Pakistan and the USA were compared with *t*-tests, and corrected with the Holms-Bonferroni correction. [ab]*p<.004* (means for Pakistan versus USA were significantly different after correction).

Table 2. One-way ANOVAs showing effect of headline manipulation for the main subject of each story

	USA					Pakistan				
Feelings for:	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_{P}^{2}	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_{P}^{2}
Donald Trump	10.45	3	.67	.57	.01	11.87	3	.58	.63	.01
Asian Immigrants	7.08	3	.46	.71	.01	26.55	3	1.58	.20	.05
Qandeel Baloch	19.34	3	1.07	.36	.02	17.22	3	.70	.56	.02
Mumtaz Qadri	8.02	3	.84	.47	.01	60.29	3	1.67	.18	.04

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis with SDO, RWA, negative and positive headlines as predictors

		Donald Trump			Asian Immigrants			Qandeel Baloch			Mumtaz Qadri		
		B	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*B*	*SE*	*β*
USA	SDO	.90	.17	.36[c]	-1.0	.17	-.40[c]	-.51	.19	-.19[b]	.06	.15	.03
	RWA	.68	.19	.24[b]	-.19	.20	-.07	-.96	.22	-.31[c]	.38	.17	.17[a]
	Pos.	-.23	.34	-.04	-.16	.36	-.03	-.11	.39	-.02	.26	.31	.06
	Neg.	.53	.35	.10	.04	.36	.01	-.69	.39	-.12	.18	.31	.04
Pakistan	SDO	.12	.30	.04	-.27	.27	-.09	-.09	.32	-.03	1.08	.38	.25[b]
	RWA	-.24	.36	-.06	.24	.32	.07	-1.12	.37	-.29[b]	1.23	.45	.24[b]
	Pos.	-.19	.61	-.02	.71	.54	.13	-.01	.63	.00	.11	.80	.01
	Neg.	-.05	.60	-.01	-.54	.54	-.10	.88	.63	.13	-1.40	.74	-.17

Note. [a]$p < .05$, [b]$p < .01$, [c]$p<.001$.

Table 4a. Correlations between SDO, RWA and Question Composites in USA

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Pro-Trump	-				
2. Anti-Immigration	.523[b]	-			
3. Pro-Honour Killing	.249[b]	.288[b]	-		
4. Pro-Killing for Religion	.181[a]	.180[b]	.541[b]	-	
5. SDO	.428[b]	.500[b]	.281[b]	.203[a]	-
6. RWA	.337[b]	.285[b]	.369[b]	.403[b]	.376[b]

Note. [a]$p<.05$, [b]$p < .01$.

Table 4b. Correlations between SDO, RWA and Question Composites in Pakistan

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Pro-Trump	-				
2. Anti-Immigration	-.150	-			
3. Pro-Honour Killing	-.012	.039	-		
4. Pro-Killing for Religion	-.020	-.012	.406[b]	-	
5. SDO	-.003	.119	.086	.309[b]	-
6. RWA	-.067	-.087	.217	.319[b]	.062

Note. [b]$p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

In this study, sensational news headlines did not have a significant effect on attitudes regarding the four key issues studied. Instead, ideological belief systems – RWA and SDO – had a much greater influence on how a reader perceived the news and how they felt about the main subject. Amongst participants from the USA, we found that individuals who scored higher on RWA were more likely to endorse Donald Trump, Mumtaz Qadri, and Qandeel's brother. Those who scored high in SDO tended to rate Donald Trump more positively, but Asian Immigration in New Zealand and Qandeel Baloch negatively.

These findings make sense in light of Feldman and Johnston's (2013) definition of RWA (submissive, conservative, religious) and SDO (dominant personality, seeking socioeconomic superiority of their in-group and less concerned with preserving traditional values).

For instance, Pettigrew (2017, p.108) notes the following: "Trump's speeches, studded with such absolutist terms as "losers" and "complete disasters," are classic authoritarian statements. His clear

distinction between groups on the top of society (Whites) and those "losers" and "bad hombres" on the bottom (immigrants, Blacks and Latinos) are classic social dominance statements".

Other recent studies have reported that individuals scoring high on RWA and SDO tend to exhibit more favourable feelings towards Trump and a higher intention of voting for him (Choma & Hanoch, 2017). Our story focussed on Trump's stated aim to protect Americans from attacks by Muslims. The solution proposed by Donald Trump is to establish dominion over America and curtail the entrance of individuals from Muslim countries who may pose a threat to the Americans. These are essential features of both RWA (minimising diversity, the influence of ethnic minorities, and external threat) and SDO (domination of low status groups by higher status groups), and it therefore makes sense that participants who scored higher on SDO were pro-Trump and pro-banning of Muslim countries. The results of the present study are consistent with previous findings and provide additional evidence to show that participants who already had pro- or anti-Trump feelings could not be swayed differently when presented with a contrary headline.

Cohrs and Stetzl (2010) found that SDO and anti-immigration feelings were most popular in countries which have foreign-born people who are either unemployed or in a disadvantaged position. Our second story was about locals who have to compete for houses because of immigrants, and is therefore consistent with the characteristics of RWA and SDO, that outgroup members are perceived as presenting the threat of economic competition (Duckitt, 2006).

An interesting finding of this study is that amongst participants from Pakistan, only two issues appeared to be significantly correlated with SDO and RWA. These two issues were both highly relevant in Pakistan (i.e., honour killing and killing in the name of religion). The case of Qandeel Baloch, a young Pakistani model who was murdered by her brother for indulging in modelling photoshoots, reflects the idea that men have more autonomy and women must follow basic restrictions (SDO) and that they must not step out of conventional roles (RWA). Christopher and Wojda (2008) found that participants higher in SDO held negative beliefs about women in managerial roles. Likewise, Fraser, Osborne and Sibley (2015) found

a positive correlation between SDO and opposition to gender-based affirmative action. Likewise, Altemeyer (1988; cf. Smith & Winter, 2002, p.306) claims that authoritarian personalities hold "a 'law and order' mentality that legitimizes anger and aggression against those who deviate from social norms and conventions." In this case, the penalty was death by her brother, which participants high in RWA and SDO were more likely to endorse.

Killing in the name of religion presented a unique case as it was one issue for which SDO and RWA were consistent predictors in both the countries. While the story concerned an issue that took place in Pakistan, even American students high in RWA and SDO rated it as more acceptable. This is a striking finding because a subsection of college students in two diverse countries, with different religious views and not much else in common, showed more tolerance for murder as justified by religion. This finding makes clear that violence toward others of differing beliefs is not simply a Muslim issue or an American issue, but rather, is an issue that is not restricted to a particular religion or cultural/ national context. Although the mean approval for killing in the name of religion (see Table 1) still tended to be low overall, even in a mainstream, non-extremist college sample, there is more tolerance for killing in the name of religion in those high in SDO or RWA. As such it is inopportune to blame a particular culture, national group or religion for promulgating hatred toward another group. Clearly, this is a human propensity that is possible for a wide range of ethnographic groups, and depends on more general attitudes such as SDO or RWA. Future research could replicate the same study in other cultures to examine the role of SDO and RWA in shaping attitudes toward other phenomena, and potentially, the role of the media in developing such attitudes in the first place. It could also examine whether repeatedly slanted headlines or news story biases might change attitudes even if one-off headlines do not. This, for instance, could explain some of the general differences in attitudes in Pakistan versus the USA (see Table 1).

In conclusion, the present study suggests that one-off sensational headlines do not cause a significant change in an individual's perceptions about people and issues, at least in a university-educated audience. Instead,

RWA and SDO are the main influences for how such individuals interpret incoming information regarding a known topic. Moreover, based on the sample from Pakistan, it appears that issues that one is most familiar to are the ones most strongly predicted by SDO and RWA.

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Appendix A: Questionnaires

SDO Short version
1. It is OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.
2. Inferior groups should stay in their place.
3. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes okay to step on other groups.
4. We should have increased social equality.∗
5. It would be good if all groups could be equal.∗
6. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.*

RWA Short version
1. It is always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds.
2. It would be best for everyone if the proper authorities censored magazines so that people could not get their hands on trashy and disgusting material.
3. Our country will be destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fibre and traditional beliefs.
4. People should pay less attention to The Bible and other old traditional forms of religious guidance, and instead develop their own personal standards of what is moral and immoral.*
5. Atheists and others who have rebelled against established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly.*
6. Some of the best people in our country are those who are challenging our government, criticizing religion, and ignoring the "normal way" things are supposed to be done.*
*Reversed

Appendix B: Headlines for the experimental groups

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
1. Trump renews call for 'travel ban' to protect against 'dangerous Muslim countries'	Trump's Muslim Ban 3.0 Is Just as Inhumane — and Even More Frightening.	No headline	Both headlines
2. Asian Immigration good news for NZ business.	Asian Immigration damages house prices, say Home Office advisers.	No headline	Both headlines
3. Qandeel Baloch died a feminist hero	Qandeel Baloch died a prostitute, not a hero	No headline	Both headlines
4. Mumtaz Qadri Hero of Islam & Pakistan.	Mumtaz Qadri: the cowardly murderer we hail as an Islamic saint.	No headline	Both headlines

Appendix C: Questions following each story and Scale for measuring feeling towards sensitive topical issues

		Using the thermometer (where 0 is least favourable and 10 is highly favourable) indicate your feelings towards:
Story 1	1a	Donald Trump
	1b	Muslims from banned countries
	1c	Trump's travel restrictions
Story 2	2a	Asian Immigrants
	2b	Immigration
	2c	New Zealand
Story 3	3a	Qandeel Baloch
	3b	Qandeel's brother
	3c	Honor killing
Story 4	4a	Mumtaz Qadri
	4b	Salman Taseer
	4c	Killing in the name of Islam

Combination of outcome feeling questions to form issue clusters
Pro Trump =1a+1c-1b
Anti- Immigration =-2a-2b-2c
Pro Honour Killing =3b+3c- 3a
Pro Killing for Religion =4a+4c-4b