The immigration debate is dynamic and complex. Relations between immigrants and members of receiving societies can be highly contentious, although (im)migration is a concept as old as humanity itself. Social psychologists call Immigration an “ambiguous social situation”, triggering two opposing psychological responses towards immigration among people:

- A willingness to include immigrants, or
- Perceived group threat.

The bad news about this phenomenon is that individuals tend to differ markedly in their opinion about immigration. People’s responses to messages about immigration map onto a rather stable personality feature, i.e. whether someone is typically tolerant and egalitarian, or conversely exclusionary and considers immigrants and immigration a threat.

More about the general psychological tendencies of people who consider immigrants threatening:

- Perceiving immigrants as a threat to national identity, political power, and/or economic prosperity.
- Viewing immigrants as competing with host communities for economic resources and/or for cultural dominance.
- Tending to believe in the value of a social hierarchy, and that their own social group should dominate others.
- Are associated with social conservatism and Republicanism.
- Believing that (economic or social) gains for immigrants necessarily imply an equivalent loss for Americans; a type of zero-sum thinking.

The good news is that particular frames of a message about immigration can change the meaning of immigration to its audience. In this way, how the political discourse on immigration is framed has tremendous potential to change people’s attitudes towards immigration policy.

Here are some tips derived from scientific findings on the effect of communications about immigration on people who consider immigration threatening in any of the ways outlined above.

- Don’t challenge zero-sum beliefs about immigrants directly. Research shows that attempting to directly contradict the opinions of opponents to immigration only reinforces their anti-immigration stance.

- Consider emphasizing immigration as an enhancement of the dominant culture. A scientific experiment illustrated that social conservatives favored a fictitious immigrant assimilation policy more when it was accompanied by an argument that emphasized the enhancement of the host culture, such as maintaining native culture, language, educational levels, standards of living and protecting the receiving society from the threat of foreign disease and obligations to immigrants (e.g. care in the form of social services and language programs).

- Focus on the connections between host communities and immigrant groups. Researchers found that those threatened by immigration reported significantly more favorable attitudes towards immigrants when they were presented with information that stressed the notions of a common national identity, i.e., “the U.S. is a nation built on immigration”, and of a common history of diverse ethnic roots, e.g., “nearly everyone can trace their origins back to immigration”.

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• Focus attention on \textit{individuals} (not groups) when communicating about immigration.

• De-stress the notion of immigrants belonging to a \textit{different group}, who hold values that are at odds with the values and beliefs cherished by Americans.

• Emphasize the values of others in a non-competitive way, e.g. joint, shared values.

• Empathy helps too. Scientists confirmed that empathizing with foreign refugees had a beneficial effect on reduced prejudice towards them. This effect was especially strong when communications about these refugees was presented in conjunction with information suggesting that they were far from presenting a threat to the receiving community.\footnote{Stephan et al, 2005.}

• Always present information on differences alongside its benefits and similarities. Take extra care to convey information about immigrant groups in a non-evaluative way, and supplement communications about group differences with information that outlines the associated benefits of this, as well as similarities between host communities and immigrant groups in other domains.\footnote{Stephan, W.G., & Stephan, C.W. (2001). Improving intergroup relations. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.}

The silver lining
The position of immigrants in a society is “socially constructed” – which means that general attitudes towards them are not set in stone. Irish immigrants, who flocked to the United States in the 19th century, are a case in point. For decades after their arrival, they were considered a White underclass. This is in stark contrast to the socio-economic status of Irish Americans today. If the perception of Irish immigrants is malleable over time, then the same can be true for other immigrants’ position in American society.

About SPSSI
The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social issues. In various ways, the Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries. For more information, please contact Alex Ingrams, SPSSI Policy Coordinator, at (202) 675-6956 or aingrams@spssi.org.

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