



On the pursuit of desired attitudes: Wanting a different attitude affects information processing and behavior



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ABSTRACT

Recent work suggests that in addition to actual attitudes, people often have desired attitudes that can vary in their congruence with their actual attitudes. We explored whether desired attitudes motivate goal-congruent outcomes by impacting people's evaluative responses over the effects of actual attitudes. Across four studies, we demonstrated that desired attitudes independently predicted behavioral intentions (Study 1), information seeking (Study 2), information processing (Study 3), and overt behavior (Study 4). Further, consistent with the idea that desired attitudes reflect attitudinal goals, these effects were strongest among people who reported that they were highly committed to the pursuit of their desired attitudes (Studies 3 and 4). Last, meta-analyses of the effects of desired attitudes and the desired \times commitment to desired attitudes interaction revealed significant evidence for these effects across the four studies. Implications of the results for research on attitudes and persuasion, motivated reasoning, and goal pursuit are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Besides wanting and choosing and being moved to do this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are. (Frankfurt, 1971, p. 7)

In the above quote, philosopher Harry Frankfurt suggests that humans are uniquely capable of reflecting on their attitudes and consequently are capable of wanting to have different attitudes and preferences. In other words, people might simultaneously have actual attitudes (what Frankfurt refers to as desires) and desired attitudes (what Frankfurt and other philosophers have referred to as meta-desires or second order desires) that can sometimes conflict. For example, a dieter might want to like cheesecake less, a Republican might want to be more favorable toward Donald Trump, a married man might want to be less attracted to his single neighbor, or a student might want to enjoy studying more.

This is more than a rhetorical exercise, however. Recent work has demonstrated that people's actual and desired evaluations often differ. Notably, DeMarree and colleagues (e.g., DeMarree, Wheeler, Briñol, &

Petty, 2014) have observed discrepancies between people's reports of actual and desired attitudes on topics as diverse as social groups, political figures, social issues, health-related behaviors, specific companies, and even the self. Although the frequency of such discrepancies varies across sample and topic (e.g., 29% for the topic of exercising and 66% for the self; see DeMarree et al., 2014) and vary in direction (e.g., some people want to like legalized abortion more than they do and others less), they are surprisingly common, suggesting that they are not easily resolved. If they were, people would simply change their actual attitudes to be congruent with their desired attitudes and discrepancies would be relatively rare. However, a dieter who wants to like broccoli more cannot merely "wish" to like it more and then, *poof*, their attitude changes. Instead, their actual attitude (a negative evaluation of broccoli) and their desired attitude (to be positive toward broccoli) may coexist.

DeMarree and colleagues (DeMarree & Rios, 2014; DeMarree et al., 2014) argued that when actual and desired attitudes are discrepant, the conflicting evaluative tendencies created by each type of attitude lead people to experience *subjective ambivalence* – the psychological experience of conflict in their evaluations (Priester & Petty, 1996). Across eight studies, people reported feeling greater conflict as their actual and desired attitudes diverged (DeMarree & Rios, 2014; DeMarree et al., 2014). Further, people reported being motivated to reduce the conflict they experienced (DeMarree et al., 2014, Study 6). The hypothesized

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reason for this – that actual and desired attitudes can independently predict cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to the attitude object – is the central focus on the current research. For example, if actual and desired attitudes point to different behaviors, people could be conflicted about how to act.

The notion that people sometimes attempt to pursue desired attitudes is a relatively novel idea. The present work tests this by determining whether people interact with their environments in a way that is consistent with pursuit of their desired attitudes. In the original conceptual work on this topic, [Maio and Thomas \(2007\)](#) discussed several strategies people use seemingly to engage in “deliberate self-persuasion” – strategies directed toward the attainment of people’s preferred evaluations. For example, people define positive characteristics in terms of their own personal strengths in order to maintain a positive self-evaluation (i.e., self-attitude), and this tendency is greatest for ambiguous traits for which there is room for biased interpretation without sacrificing accuracy (e.g., [Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989](#)). People also suppress potentially negative information about their relationship (e.g., the extent to which their partner might be attracted to someone else) under conditions that may create actual-desired discrepancies in their evaluation of their current relationship, leading to inaccurate, though potentially more positive views of their relationship and relationship partner ([Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995](#)). Although there are individual differences in preferences for different types of attitude-pursuit strategies ([Taylor et al., 2014](#)), the ones that have been examined thus far do appear to produce the intended attitude change, at least in the short-term ([Lu, Lord, & Yoke, 2015](#); [Resch & Lord, 2011](#)).

Thus, the existing conceptual and empirical work provides initial evidence for the deployment of *intrapsychic* strategies for pursuing desired attitudes ([Lu et al., 2015](#); [Maio & Thomas, 2007](#)). However, little is known about whether desired attitudes affect how people interact with the external world. In the present work we seek to determine whether people’s behavior, information seeking, and processing of new information reflect the pursuit of their desired attitudes, independent of any influence of their actual attitudes. That is, we aim to show that the pursuit of desired attitudes extends to people’s interactions with the world around them.

Our outcomes of interest are ones that past research has examined as consequences of people’s *actual* attitudes, but that have not been examined in the context of pursuit of desired attitudes. Certainly, one of the major reasons for studying actual attitudes is because of the influence they can exert on people’s emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses (e.g., [Breckler, 1984](#); [Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975](#); [Kraus, 1995](#); [Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979](#); see also [Petty & Krosnick, 1995](#)). For example, research has demonstrated that being more favorable toward religion predicted engagement in religious-congruent behaviors ([Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975](#)) and environmental attitudes predicted ecologically-congruent behaviors ([Weigel & Newman, 1976](#)). Relatedly, research has shown that people’s actual attitudes influence strategies geared toward maintaining and bolstering preferred conclusions, such as selective exposure to attitude confirming information (e.g., [Frey, 1986](#); [Hart et al., 2009](#); [Taber & Lodge, 2006](#)) and motivated evaluation of the validity of attitude confirming or disconfirming information (e.g., [Kunda, 1990](#); [Lord et al., 1979](#)). To our knowledge, however, no research has investigated whether desired attitudes influence these consequences above and beyond the influence of actual attitudes. In fact, to our knowledge, the distinction between actual and desired attitudes has not been made at all in the motivated reasoning literature, thus it is unclear whether each type of attitude can exert unique effects.

As noted above, discrepancies between actual and desired attitudes have been linked to subjective ambivalence (e.g., [DeMarree et al., 2014](#)). However, the current work is distinct from the previous work on ambivalence in a number of ways. First, objective ambivalence by definition involves both positive and negative associations regarding the attitude object, something that is explicit in all objective ambivalence measures (i.e., questions that ask for separate positive and negative evaluations;

see [Kaplan, 1972](#)). In contrast, actual and desired attitudes can lead to the *experience* of conflict (subjective ambivalence) even when both attitudes are (unambivalently) positive or negative overall ([DeMarree et al., 2014](#)) because attitudes of varying extremity might predict different cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses. For example, a moderately positive (actual or desired) attitude might lead to quiet support for a candidate but no additional desire to actively support them, whereas an extremely positive (actual or desired) attitude might lead to more active support for the candidate (e.g., volunteering for, advocating for, or donating to the candidate). Also critical, the outcomes we investigate are not outcomes typically associated with ambivalence. Ambivalence is generally linked to instability of attitudes (e.g., [Bell & Esses, 1997](#)) or increased information processing in general (presumably with the goal of ambivalence reduction; e.g., [Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996](#)), not the directional sort of biases we examine here.¹

In the present investigation, we examine whether and how desired attitudes influence behavioral and information processing strategies that have the potential to bring about changes in people’s evaluations, beyond the known influence of actual attitudes. Across 4 studies, we tested whether, across a variety of domains, desired attitudes independently predict engagement in information processing and behaviors aimed at obtaining those desired attitudes. Specifically, we examined whether actual and desired attitudes would independently predict behavior (Studies 1 and 4), information seeking (Study 2), and information processing (Study 3). We examined these ideas across multiple topics, and examined the moderating influence of desired attitude commitment on the impacts of desired attitudes (Studies 3 & 4), predicting that desired attitudes should play a greater role when people are highly committed to them. Together these results are consistent with the prediction that desired attitudes motivate informational and behavioral strategies that appear directed toward obtaining desired attitudes, and show that actual and desired attitudes can independently influence people’s evaluative responding. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions included in these studies either in the main text or in the online supplement.

2. Study 1

In Study 1, we examined a behavioral outcome of people’s desired attitudes. Specifically, we examined whether people’s desired attitudes would predict their behavioral intentions above and beyond their actual attitudes. In this study, we asked participants to report their behavioral intentions with respect to eating at McDonald’s and examined whether people’s desired attitudes toward McDonald’s explained additional variance in behavioral intentions over that explained by their actual attitudes toward McDonald’s.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

One hundred twelve Ohio State University undergraduates participated for course credit (54 male, 58 female; 4 Hispanic or Latino, 87 white, 3 black, 14 Asian, 1 American Indian, 3 other; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.29$, $SD = 1.49$). In this study, the sample size was consistent with previous similar studies in this program of research that have consistently obtained significant effects with approximately 100 participants (e.g., [DeMarree et al., 2014](#)).

2.1.2. Procedure

Participants completed the study in a room with 11 desktop computer workstations, separated by dividers. Participants first completed

¹ Some recent work has begun to examine directional effects of ambivalence ([Clark et al., 2008](#); [Sawicki et al., 2013](#)). We return to this work, and analyses we conducted to address it, in the General discussion.

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