Short Communication

A good thing isn't always a good thing: Dispositional attitudes predict non-normative judgments

Justin Hepler *

Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Reno, 1664 North Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557, USA

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ABSTRACT

A common belief in social sciences is that people like or dislike stimuli based on the properties possessed by those stimuli. Therefore, stimuli with many (few) positives should be universally liked (disliked). However, differences in opinion are common, and one source of disagreement may be personality. This research demonstrates that dispositional attitudes (an individual difference in the tendency to like/dislike stimuli), are associated with qualitative attitude differences (i.e., liking rather than disliking) for stimuli across important domains such as health, business, entertainment, and politics. Qualitative attitude differences frequently predict interpersonal conflict and diametrically opposed behavioral outcomes (e.g., voting for or against a candidate). Thus, these results have implications for understanding seemingly intractable differences found in nearly all social science fields.

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1. Introduction

What makes something a good thing? According to intuition and prevailing theories, people like or dislike stimuli based on stimulus features (Albarracin & Vargas, 2010; Fazio, 2007). Thus, people like furry, affectionate, and helpful animals such as cats and dogs but dislike slimy, hostile, and dangerous animals such as snakes and spiders. However, personality differences exist in the tendency to like or dislike stimuli, which is a trait known as the dispositional attitude (Hepler & Albarracin, 2013a). Dispositional attitudes have predicted specific attitude differences that are a matter of degree (e.g., *how good* something is). For example, people with positive dispositional attitudes strongly like recycling, whereas people with negative dispositional attitudes only moderately like recycling (Hepler & Albarracin, 2013a). Yet dispositional attitudes have not been found to predict qualitative attitude differences (i.e., whether something is judged to be good versus bad to begin with). This is an interesting possibility because liking and disliking often lead to diametrically opposed behaviors (Clore & Huntsinger, 2009; Glasman & Albarracin, 2006). Therefore, the present research examined whether dispositional attitudes can be associated with qualitative differences in attitude valence. In other words, are some good things only good because of the personalities of the people who judge them?

1.1. Does it matter if something is judged to be good?

Understanding antecedents of attitude valence is important because attitudes are related to meaningful life outcomes. First, positive attitudes generally motivate approach behavior, whereas negative attitudes motivate avoidance/withdrawal behavior (Glasman & Albarracin, 2006; Hepler & Albarracin, 2014). For example, positive (negative) attitudes toward condom use predict frequent (infrequent) condom use behavior (Albarracin, Johnson, & Muellerleile, 2001). Second, attitudes often influence social relationships, such that people actively seek relationships with attitudinally similar others (Nahemow & Lawton, 1975) and dislike attitudinally dissimilar others (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). Third, when people want to learn about a topic, they often search for information based on attitude similarity, and this can bias the learning process (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2010; Hart et al., 2009). For example, political conservatives often expose themselves to conservative news outlets while avoiding liberal news outlets, whereas political liberals do the opposite (Stroud, 2008). Therefore, if dispositional attitudes are associated with differences in the valence of specific attitudes, dispositional attitudes may help account for between-person differences in a wide variety of important outcomes, including behavioral patterns, relationships, learning, health behaviors, and political knowledge.

Similarly, once a stimulus is judged to be good or bad, the degree to which it is liked or disliked is important (Albarracin & Vargas, 2010). Specifically, attitudes often display a linear association with behavioral outcomes, such that extremely positive attitudes predict

* Tel.: +1 775 682 8608.
  E-mail address: justinhepler@unr.edu

more positive behaviors directed toward a stimulus than mildly positive attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). For example, people with extremely positive attitudes toward exercise tend to engage in more exercise than people with mildly positive attitudes toward exercise, both of whom are more likely to exercise at all compared to people with negative attitudes toward exercise (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Godin & Kok, 1996). Thus, if dispositional attitudes are associated the extremity of certain attitudes, dispositional attitudes may help account for between-person differences in the extent to which people pursue desirable behaviors or avoid undesirable behaviors. Overall then, it is important to examine whether dispositional attitudes predict both quantitative and qualitative attitude differences.

1.2. Predicting quantitative versus qualitative attitude differences

Prior research has demonstrated that dispositional attitudes are correlated with attitudes toward specific stimuli (Hepler & Albarracin, 2013a). Theoretically, this could result in people with high and low dispositional attitudes displaying quantitative attitude differences (i.e., liking a lot versus liking a little) or qualitative attitude differences (i.e., liking versus disliking). Despite the potential for these two types of relations, past research has only found quantitative attitude differences as the result of dispositional attitude differences (Hepler & Albarracin, 2013a). Thus, there is currently no evidence that dispositional attitudes actually predict qualitative attitude differences. As discussed, qualitative attitude differences often lead to diametrically opposed behavioral outcomes, and thus it is important to discover whether dispositional attitudes systematically predict such differences. However, as noted, quantitative attitude differences also predict important behavioral outcomes, and thus elaborating the conditions under which dispositional attitudes are expected to predict quantitative versus qualitative differences in specific attitudes is vital. In the present research, I propose that whether dispositional attitudes predict quantitative or qualitative attitude differences should be moderated by the normative extremity of the specific attitude in question. Thus, dispositional attitudes should only predict quantitative attitude differences under certain conditions, whereas they should predict qualitative attitudes differences under other conditions.

Specifically, dispositional attitudes should predict quantitative attitude differences for normatively extreme stimuli and qualitative attitude differences for normatively moderate stimuli. For example, an extremely positive stimulus would have a mean attitude rating near the ceiling of the attitude scale, and both the upper and lower ends of the attitude distribution would fall above the scale's neutral point. Thus, although people with high dispositional attitudes may like the stimulus more than people with low dispositional attitudes, the average specific attitude for both groups would be above neutral, and thus the difference would be a matter of degree. In contrast, dispositional attitudes should predict qualitative attitude differences for normatively moderate stimuli. A moderate stimulus would have an average attitude rating that is nearly neutral, but the ends of the attitude distribution would fall on opposite sides of the neutral point. Because dispositional and specific attitudes are positively correlated, the upper end of the specific attitude distribution would be populated by more people with high than low dispositional attitudes, and vice versa. Consequently, the average specific attitude toward moderate stimuli for people with high (low) dispositional attitudes may actually be positive (negative) rather than neutral, resulting in qualitative attitude differences. This would be an interesting outcome because it would indicate that individual differences in the tendency to like or dislike stimuli can be associated with qualitative differences in attitude valence – i.e., personality may predict whether people like or dislike a stimulus regardless of the stimulus's properties, suggesting a fundamental role for personality in the prediction of a specific

attitude's valence. However, these qualitative attitude differences are only hypothesized to occur for normatively moderate stimuli, whereas normatively extreme stimuli should display quantitative attitude differences (regardless of whether they are extremely positive or extremely negative).

To examine these predictions, the present research tested whether dispositional attitudes are related to quantitative attitude differences for extreme stimuli and qualitative attitude differences for moderate stimuli. Across two studies, participants completed a dispositional attitude measure and reported attitudes toward six normatively extreme stimuli and six normatively moderate stimuli. Specific attitudes were then analyzed to examine whether dispositional attitudes predicted quantitative or qualitative attitude differences as a function of the specific attitudes being normatively moderate or extreme.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

Undergraduate students at a large public university ($N = 366$) completed this study for partial course credit. The sample was designed to include all participants who could be collected during a single academic semester. Data were not analyzed until all participants had completed the study. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M = 19.78$, $SD = 2.34$). The sample was 63% female and 62% White/European–American, 19% Asian/Asian–American, 6% Black/African–American, and 13% other race/ethnicity. Participants completed the Dispositional Attitude Measure (DAM) and a 12-item attitude questionnaire. The DAM has participants report attitudes toward 16 independent attitude-objects such as *architecture*, *bicycles*, and *taxes* using 1 (*extremely unfavorable*) to 4 (*neutral*) to 7 (*extremely favorable*) scales (Hepler & Albarracin, 2013a). DAM responses are averaged together to yield a single measure indexing a participant's overall tendency to like or dislike stimuli regardless of what those stimuli are.

On the attitude questionnaire, participants reported attitudes toward 12 stimuli using −3 (*extremely unfavorable*) to 0 (*neutral*) to +3 (*extremely favorable*) scales. To select appropriate stimuli, I consulted prior research conducted with the same subject population that had measured attitudes toward a wide range of stimuli (Study 1b of Hepler & Albarracin, 2013a). Based on this work, I selected three very negative stimuli (*losing a game*, *testing products on animals*, and *traffic*), three very positive stimuli (*board games*, *exercising*, and *recycling*), and six moderate/neutral stimuli (*Barack Obama*, *bumper stickers*, *capitalism*, chemicals, *Conan O'Brien*, and *going to the dentist*). The very negative and very positive stimuli should elicit quantitative attitude differences, whereas the moderate stimuli should elicit qualitative attitude differences. Participants reported their attitudes toward all 12 stimuli in alphabetical order. Importantly, none of these stimuli are on the DAM. The administration order of the DAM and attitude questionnaire was randomized and did not influence results.

2.2. Results

Participants were classified into one of three groups based on their DAM scores (overall $M = 3.84$, $SD = .77$). "Haters" had DAM scores 1 SD or more below the mean ($n = 57$, $M = 2.57$, $SD = .30$), "Moderates" had DAM scores between −1/+1 SD of the mean ($n = 250$, $M = 3.83$, $SD = .42$), and "Likers" had DAM scores 1 SD or more above the mean ($n = 59$, $M = 5.00$, $SD = .37$). Attitudes toward the 12 stimuli from the attitude questionnaire are displayed separately for each group in Panel A of Fig. 1. Based on non-overlapping confidence intervals for average attitude ratings, likers had more