



When attitudes and habits don't correspond: Self-control depletion increases persuasion but not behavior



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ABSTRACT

Changing attitudes does not necessarily involve the same psychological processes as changing behavior, yet social psychology is only just beginning to identify the different mechanisms involved. We contribute to this understanding by showing that the moderators of attitude change are not necessarily the moderators of behavior change. The results of three studies ($N_s = 98, 104, 137$) employing an ego depletion manipulation indicate that although people are more likely to agree with a persuasive message when executive control is reduced they are not more likely to change their behavior. Rather, under conditions of ego depletion, attitudes became less correlated with behaviors after persuasion. Moreover, in Study 3, we provide an explanation for this phenomenon: People are more likely to agree with a persuasive message when depleted but are also more likely to fall back on habits that may conflict with their new evaluations. A mini meta-analysis of the data indicated that ego-depletion had a medium effect size on the difference between attitude change and behavior change, $N = 339$, $\bar{d} = -0.51$, 95% CI $[-0.72, -0.29]$. Jointly, these studies suggest an integrative, resource-based explanation to attitude-behavior discrepancies subsequent to persuasion.

Social psychologists often assume that the factors that control attitude change also control behavior change (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Johnson, Siegel, & Crano, 2014; Mancha & Yoder, 2015; McEachan et al., 2016; Wurtele & Maddux, 1987). For this reason, the field of persuasion has mostly focused on attitude and intention change, believing that behaviors will follow. Recent evidence, however, suggests that change in attitudes does not always yield a change in behaviors. Specifically, meta-analyses of experiments employing persuasion manipulations and other means of intention change have found that medium-to-large changes in intentions only led to small-to-medium changes in behavior (Rhodes & Dickau, 2012; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Moreover, statistical simulations suggested that a change in attitudes does not guarantee a change in behavior (Fife-Schaw, Sheeran, & Norman, 2007). At the very least, it seems easier to change intentions than change behavior. These findings also hint that some unique psychological processes are involved in attitude and behavior change.

In the present article, we first demonstrate that attitude and behavior change do not always correspond. The importance of demonstrating this discrepancy is highlighted by recent analyses indicating

that many studies assessing attitudes and intentions do not also assess behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). As a result, the extent to which this discrepancy occurs is largely unknown. We then explore two accounts for the divergence between attitude and behavior change, one involving attitude strength and the second involving habit. We present three studies, the first two of which illustrate the attitude change - behavior change discrepancy. The third describes a test of the underlying mechanism.

To generate conditions in which attitudes and behavior do not change in tandem, we manipulated the extent of thought that participants could allocate to thinking about attitude and behavior change. Specifically, we varied ego-depletion. This manipulation not only established a precondition for this discrepancy but also revealed the processes that contribute to it.

1. Attitude strength

The first explanation why attitudes change without comparable behavior change comes from dual process theories of attitude change,

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especially the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to the ELM, the impact of persuasion attempts on attitude change depends on the recipients' motivation and ability to think (Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). When motivation or ability is low, attitudes change through low-level elaboration processes that depend on peripheral cues such as the number of arguments supporting one side (e.g., Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992). Attitude change under low elaboration results in relatively weak attitudes (e.g., low in accessibility, certainty, extremity) that are less predictive of behavior than the stronger attitudes formed under high elaboration (Krosnick & Petty, 1995).

In this view, recipients may change their attitudes, but not their behavior when attitudes are weak. That is, discrepancies between attitude and behavior change may be due to the fact that newly changed attitudes are too weak to guide behavior. Tests of this model have provided support for this hypothesis. However, these studies have only examined behavioral intentions and not actual behavior (e.g., Barden & Petty, 2008).

2. Habit

The second possibility is that expressing attitudes and behavior may involve somewhat different psychological mechanisms. Recent models of habitual action suggest that people can develop response habits through instrumental learning that are relatively resistant to change from persuasion (e.g., Amodio & Ratner, 2011; Wood & Rünger, 2016). Habits are context-response associations that develop with repeated responding in a given context. Once habits form, the perception of the context automatically triggers activation of the response in mind (Wood, 2017).

The idea that persuasive messages that change people's attitudes do not necessarily change habitual behavior comes from Webb and Sheeran's (2006) meta-analytic review. In their analysis, persuasion and other interventions that successfully changed people's behavioral intentions had little traction in changing their habits. That is, intention to change did not translate into behavioral change in domains in which participants could form habits. In non-habitual domains, however, changed intentions corresponded closely with changed behavior. These findings suggest that the cause of the attitude change - behavior change discrepancy does not lie in weak attitudes but rather in the strength of behavior.

Whether people act out of habit or respond more deliberately depends in part on their ability to deliberate. When the capacity to think is low, such as following ego depletion, they are especially likely to act out of habit. The tendency for people to backslide into responding habitually when self-control falters has been observed with choice of food among dieters (Kahan, Polivy, & Herman, 2003), consumption of alcohol among social drinkers (Muraven, Collins, & Neinhaus, 2002), and the prescription of medications by physicians (Linder et al., 2014). In addition, participants with low willpower are less likely to follow situationally appropriate self-presentation strategies and instead fall back on habitual modes of presenting themselves (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). This does not only refer to bad habits. As Neal, Wood, and Drolet (2013) showed, people exhibit more good habits as well as more bad habits consecutive to an ego depleting task. Depleted individuals are more likely to implement their habitual response because they are less able to reject the automatically activated response or choose an alternative response (or even not respond).

Crucially, in both attitude strength and habit accounts of the attitude change - behavior change discrepancy, attitude change adheres to the processes specified by the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When people can only engage in limited thought, as in the case of ego depletion, they are more likely to change their attitudes when given positive peripheral cues (e.g., a pleasant speaker's voice; Petty et al., 1976) and are less likely to do so when given negative peripheral cues (e.g., an unattractive message source). The two accounts also correspond in

anticipating that, under limited thought, behavior change will not always correspond to attitude change. In the ELM, behavior fails to change when attitudes are weak whereas the habit account emphasizes mechanisms in terms of the behavior. Although our focus here was primarily on testing the influence of habit (given the novelty of this aspect of our analysis), we acknowledge that both mechanisms probably contribute to attitude change - behavior change discrepancies in daily life.

3. Ego depletion

Ego depletion refers to a state in which a person's ability and motivation to engage in effortful deliberation and control of thoughts and actions is reduced, typically as a result of performing a control-demanding task (Baumeister, Muraven, & Tice, 2000). In some views, this phenomenon reflects that self-regulation draw upon a limited resource that has been temporarily diminished from use (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998). In other views, depletion is due to a reduced level of motivation, as people become less motivated to engage in deliberative activities and more motivated to engage in activities that are more satisfying, interesting, and enjoyable (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012).

Previous work has devoted little attention to the effect of depletion on attitude strength (although see: Wan, Rucker, Tormala, & Clarkson, 2010). It is assumed that depletion should result in relatively weak attitudes caused by the peripheral processing of a persuasive message. This ELM-based prediction is consistent with work showing that processing difficulty reduces attitude certainty (Haddock, Rothman, Reber, & Schwarz, 1999), and with recent studies showing that depleted people who are presented with persuasion attempts rely on heuristics when forming their attitudes (Janssen & Fennis, 2017).

Studies that have examined the effect of depletion on attitude change report that depletion impairs the ability to resist persuasive attempts, which leads to attitude change in the direction of this attempt. Specifically, depleted participants were shown to be less able to counterargue specious persuasive messages (Wheeler, Briñol, & Hermann, 2007), and were more susceptible to persuasion when resistance required effort (Burkley, 2008; Clarkson, Hirt, Jia, & Alexander, 2010). Depletion was also found to increase susceptibility to persuasion in studies employing social influence techniques, which consist of a sequence of requests, such as the foot-in-the-door (Fennis & Janssen, 2010; Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009; Janssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Vohs, 2008). Advertising research has also showed that depletion amplifies the effectiveness of persuasion (Gillespie, Joireman, & Muehling, 2012).

Thus, consistent with previous work we hypothesized that:

H1. Depleted participants should show more attitude change than non-depleted participants consecutive to a persuasive message.

We also anticipated that depletion would reduce the association between the newly-formed attitude and its corresponding behavior. This could occur when the new attitude is weak and does not have sufficient strength to guide action. Alternatively, behavior might be strong and habitually cued. Under these circumstances, the depletion-induced attitude change should fail to generate behavior change. This led to the following hypothesis:

H2. Ego-depletion should attenuate the association between attitude change and behavior change consecutive to persuasion.

These two hypotheses were both tested in Study 1 and Study 2 below. These studies highlight the importance of behavioral processes and the ways that successful persuasion may or may not translate into comparable success as behavior change. To more clearly identify the mechanisms behind any discrepancies, in Study 3 we assessed the habit strength of the behavior in the research. This allowed us to test whether habits could account for the posited lack of correspondence between attitude and behavior. We thus hypothesized that:

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