



Social vigilantism and reported use of strategies to resist persuasion



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ABSTRACT

We assessed the unique contribution of social vigilantism (SV; the tendency to impress and propagate one's "superior" beliefs onto others to correct others' more "ignorant" opinions) in predicting participants' reported use of strategies to resist persuasion. Consistent with hypotheses, SV was uniquely and positively associated with reported use of several resistance strategies (including counterarguing, impressing views, social validation, negative affect, and source derogation) in response to challenges above and beyond the effects of argumentativeness, attitude strength, and topic (in Study 1, the issue was abortion; in Study 2, the war in Iraq or the constitutional rights of pornographers). These studies indicate that social vigilantism is an important individual difference variable in the process of attitude resistance.

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1. Introduction

Little research has examined when and why some people resist persuasion attempts (Jacks & Cameron, 2003; see also Crano & Crislin, 2006; Knowles & Linn, 2004). We, and others (e.g., Jacks & Cameron, 2003), argue that resistance to persuasion can be better understood by considering individual differences in strategies to resist persuasion, on which there has also been little research (see Crano & Crislin, 2006; Wood, 2000; c.f., Briñol, Rucker, Tomala, & Petty, 2004; Shakarchi & Haugtvedt, 2004). Accordingly, we developed the individual difference variable *social vigilantism* (SV; Saucier & Webster, 2010).

SV refers to individual differences in the tendency to believe one's views are superior to others'. Individuals higher on SV feel socially obligated to propagate their beliefs onto others. We hypothesize that when confronted with another's opinion, individuals higher in SV will identify the shortcomings in others' arguments, preserve their existing attitudes, maintain superiority in their attitudes, and impress their attitudes onto others.

We showed that individuals higher in SV demonstrated higher levels of belief superiority, counterarguing, and attitude stability after a persuasion appeal (Saucier & Webster, 2010). The effects of SV held regardless of the orientation of the other's position (i.e., left- or right-wing) on an issue, and after controlling for narcissism, dogmatism, reactance, need for cognition, and

characteristics related to the target attitude (attitude importance and extremity). We predict individuals higher in SV are more resistant to challenges because they are more likely to use resistance strategies.

In the current studies, we tested whether individuals higher in SV would report increased use of resistance strategies when their attitudes were challenged, even after controlling for attitude strength, argumentativeness, and the attitude's importance.

1.1. Resistance strategies

Jacks and Cameron (2003) identified seven behavioral strategies individuals use to resist challenges to their attitudes. These are *negative affect* (arousal of anger and other negative emotions), *counterarguing* (direct rebuttal of challenges), *attitude bolstering* (generating ideas confirming one's attitude), *assertion of confidence* (stating nothing can change one's attitudes), *source derogation* (insulting/dismissing the challenger), *social validation* (thinking about others who share one's attitudes), and *selective exposure* (withdrawing from the challenge). Research has shown these resistance strategies – especially counterarguing – are frequently used to resist challenges to attitudes (Cameron, Jacks, & O'Brien, 2002; Jacks & Cameron, 2003; Wellins & McGinnies, 1977).

By examining how SV relates to the use of these strategies, we will better understand how individuals achieve the goals of social vigilantism. Specifically, the strategies enable maintenance of belief superiority, resistance to persuasion, or impression of beliefs in some way, with the possible exception of selective exposure. Higher SV may not be associated with more use of this strategy

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because withdrawing from an argument would preclude the assertion of one's "superior" beliefs. Overall, we suspect that most of Jacks and Cameron's (2003) strategies fulfill the goals associated with SV, and predict SV will be positively related to their use.

1.2. Attitude strength and argumentativeness

Research on resistance to persuasion has focused on *attitude strength*: how an attitude persists, resists change, and impacts information processing and behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Attitude strength has been divided into relatively distinct dimensions (extremity, certainty, importance, knowledge, intensity, interest, direct experience, accessibility, latitudes of rejection and non-commitment, and affective-cognitive consistency of the attitude) (Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003). These individual dimensions of attitude strength predict resistance to persuasive messages (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Jacks & Devine, 2000; Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Zuwerink & Devine, 1996). In our initial SV studies, we only controlled for measures of attitude importance and extremity (Saucier & Webster, 2010). In the current studies, we tested whether the effects of SV on the use of resistance strategies would hold after controlling for these multiple attitude strength dimensions.

It is possible that some individuals just enjoy arguing (i.e., score higher on *argumentativeness*; Infante & Rancer, 1982), and may therefore use resistance strategies more. However, we expect SV to predict resistance strategies above and beyond argumentativeness. People higher in argumentativeness are likely compelled to "get under people's skin," whereas individuals higher in SV feel obligated to change individuals' minds to benefit society. Thus, we contend SV goes beyond argumentativeness in explaining reactions to persuasion attempts and attitude challenges.

1.3. Overview of current studies

We assessed the contribution of SV in predicting a variety of strategies to resist persuasion, beyond the effects of attitude strength and argumentativeness. Study 1 assessed attitudes toward abortion, while Study 2 assessed issues of lower (constitutional rights of pornographers) versus higher (the war in Iraq) importance. Participants completed measures of argumentativeness and SV, and reported how likely they would be to use various resistance strategies when their attitudes were challenged. We predicted that levels of SV would uniquely predict use of resistance strategies, especially for strategies that confront the challenger (e.g., counterarguing), but not for strategies by which they disengage (i.e., selective exposure).

2. Study 1 method

2.1. Participants

Undergraduates ($N = 128$, 27% male) in a social psychology course participated voluntarily during class for extra credit. Twelve participants were sophomores, 60 were juniors, 51 were seniors, and 2 were post-graduate (3 did not report). The mean age of the sample was 21.43 ($SD = 2.20$) with the ages ranging from 19 to 34.

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed questionnaires containing the Social Vigilantism Scale, the Argumentativeness Scale, measures of attitude strength regarding abortion, and measures of resistance strategy use when their abortion attitudes were challenged. The

questionnaires were randomly distributed in counterbalanced orders.

2.2.1. Social vigilantism

The Social Vigilantism Scale (SVS; Saucier & Webster, 2010) consists of 14 items (e.g., *I feel as if it is my duty to enlighten other people*) to which participants report their agreement from 1 (*disagree very strongly*) to 9 (*agree very strongly*). Participants' responses were summed to produce their overall SVS score. Higher scores indicated greater levels of SV, $\alpha = .88$.

2.2.2. Argumentativeness

The Argumentativeness Scale (ARG; Infante & Rancer, 1982) assesses individuals' tendency to argue and consists of 20 items (e.g., *I enjoy a good argument over a controversial issue*) to which individuals' report their levels of agreement from 1 (*disagree very strongly*) to 9 (*agree very strongly*). Relevant items were reverse-scored before responses were summed to produce the overall ARG scale score. Higher scores indicated higher levels of argumentativeness, $\alpha = .91$.

2.2.3. Attitude strength

Participants responded to items representing the nine distinct attitude strength dimensions (see Section 1.2; Krosnick et al., 1993) regarding their attitudes about abortion, a controversial issue in the U.S. With few exceptions, participants responded from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). For eight of the nine dimensions, relevant items were reverse-scored and responses were summed to produce scores for the distinct abortion attitude strength dimensions. For the items assessing extremity, scores were calculated using responses' distance from the midpoint of the scale. These distances were summed to provide overall attitude extremity scores. All α 's were $>.91$ for the attitude strength dimensions, except for direct experience, $\alpha = .70$.

2.2.4. Resistance strategies

Resistance strategy use was assessed using items created by Jacks and Cameron (2003). Participants reported how likely they would be to use various strategies when someone challenged their attitudes about abortion from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). Two items assessed the use of each resistance strategy: attitude bolstering (e.g., *respond by thinking about the reasons why I believe what I do about abortion*), assertions of confidence (e.g., *respond by thinking about how there is nothing the other person can say to change my mind*), counterarguing (e.g., *respond by thinking about or verbalizing why the other person's arguments are faulty*), social validation (e.g., *respond by thinking or talking about the fact that lots of people share my convictions*), selective exposure (e.g., *respond by walking away or just not listening*), negative affect (e.g., *respond by getting emotionally upset*), and source derogation (e.g., *respond by thinking or saying things about the person that are uncomplimentary*).

We included two additional items to assess an eighth resistance strategy in which individuals would attempt to impress their views on the person who challenged their attitudes (i.e., *respond by trying to convince the other person to agree with me* and *respond by helping the other person to understand the value of my opinion*). Participants' responses for each pair of items were summed to produce scores for each of the eight resistance strategies.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Predicting resistance strategies

Eight separate hierarchical regressions assessed SV's ability to predict the use of resistance strategies above and beyond the other

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