



Making it moral: Merely labeling an attitude as moral increases its strength



Andrew Luttrell^{a,*}, Richard E. Petty^a, Pablo Briñol^b, Benjamin C. Wagner^c

^a The Ohio State University, United States

^b Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

^c St. Thomas Aquinas College, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Mere perceptions of moral (vs. non-moral) attitude bases were manipulated.
- Perceiving a moral basis increased attitude–intention consistency.
- Perceiving a moral basis also led to greater resistance to persuasion.
- These effects were not mediated by other established attitude strength indicators.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 September 2015

Revised 15 March 2016

Accepted 20 April 2016

Available online 27 April 2016

Keywords:

Morality
Attitude strength
Attitude–behavior consistency
Resistance to persuasion
Moral conviction

ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown that self-reported moral bases of people's attitudes predict a range of important consequences, including attitude-relevant behavior and resistance in the face of social influence. Although previous studies typically rely on self-report measures of such bases, the present research tests the possibility that people can be induced to view their own attitudes as grounded in moral bases. This perception alone leads to outcomes associated with strong attitudes. In three experiments, participants were led to view their attitudes as grounded in moral or non-moral bases. Merely perceiving a moral (vs. non-moral) basis to one's attitudes led them to show greater correspondence with relevant behavioral intentions (Experiment 1) and become less susceptible to change following a persuasive message (Experiments 2 and 3). Moreover, these effects were independent of any other established indicators of attitude strength.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

When people claim that an attitude of theirs is grounded in core moral beliefs, that attitude tends to be relatively consequential (Skitka, 2010; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Research on attitudes' moral bases typically assesses people's beliefs regarding the link between their attitude and their morality with questions such as, "To what extent is your attitude about this topic a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?" (Skitka, 2010). This work consistently shows that the more people report a moral basis for their attitudes, the more those attitudes predict relevant behavior (e.g. Bloom, 2013, Morgan, Skitka, & Wisneski, 2010, Skitka & Bauman, 2008, Skitka et al., 2005, Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008) and resist being changed (Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, 2012; Haidt,

2001; Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimmie, 2003; Hornsey, Smith, & Begg, 2007).

Those two outcomes, attitude–behavior consistency and resistance to change, are critical consequences of *attitude strength*. The defining features of strong versus weak attitudes are that they are more resistant to persuasion, more stable over time, and have greater influence over cognition and relevant behaviors (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). To date, many measurable aspects of attitudes have been shown to index whether those attitudes will demonstrate one or more of the defining strength consequences. These indicators of strength include the extent to which an attitude is confidently held (Rucker, Tormala, Petty, & Briñol, 2014), ambivalent (Armitage & Conner, 2000), accessible (Fazio, 1995), rated as important (Eaton & Visser, 2008), based on high knowledge (Wood, Rhodes, & Biek, 1995), or resulted from considerable message-relevant thinking (Barden & Petty, 2008). Importantly, these strength indicators are not necessarily equally good at predicting strength consequences in all situations or for all people. Some strength indicators even

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, United States.

E-mail address: luttrell.19@osu.edu (A. Luttrell).

interact with other indicators to predict strength consequences. For example, increased certainty increases resistance to change and stability over time when attitudes are relatively unambivalent but not when they are ambivalent (Clarkson, Tormala, & Rucker, 2008; Luttrell, Petty, & Briñol, 2016), and people engage in attitude-expressive behaviors more when certainty and importance are both high (Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003).

In short, the literature on attitude strength has distinguished between the critical consequences of strength (e.g., enhanced resistance to change) and the variables that can indicate whether these strength consequences are likely to occur (e.g., certainty). In this regard, studies have suggested that having a moral basis to one's attitude is a strength indicator akin to having more knowledge, or accessibility, or certainty. It is notable that the existing work on measured moral attitude bases has typically aimed to distinguish that construct from attitude strength, instead emphasizing that moral conviction is about the specific underlying content of an attitude rather than attitude strength per se (Skitka, 2014). However, although the measured moral basis of an attitude would most likely link to particular underlying content (e.g., having moral reasons for the attitude), measured moral conviction is nonetheless an attitude strength "indicator" given the prior research connecting it to strength outcomes of interest such as resistance to influence and attitude-behavior correspondence. But the question still remains: why would having a moral basis for one's attitude be associated with strength consequences? Is the moral content a necessary component or is the mere perception of a moral basis sufficient? That is the key question of this research.

One possibility is that morally based attitudes are different in some fundamental way (such as in content) from non-morally based attitudes and that this makes them stronger. Some scholars have suggested that morally based attitudes develop from stable, internal influences. Rozin (1999), for instance, discusses the process of moralization, noting that the adoption of new moral principles gives moral value to anything else that seems related to them. Additionally, some data demonstrate that more conservative ideology corresponds to a greater tendency to moralize attitudes (e.g., Jarudi, Kreps, & Bloom, 2008), but a recent meta-analysis suggests that people moralize attitudes that are important to any ideology, be it liberal or conservative (Skitka, Morgan, & Wisneski, 2015). Thus, moral attitudes could be more strongly based on ideology, rendering them more impactful. Other evidence also suggests stable internal origins by demonstrating a link between morality and the heritability of attitudes. Prior research has documented the heritability of a subset of attitudes such as those toward pre-marital sex and the death penalty (vs. those toward refugees and capitalism; Tesser, 1993). Building on this research, Brandt and Wetherell (2012) showed that even controlling for other attitude strength indicators such as certainty and importance, more heritable attitudes tended to be held with greater degrees of perceived moral basis.

Although this research provides some interesting insights into factors that could make morally based attitudes differ substantively from non-morally based attitudes, it does not address the questions of whether these substantive differences are responsible for the relationship between moral conviction and attitude strength consequences. For instance, does moral conviction predict resistance to persuasion *because* those attitudes have a stronger basis in heredity or ideology?

In contrast to the possibility that morally based attitudes are more consequential because they are substantively different from non-morally based attitudes, the current research explores the idea that the mere perception that attitudes have a moral basis is sufficient to render them more consequential even if there is no substantive difference. That is, a perceived moral basis could serve as an attitude strength heuristic similar to how other strength heuristics operate in the absence of substantive differences in the underlying nature of the attitude. For

example, although attitudes tend to be more consequential when they are the result of careful thinking (see Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995), Barden and Petty (2008) showed that when people merely believed that they diligently thought about an issue, their attitude on the issue better predicted their behavior even if the perception of deep thought was created experimentally without any substantive basis to it. Following the methodology of Barden and Petty (2008), testing the unique role of perceived moral attitude bases requires randomly assigning some people to believe that their attitude is based in morality and other people not to.

Recently, Van Bavel, Packer, Haas, and Cunningham (2012) presented data suggesting that the same issue can indeed be framed in moral versus non-moral terms, which can correspond to some attitude strength indicators. Their participants evaluated a series of actions, sometimes using morally-framed questions ("how morally wrong/right it would be") and sometimes using non-morally-framed questions ("how personally bad/good you think it would be"). They found that people could switch flexibly between moral and non-moral evaluations, and people answered the morally-framed questions with more extreme and quickly-registered responses, compared to the non-moral questions (Van Bavel et al., 2012). It would thus seem that thinking along moral lines was associated with the attitude strength indicators of extremity (Abelson, 1995) and accessibility (Fazio, 1995), though this research did not examine attitude strength consequences.

Furthermore, the implications of these results for our proposal are seriously limited by the manipulation's emphasis on having participants make *different* evaluations in responding to the moral and non-moral questions. That is, participants could be drawing on different information in responding to each unique type of question, leading to different evaluations. In contrast, we propose that merely perceiving the *same* evaluations of the same object as morally based or not can produce attitude strength consequences. In particular, we aim to examine perceived morality's influence on two key attitude strength consequences: attitude-behavior correspondence and resistance to persuasion. Although Van Bavel et al.'s (2012) effects on extremity and accessibility suggest a relationship with indicators of attitude strength (though this might be due to differing considerations that informed responses to the moral versus non-moral questions), no work has yet shown that mere perceptions of a moral basis are consequential in producing differential attitude strength outcomes.

In addition to the Van Bavel et al. (2012) research, other studies have used manipulations to influence how much people perceive an *issue* to be a moral one, but our analysis is focused on labeling one's own *attitude* as morally based. That is, although some prior studies have manipulated moral vs. non-moral issue frames (Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014), use of moral vs. non-moral persuasive arguments (Ferrari & Leippe, 1992), moral vs. non-moral judgment questions (Van Bavel et al., 2012), or reminders that others see a topic as morally relevant or not (Ben-Nun Bloom & Levitan, 2011), they do not show evidence that connecting the issue to the concept of morality makes people think that their own specific attitude is grounded in moral beliefs. Even more importantly, no prior work has examined whether manipulations of perceived moral bases can affect how consequential one's attitude is. Thus, although there is evidence in the domain of morality and attitude processes that utilized experimental manipulations, it remains to be shown that the perception of a moral attitude basis alone can lead to attitude strength outcomes such as persuasion resistance and engaging in attitude-consistent behavior.

By experimentally inducing the perception of a moral attitude basis, we are also able to better understand the role that various other attitude strength indicators might play in the relationship between perceived moral bases and attitude strength consequences. Specifically, are perceived moral attitude bases distinct from other established attitude strength indicators? As we mentioned earlier, many individual variables

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947667>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/947667>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)