Fostering Advocacy: How the Underlying Constructs of Attitude Certainty Affect Persuasion Intentions

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The present research suggests that while attitude certainty plays a large role in advocacy, it is the underlying construct of attitude correctness, not clarity, which really drives the effect. Across three studies we show that attitude correctness is a strong predictor of advocacy while attitude clarity is not.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017223/volumes/v42/NA-42

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT:
What drives people to advocate on behalf of their own beliefs? When, and why, do people try to persuade others? On a daily basis, we are exposed to countless advocacies generated by individuals. One person might advocate for stricter gun control after learning of a school shooting, whereas another might endorse a new product based on recent personal experience with it. Despite a voluminous literature on attitude change and persuasion, we know very little about advocacy.

One thing we do know about advocacy is that attitude certainty appears to be an important determinant (Akhtar, Paunesku, and Tormala, 2013). Attitude certainty refers to the subjective sense of conviction with which one holds one’s attitude (Rucker, Tormala, Petty, and Briñol, 2014). According to past research, attitude certainty is the catalyst that transforms attitudes into action (Tormala & Rucker, 2007). For instance, Barden and Petty (2008) found that high attitude certainty increases willingness to vote and sign petitions. In addition, Visser, Krosnick, and Simmons (2003) found that high attitude certainty encouraged people to seek to persuade others. More recently, Akhtar et al. (2013) found that greater attitude certainty was associated with greater intentions to persuade others to one’s viewpoint.

According to Petrocelli, Tormala, and Rucker (2007) attitude certainty can be construed in terms of either attitude clarity, “the subjective sense that one knows what one’s attitude is,” or attitude correctness, “the subjective sense that one’s attitude is correct or valid.” The aim of this research is to offer greater insight into the certainty-advocacy relationship by investigating which construct, clarity or correctness, is the primary driver of advocacy.

Our central hypothesis is that advocacy depends more on correctness than it does on clarity. Indeed, feeling clear about one’s own attitude does not necessarily imply that others should share it, but feeling that one’s attitude is correct might suggest that others should share it. To the extent that people feel that they have the correct opinion, we suspect that they will be more likely to express an inclination toward advocating.

Study 1 used a correlational design to provide initial evidence that clarity and correctness could be statistically differentiated in how they predict advocacy behavior. Participants were presented with five policy issues and asked about their attitudes, certainty, clarity, correctness, and advocacy. We hypothesized that correctness would be a much better predictor of advocacy than would clarity. For each policy item we considered the partial correlations for correctness with advocacy (controlling for clarity and global certainty) and the partial correlations for clarity with advocacy (controlling for correctness and global certainty). The results across all five issues for our partial correlations show that correctness consistently and significantly predicted advocacy, whereas clarity did not.

Study 2 aimed to establish a causal path for the effect uncovered in study 1. Following the attitude measurement, all participants were exposed to a consensus manipulation where they were informed that their score was either similar to or dissimilar to the majority of other survey takers responses. We predicted that participants in the high consensus condition would feel higher levels of attitude correctness, but not attitude clarity, leading them to be more likely to exhibit advocacy behavior than those in the low consensus condition.

Participants were asked to report their attitudes toward a statement on gun control after which they completed all of the same items as in study 1. We found an effect of consensus on our correctness index (a = 0.85), t(402)=-3.20, p=0.001, such that participants exposed to the high consensus condition (M=7.02, s.d.=1.65) felt significantly more correct than those in the low consensus condition (M=6.46, s.d.=1.85). We then found a marginal effect of consensus on our clarity index (a = 0.94), t(402)=1.80, p=0.072, such that participants exposed to the high consensus condition (M=7.81, s.d.=1.46) felt marginally more clarity than those in the low consensus condition (M=7.52, s.d.=1.73). Finally, we found an effect of consensus on our advocacy index (a = 0.94), t(402)=2.79, p=0.006, such that participants exposed to the high consensus condition (M=4.66, s.d.=2.28) did express stronger intentions to advocate than those in the low consensus condition (M=4.03, s.d.=2.23). Next, to provide direct evidence that correctness and not clarity, mediated the relationship between consensus and advocacy, we employed a mediation analysis.

Across 3 studies, we found evidence for the proposed advocacy hypothesis. Specifically, we found that attitude correctness does have a significantly stronger relationship with advocacy than does attitude clarity. As hypothesized, we observed correctness mediating the relationship with advocacy. In contrast, attitude clarity appeared to play no role. Implications for understanding and eliciting advocacy in consumer contexts will be discussed.

REFERENCES:


