

Study sheds new light on certainty of opinions

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Researchers for years have understood how attitudes held with certainty might predict behavior, but a series of new studies led by a University at Buffalo psychologist suggest there may be a more general disposition at

work that predicts the certainty of newly formed evaluations, just as they do for pre-existing opinions.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, could help polling researchers and others interested in studying attitudes gain insights on a variety of matters—including those they aren't directly measuring.

Attitudes are our personal evaluations—of anything. It might be a [political issue](#), other people, food, movies, cars, climate or even yourself. Each example is a different target that people can evaluate. But these evaluations aren't the whole story. Attitude certainty—the extent to which people have a clear idea of, trust in, or belief that their attitudes are correct—is also important.

Attitudes that people are certain of are more likely to predict behavior and are more stable than attitudes people doubt.

"If I'm positive toward a candidate, but am not very certain of that [attitude](#), I'm not as likely to vote for her as I would be if I were just as positive, but were higher in my certainty," says Kenneth DeMarree, an associate professor of psychology in UB's College of Arts and Sciences and the paper's lead author.

"Most of the past research studying the origins of certainty has focused on how people engage with each issue," he says. "If an issue is personally important to someone, if they think carefully about it, if it is linked to their morals, they're likely to be more certain of their opinion on that issue."

What this new research shows is that some people tend to be certain—and others uncertain—across a wide range of their attitudes, something which hasn't previously been explored.

Where past research has examined how people think about and relate to individual issues, the new work suggests that there are general patterns about how people think about and relate to nearly any issue they consider.

"The general tendency to be certain of one's attitudes, what we've labeled dispositional attitude certainty, is correlated with traits like how much people enjoy thinking or their self-esteem," says DeMarree. "There are likely a range of other aspects of the person that may relate to the tendency to be certain of one's attitudes in general, and some of our follow-up work is seeking to explore this by targeting different reasons people might be certain."

"Ours is the first study to show that certainty in an attitude, including an attitude that has not been formed yet, is generally related to one's certainty in other attitudes," DeMarree adds.

Is someone certain about the quality of the soup special at the corner diner? Those most certain about that attitude may be more certain about all items on that restaurant's menu, according to DeMarree. They may also be more likely to act on those attitudes.

"For others that might not feel as certain in their attitudes of the soup over the pizza, their attitudes won't as strongly predict the choices they'll make," he says.

In addition to the study predicting attitude certainty for novel objects and issues, DeMarree and his co-authors—Richard E. Petty, distinguished professor at The Ohio State University, Pablo Briñol, a professor at Autonomous University of Madrid, and Ji Xia, a UB graduate student—also examined how likely participants would be to rely on their attitudes.

And, as certainty in an individual attitude predicts whether a person is likely to act on it, dispositional attitude certainty predicts people's likelihood of acting on their attitudes in general.

"People higher in dispositional attitude certainty seem to be relying more on their attitudes across every domain we examined," DeMarree says, adding that this effect was not found for everyone, and future research will explore which people are easiest to predict.

More information: Kenneth G. DeMarree et al, Documenting individual differences in the propensity to hold attitudes with certainty., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000241](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000241)

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