

Populism vs. Elitism: Social Consensus and Social Status as Bases of Attitude Certainty

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ABSTRACT. This study examined the effects of social consensus and social status on attitude certainty that is conceptualized multi-dimensionally as perceived clarity and correctness of one's attitude. In a mock opinion exchange about a social issue, participants were either supported (high consensus) or opposed (low consensus) by most of the confederates. They were informed that their opinion (high status) or their opponents' opinion (low status) had the alleged psychological significance indicative of future success. Post-experimental attitude clarity was significantly greater when attitudinal position was associated with high rather than low status. Attitude correctness was interactively affected by social status and social consensus. Supporting the compensatory effect hypothesis, attitude correctness was comparable across the levels of social consensus as long as they were associated with high status, and across the levels of social status as long as they were associated with high social consensus.

Keywords: attitude certainty, attitude strength, social status, social consensus

AN ATTITUDE COUNTS FOR LITTLE if it is not accompanied with the certainty necessary to make it consequential. Attitude certainty refers to the subjective sense of conviction about an attitude (Abelson, 1988; Festinger, 1950, 1954; Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995). The higher the certainty about one's attitude, the more likely the attitude is to inform behavior (Berger & Mitchell, 1989; Bizer, Tormala, Rucker, & Petty, 2006), information processing (Chaiken, Lieberman, & Eagly, 1989; Tormala, Rucker, & Seger, 2008), withstand persuasive attacks (Bassili, 1996; Tormala & Petty, 2002), and persist over time (Bassili,

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1996). In short, attitudes high in certainty are strong (Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Prislin, 1996).

Because certainty appears to sustain attitudes and set them in action, it is important to understand its origins. Much of the extant research on the origins of attitude certainty has focused on intra-individual factors that reflect various aspects of subjective experience with the attitude object (Tormala & Rucker, 2007). Recently, however, attention has turned to social contextual factors (Eaton, Majka, & Visser, 2008). The idea guiding this emerging approach is that the social context in which attitudes are held may regulate their strength (Crano & Prislin, 2006; Prislin & Crano, 2008).

Although only recently applied to attitude strength, the idea about social regulation of attitudes is an old one. It was central in the early theorizing that the social environment could substitute for, and sometimes even override the physical environment as a criterion for attitude validity (Asch, 1956; Festinger, 1950, 1954; Sherif, 1935). If social consensus as a central element of the social environment could strongly determine attitude validity, it should also affect attitude strength. In a test of this hypothesis, Visser and Mirabile (2004) embedded their participants in social networks that were uniformly supportive of their attitudes, or alternatively, reflected a range of attitudinal positions of which only a few were supportive. Participants embedded in socially supportive networks strengthened their attitudes as evident from, among others, greater certainty with which they held their attitudes. Greater certainty, in turn, resulted in greater resistance to change in the face of persuasive attacks. The powerful role of social consensus in strengthening attitudes is additionally illustrated in research on the phenomenological construction of social consensus. This research has documented that attitude certainty increases not only due to the actual social consensus, but also due to the social consensus constructed through social projection (Holtz, 2004, 2009), and conformity to group norms (Smith, Hogg, Martin, & Terry, 2007).

Social consensus builds certainty by providing information about what is a socially correct way of thinking and feeling about an attitude object (Asch, 1956; Festinger, 1954; Orive, 1988). Social consensus transforms a subjective attitude into a reflection of the "objective" reality (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Those holding socially shared attitudes may claim that they are "objective" and therefore correct in how they react to an attitude object. Importantly, they need not necessarily know with clarity how to evaluate the object, only that they are correct when they do so. This reasoning received empirical support in a series of studies showing that social consensus increased the subjective sense of attitude validity or confidence in attitude correctness. Social consensus did not affect confidence in attitude clarity or the subjective sense that one knows one's attitude (Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007). Clarity was increased through repeated expressions of an attitude. Thus, attitude correctness and attitude clarity as two related but separate components of attitude certainty appear to originate from different factors (Petrocelli et al., 2007).

Although not affected by social consensus, attitude clarity may be sensitive to other features of social environment. We surmise that attitude clarity may be affected by social status or the relative position of an attitudinal reaction on valued dimensions of comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social status affords prestige or esteem (high status) to those holding certain attitudes, leaving others holding the opposite attitudes ill-regarded (low status). For example, preference for a certain art genre may be prestigious, whereas preferences for the others may afford little prestige or, worse yet, may be disreputable. Whereas it may be prestigious to hold socially shared attitudes (Prislin & Christensen, 2005), it need not always be so. The opposite may be equally true, as in the case of social elites whose prestige originates from their social exclusivity (Prewitt & Stone, 1973). Thus, social consensus for an attitudinal position and social status that goes with that attitudinal position, though possibly related, are separate features of the social environment.

When an attitudinal position is associated with social status, it should become especially salient and distinctive. To those seeking status, knowledge of the attitudinal position instrumental toward their goal becomes a condition *sine qua non*. When knowing oneself is a condition for social advancement, people should be especially likely to reflect on their thoughts and feelings. Thus, they should become keenly aware of the position associated with high status and hold it with clarity. Moreover, they should be eager to express it frequently, further increasing clarity with which they hold their attitudes (Petrocelli et al., 2007). Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Attitudes associated with high status, in comparison to attitudes those associate with low status, should be held with a greater clarity.

The same instrumental value of an attitude in achieving social status, which presumably increases attitude clarity, should also increase attitude correctness. We base our hypothesis on the assumption that social status may serve as a pragmatic criterion of attitude correctness. That is, social status may signal “ecological” validity of an attitude. In the absence of an objective criterion, such an ecological criterion may serve as a convenient substitute on the ground that what is useful is correct. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Attitudes associated with high status, in comparison to those associated with low status, should be higher in correctness.

If our hypothesis receives empirical support, it would indicate that social status functions much like social consensus—it increases perception of attitude correctness. The presumed functional equivalency of the two features of social environment further implies that a favorable social comparison on one feature may compensate for an unfavorable social comparison on the other. If so, then:

Hypothesis 3: The *compensatory effect* should be evident in the comparable perception of attitude correctness across all levels of one variable as

long as they are paired with a high level of the other variable. Specifically, individuals should perceive their attitudes as comparably correct in the low social consensus and high social consensus environment as long as they are high in status. Similarly, individuals should perceive their attitudes as comparably correct when they are low in status and high in status as long as there is a high level of social consensus about their attitudinal position. If so, only those low in status and social consensus should question the correctness of their attitudes. In statistical terms, the hypothesized compensatory effect would be indicated by a significant interaction between social status and social consensus in determining attitude correctness.

Our assumption about functional equivalency of social status and social consensus in determining attitude correctness does not extend to attitude clarity. As indicated earlier, attitude clarity or the subjective sense that one knows one's attitude should be affected by factors that aid in becoming aware of one's attitude. Because social consensus is not among such factors (Petrocelli et al., 2007), we did not anticipate that high levels of social consensus could compensate for low levels of social status. Thus, we did not anticipate a significant interaction between social consensus and social status in determining attitude clarity.

These hypotheses were examined in a study in which the participants, in the course of a mock opinion exchange with a group of confederates, explained their attitudes on an important social issue. The participant experienced either high social consensus for the expressed attitude when three of the five confederates sided with the expressed position (4:2), or low social consensus when four of the five confederates opposed the expressed position (2:4). Independently of the social consensus on their attitudinal position, the participants were informed about the alleged prognostic value of their attitudes for their future success. Specifically, participants were told that their opinions were of further interest to the researcher because of their alleged psychological significance and implications for future success (high status) or heard these comments being made about the opposite opinions (low status) within the group. The participants indicated certainty about their attitudes by responding to a series of questions assessing their perceptions of the clarity and correctness of their attitudes.

Method

Participants and Design

Of the 130 undergraduate students who participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement, 64 were women and 66 were men, with the mean age of $M = 18.93$ ($SD = 1.55$). The sample included 53 White (non-Latino/a) Americans, 29 Latino/a Americans, 25 Asian Americans, 7 African Americans, and 16 participants of an unspecified race or ethnicity. Participants

were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (social consensus: low vs. high) X 2 (social status: low vs. high) between-subjects design.

Procedure

When one participant and five confederates gathered in the laboratory, the experimenter explained that the goal of the study was to address a common criticism regarding the artificiality of laboratory research. Specifically, laboratory research often assesses opinions through the use of questionnaires, whereas in real life, opinions are expressed verbally in communication with other people. To mimic a real life scenario, participants were to express their opinions verbally by stating where they stand on the issue and then explaining why. Specifically, they were to state their position on various issues related to legalization of marijuana and offer their reasons for the position. In preparation for the opinion exchange, participants first responded to two questions about their overall attitude toward the legalization of marijuana (see below). Next, they were given a list of ten pertinent issues (e.g., marijuana as a painkiller, a gateway to hard drugs, its effects on the economy, crime, etc.) and asked to generate their arguments about each of them. Next, they were told that they would go through the issues one at a time, stating their opinions and a few supporting arguments. The experimenter further explained that they were to listen to each other carefully and to take into account each other's opinion but not to make any comment because the study was not about their ability to argue but rather about the range of ideas on the issue.

In an ostensibly random procedure, the naïve participant was selected to be the first to state his or her opinion, with others to follow. With an explanation that it was important to assess everybody's opinion in the same, consistent way, this order was maintained throughout the opinion communication. In the *low social consensus* condition, one of the confederates sided with the participant whereas the remaining four expressed opposing opinions (2:4). In the *high social consensus condition*, three of the confederates sided with the participant, whereas the remaining two expressed opposing opinions (4:2). Arguments that the confederates offered as explanations for their positions were selected in a pilot study. To ensure that the position advocated (pro or contra legalization of marijuana) was not confounded with the quality of explanation, arguments were selected so that those supporting the issue were on average as strong as arguments used to oppose the issue, $F(1, 23) = 0.91, p = 0.51$.

To confer *high status* to the participant, after the group discussion, the experimenter expressed special interest in the participant's opinion, emphasizing its psychological significance and implications for future success. Specifically, looking at the participant and his or her supporters, the experimenter commented that researchers were especially interested in those participants who were in the majority (minority) because they represented a normative and valid (innovative and progressive) way of thinking that typically characterized those who

were to become leaders. Because of the alleged psychological significance of their way of thinking, the experimenter invited them to remain for further discussion with a lead researcher while dismissing others who were of no further interest to the study. Conversely, to confer *low status* to the participant, the experimenter used the same strategy but addressed the participant's opponents. Thus, the participant's opponents were invited to remain for further discussion with a lead researcher because of the presumed psychological significance of their opinions, indicative of future success and leadership, while the participant and his or her supporter were dismissed. Prior to meeting with the lead researcher (leaving the laboratory), the participants were invited to answer a computer-administered questionnaire assessing their attitudes toward legalization of marijuana and attitude certainty (clarity and correctness). Finally, they were thoroughly debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Dependent Measures

Attitude certainty. On a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*), participants indicated to what extent they were certain that they knew their true opinion, expressed their true thoughts and feelings, had a clear opinion, expressed their real opinion (*clarity*), were certain that they had the correct opinion, expressed the right way of thinking and feeling, and the extent to which others should have the same opinion about legalization of marijuana (*correctness*). These items were modeled after measures proposed by Petrocelli and colleagues (2007).

Manipulation Checks

The effectiveness of the social consensus manipulation was assessed by questions about the extent to which others in the session agreed and disagreed with the participant. The effectiveness of the social status manipulation was assessed by questions about the extent to which the position advocated by the participant was more prestigious and more important than that advocated by his or her opponents. This assessment is in line with conceptualization of social status in terms of comparative advantages (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). All questions were answered on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*).

To document that attitudes toward legalization of marijuana were evenly distributed across all experimental conditions, an additional measure was taken. Specifically, on a 9-point scale (-4 to 4), participants indicated to what extent they oppose vs. support and disagree vs. agree with the legalization of marijuana.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Social consensus. Responses to the questions about agreement and disagreement (recoded) were averaged into an index of perceived agreement with one's position

($r = .56$). A 2 X 2 (consensus x status) ANOVA on this index yielded a significant main effect of social consensus, $F(1, 126) = 367.41$, partial $\eta^2 = .75$, $p < .001$. As expected, participants in the high social consensus condition perceived a significantly higher level of agreement with their position ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.49$) than those in the low social consensus condition ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.70$). Main effect of social status, $F(1, 126) = 0.04$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, $p = .85$, and interaction effect, $F(1, 126) = 0.15$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, $p = .70$, were not statistically significant.

Social status. Responses to the questions about comparative prestige and importance of their position were averaged into an index of perceived prestige of one's position ($r = .58$). A 2 X 2 (consensus x status) ANOVA on this index yielded a significant main effect of social status, $F(1, 126) = 31.63$, partial $\eta^2 = .20$, $p < .001$. As expected, participants in the high status condition perceived significantly more prestige associated with their position ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.10$) than those in the low social status condition ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.05$). Main effect of social consensus, $F(1, 126) = 0.13$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, $p = .72$, and interaction effect, $F(1, 126) = 0.002$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$, $p = .96$, were not statistically significant.

Attitudes. Responses to the two items evaluating legalization of marijuana were averaged into an index of attitude ($r = .90$). As expected, given that the manipulation of independent variables followed the attitude measure, a 2 x 2 (consensus x status) ANOVA on this index yielded no significant effect, all $F_s < 0.93$, all $\eta_s^2 = .00$, (overall $M = 0.59$, $SD = 2.24$).

Dependent Measures

Dimensionality of attitude certainty. To examine dimensionality of the attitude certainty measures, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method. The χ^2 likelihood ratio index, comparative fit index (CFI, Bentler, 1990), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA, Steiger, 1990), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR, Hu & Bentler, 1998; 1999) were used to evaluate the extent of fit for each of the models. Values greater than .90 on the CFI and less than .08 on the RMSEA and SRMR indicate acceptable fit. The two-dimensional model provided a satisfactory fit, $\chi^2(13, N = 130) = 28.96$, $p = .007$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.09, SRMR = 0.06. Support for the unidimensional model was minimal, $\chi^2(14, N = 130) = 89.59$, $p < .0001$, CFI = 0.79, RMSEA = 0.20, SRMR = 0.12. Additionally, the χ^2 difference test was used to compare the relative fit of the two models. The analysis revealed that the two-dimensional model represented the data significantly better than the unidimensional model, $\Delta\chi^2(1, N = 130) = 60.63$, $p < .001$. In light of these findings, attitude clarity and attitude correctness were treated as distinct variables in the subsequent analyses.

Attitude Clarity

A 2×2 (consensus \times status) ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of social status, $F(1, 126) = 4.60$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, $p < .05$ (Table 1). In support of our hypothesis that attitude clarity is regulated by social status, participants reported greater clarity in the high status condition ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.68$) than the low social status condition ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.85$). Main effect of social consensus, $F(1, 126) = 0.91$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$, $p = .34$, and interaction effect, $F(1, 126) = 0.19$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$, $p = .66$, were not statistically significant.

Attitude Correctness

In support of our hypothesis that attitude correctness is regulated by both social status and social consensus, a 2×2 (consensus \times status) ANOVA yielded significant main effects of social status, $F(1, 126) = 12.26$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$, $p < .001$ ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.70$ and $M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.84$ for the high and low status, respectively), and social consensus $F(1, 126) = 7.67$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, $p < .01$ ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .76$ and $M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.81$ for the high and low consensus, respectively). These effects were qualified by a significant social consensus \times social status interaction, $F(1, 126) = 4.00$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, $p < .05$ (Table 1), as predicted in hypothesis 3. Planned contrasts, performed using the overall error term and a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, provided support for the compensatory effect hypothesis. Specifically, participants in the high status condition reported comparable correctness when they had high and low social consensus for their position, $t(126) = 0.54$, $p = .59$,

TABLE 1. Attitude Clarity and Attitude Correctness as a Function of Social Support and Social Status

	Low social support		High social support	
	Low social status ($n = 32$)	High social status ($n = 35$)	Low social status ($n = 32$)	High social status ($n = 31$)
Attitude clarity				
M	3.93	4.29	4.12	4.35
SD	0.91	0.62	0.78	0.75
Attitude correctness				
M	2.81	3.53	3.44	3.63
SD	0.78	0.67	0.79	0.74

Note: Higher numbers indicate greater clarity and correctness.

$d = 0.14$, 95% CI around d $[-0.34, 0.62]$. In further support of the compensatory effect hypothesis, participants in the high social consensus condition reported comparable correctness when their position was afforded high and low status, $t(126) = 1.00$, $p = .31$, $d = 0.55$, 95% CI around d $[-0.25, 0.74]$. Additional analyses revealed that participants in the low status condition reported a significantly greater correctness when they had high rather than low social consensus for their position, $t(126) = 3.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$, 95% CI around d $[0.30, 1.31]$. Similarly, participants in the low social consensus condition reported a significantly greater correctness when their position was afforded high rather than low status, $t(126) = 3.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.99$, 95% CI around d $[0.48, 1.50]$.

Discussion

Our results provide strong support for the hypothesis that attitude certainty or confidence about one's attitude is regulated by multiple features of the social environment. Attitude certainty increased with social consensus for an attitude but also with social status associated with holding that attitude. Importantly, attitude clarity and attitude correctness as two related but distinct components of attitude certainty were differentially sensitive to these two features of the social context. Replicating previous findings (Petrocelli et al., 2007), we found that attitude clarity, or the subjective sense that one knows with precision one's attitudinal position, was not affected by social consensus. Extending previous findings, and in support of our first hypothesis, we documented that clarity was highly sensitive to social status. As our participants earned their status by advocating a specific attitudinal position, they recognized with increased clarity how exactly they felt about the issue under consideration. The participants came to know themselves better through the esteem that the social environment afforded their attitudes. Apparently, conferring prestige is a social environment's way of teaching us to "know thyself."

Whereas attitude clarity was regulated by social status only, attitude correctness was affected by both social status and social consensus. This finding provides support for our hypothesis about functional equivalence of these two aspects of social environment. It suggests that in the absence of more "objective," physical criteria, multiple aspects of the social environment may serve as criteria of validity. The apparent functional equivalency of social consensus and social status is intriguing given that these two features of the social environment have seemingly different informational value. Social consensus provides information about validity because socially shared judgments "emerged from, and survived, process of discussion, argument, and collective testing" (Turner & Oakes, 1997, p. 369). Socially esteemed judgments, however, appear to acquire their truth value through a different process. They emerge victorious in competition for a valuable outcome (esteem, prestige). Their instrumental, pragmatic value appears to make them phenomenologically valid. Extending this reasoning further, it could be argued that

attitudes instrumental in advancing attitude holders' position in aspects of a social hierarchy other than social status could also be high in correctness. For example, attitudes associated with power may be high in phenomenological correctness (e.g., Briñol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007).

Our finding about the interactive effect of social status and social consensus on attitude correctness provided empirical support for the compensatory effect hypothesis. As long as our participants could compare themselves favorably to others on one feature of the social environment, their unfavorable comparison on the other feature did not threaten their confidence in the validity of their attitudes. Specifically, lack of social consensus was compensated for by social status, and lack of social status was compensated for by social consensus, to keep the phenomenological sense of attitude validity high. Only when the participants compared unfavorably to others on both salient dimensions of comparison did they report a lower sense of validity of their attitudinal position.

The compensatory effect suggests that choice of a comparison dimension may be a viable strategy for upholding attitude certainty. When validity of an attitude is questioned on the basis of its unfavorable comparison on one social dimension, it could be defended by a creative use of an alternative dimension. This may be a strategy useful to minorities who, by definition, compare unfavorably to the majority in terms of social consensus for their attitudinal position. If social consensus were a sole basis for attitude correctness, then for their attitudes to survive, minorities would have to sever all psychological ties with the majority to avoid social comparison. Although possible, this strategy may not be always feasible or even preferred. Rather, minorities may opt to compare themselves to majorities in terms of status or another dimension on which they fare more favorably.

Status comparison may be a strategy responsible for not only survival but, in some cases, the ultimate triumph of numerical minorities over majorities. Because of their strong sense of validity, minorities who perceive themselves superior in terms of status should be more likely to step out of their traditional roles of targets of social influence (Prislin & Wood, 2005) to become agents of social influence (Hewstone & Martin, 2009). By the same token, individuals whose attitudinal positions are associated with low status may preserve their sense of validity by emphasizing social consensus they have for the positions. Their strength in numbers may fuel their attempts to change their unfavorable comparison on the status dimension. Thus, attitude certainty that they derive from one feature of the social environment may influence attempts to change another, less favorable feature of the social environment. These ideas about dynamic, multidirectional flows of influence from the social environment to attitude certainty and back to the social environment await empirical tests. However challenging it may be to address the proposed multidirectionality, future research that addresses the challenge holds promise of advancing the field.

AUTHOR NOTES

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