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David R. Dunaetz

Claremont Graduate University

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Missio-logoi and faith: Factors that influence attitude certainty

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David R. Dunaetz

Azusa Pacific University, USA

Abstract

One of the goals of missio-logoi (missionary speech) used by missionaries is the development of faith in the lives of those whom the missionaries serve. From a biblical perspective, faith has both a relational (e.g., John 3:16) and a cognitive dimension (e.g., Hebrews 11:1). This cognitive dimension is similar to what social psychologists call attitude certainty, the degree to which an individual is certain that a particular attitude or belief is true. This study reviews the empirical research conducted to discover the factors that influence attitude certainty. These factors include support for the beliefs by peers, repeated verbal expression of the beliefs, direct experience with the object of belief, and knowledge of how to defend the belief when confronted with strong counter-arguments to the belief. Beliefs and attitudes which are more certain are likely to have more of an impact on an individual's behavior, are more resistant to persuasion, and persist longer in an individual's life. Missionaries can thus focus their mission-logoi so as to maximize attitude certainty among the people to whom they minister.

One of the goals of missionary speech in ministries of evangelism, church planting, and church development is the development of faith in the lives of those whom the missionaries serve. Within a Christian context, the object of this faith is Jesus Christ. Faith, as described in the Bible has both a relational aspect and a cognitive aspect. For example, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV) emphasizes the relational aspect of faith, of humans responding to God's initiative leading to reconciliation. In contrast when the author of Hebrews (11:1 NIV) says, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see," faith is described as an essentially cognitive process, occurring in the mind of an individual.

Both dimensions of faith, relational and cognitive, are necessary to capture the fullness of the biblical concept of *πίστις*. This cognitive aspect of faith is very similar to *attitude certainty*, a construct that has been studied

extensively in social psychology. Findings from psychological science concerning attitude certainty may provide insights to missionaries as they seek to effectively minister to others through their *missio-logoi*.

Attitudes may be defined as *evaluative beliefs* about something. This something is known as the attitude object. These beliefs result from various thoughts and feelings that a person has had about this object (Prislin & Crano, 2008). Because attitudes are evaluations, they are either positive or negative, although their strength may vary. Unlike thoughts, which are conscious, the beliefs that define an attitude may lay stored in memory, only becoming conscious when recalled (Crano & Prislin, 2006). Attitudes are not constant, but vary as they are brought into consciousness depending on the social context and a person's mood (Albarracin, Wang, Li, & Noguchi, 2008). For example, a young man might have heard something about Jesus Christ and believes certain things about him. If these beliefs are evaluative, for example, that Jesus was good because he taught people to love their neighbors, these beliefs are considered attitudes. The young man might go a long time before recalling these beliefs. If the next time he recalls these beliefs is during a moving worship service where many people are joyously singing praise to Jesus, he might have an even more positive evaluation of Jesus than he did when he first thought about him.

Attitude certainty (Haddock, Rothman, Reber, & Schwarz, 1999; Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007) is the conviction that one's attitude is correct; that one has made the correct evaluation and that it should not be changed. Attitude certainty can be strong, as when a person is sure that his or her evaluation of the attitude object is correct, or weak, as when a person has a belief about something but is not sure that it is the correct belief to hold, or somewhere in between. High attitude certainty concerning foundational Christian beliefs, for example, that Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9, Phil 2:11, I Cor 12:3) or that God exists and responds to individuals seeking him (Heb 11:6, James 2:19), expresses cognitive aspects of the biblical concept of faith. The greater the attitude certainty that people have, we shall see, the fewer doubts they will have, the more likely they will be to act on their beliefs, and the more likely they are to resist persuasive arguments to abandon their beliefs.

My purpose is to summarize what psychological science has discovered about attitude certainty and apply it to missiological contexts. Experimental research on attitude certainty can be carried out because it is relatively easy to measure. A participant in a study would be asked to respond to several questions such as "On a scale from 1 (not at all certain) to 7 (extremely certain), how certain are you about your beliefs concerning X?" where X is the attitude object being examined. As is the case in all modern psychological studies, many participants are included in the studies and the averages of their responses are analyzed. There is too much variability between individuals to base conclusions on how any single individual responds to a situation; only changes in averages enable statistically significant conclusions. This paper will first discuss the

empirically verified antecedents or causes of attitude certainty, and then briefly summarize empirical evidence concerning its components and consequences, as illustrated in Figure 1.

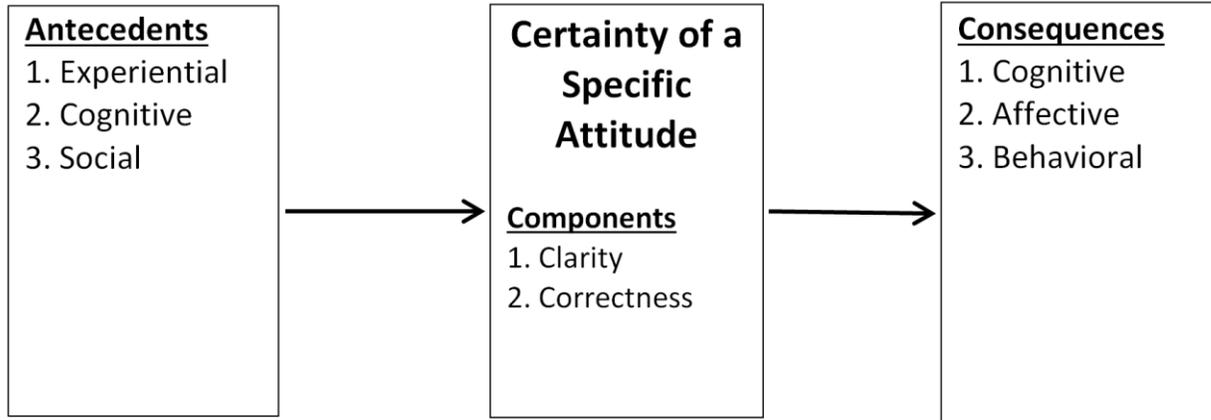


Figure 1. Antecedents, components, and consequences of attitude certainty.

Antecedents of Attitude Certainty

If humans were perfectly rational beings, attitude certainty would simply be a function of the strength of arguments for and against specific evaluative beliefs. However, humans are far from rational and use many social, emotional, and contextual cues from subjective experiences to form attitudes (Haddock, et al., 1999; Kahneman, 2011; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1998; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). These subjective experiences influence attitude certainty in predictable ways, ways that have been a major subject of study in social psychology and which can be used by missionaries to help individuals grow in faith.

Attitude certainty, the conviction that one's belief is true, can be influenced by a number of processes. Some processes primarily involve the person's experiences or interactions with the attitude object or with statements about the attitude object. Others primarily involve cognitive interaction with the concept, or social interaction with one's peers. We will examine five phenomena which have been empirically shown to affect attitude certainty and are thus relevant in missiological contexts where strengthening people's faith is a desired outcome.

Direct Experience with the Attitude Object.

Early research in attitudes (Fazio & Zanna, 1978) discovered that the more participants have had direct experience with the object of their attitude, the more

certain of their attitude they are. Psychology students were asked about their attitude toward participating in psychological research and about how certain they were of their attitudes. Their attitudes varied from very negative to very positive, but the more the students had participated in psychological experiments, the more certain they were of their attitude. Similarly, it is likely that a person who has had more direct experience with God will be more certain of his or her attitude than a person who only has had indirect experience with him through philosophical discussions, internet chatrooms, or media portrayals of him. If these experiences are positive, the person will respond with greater certainty concerning God's goodness, that is, the cognitive aspect of his or her faith will grow. The more the person has experienced God, the more certain will be his or her faith.

The missionary can thus foster faith in God by encouraging and motivating people to experience God directly. This certainly includes worship and prayer, neither of which requires much faith to begin. This may also include exposure and interaction with Christ's body, the church (Rom. 12:4-5, I Cor. 12:27, Col. 1:18), and the Word of God (John 1:1,14, Rom. 10:17, Heb. 4:12, Rev. 19:13). Although outreach activities serving the community may be appreciated by both believers and non-believers alike, there is little evidence that these types of activities lead non-believers to faith if they do not lead to more direct experiences with God (Dunaetz & Priddy, 2014).

Repeated Expression of Attitudes.

Numerous studies have indicated that people are more certain of attitudes that they have repeatedly expressed than those that they have expressed less often (e.g., Bassili, 1993; Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995). Rob Holland from the University of Nijmegen and colleagues asked Dutch students what their attitude was toward both the prince of Holland and European unification in a survey on various topics (Holland, Verplanken, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Students were asked six times a question about one of the topics and only one time for the other topic. Some were asked repeatedly about the prince, others about European unification. At the end of the survey, they were asked to indicate how sure they were about their attitude concerning the two subjects. Those who expressed their belief about a subject six times (whether it was about the prince or about European unification) were more certain of their attitudes than those who only expressed their belief one time on the same subject.

One reason that repeated expression of attitudes leads to greater attitude certainty is because repeated expression leads to easier recall of the attitude. Haddock, Rothman, Reber, and Schwarz (1999) experimentally adjusted people's ease of recall and found that it predicted their attitude certainty. Instead of making recall easier through repeatedly asking participants to express their attitude on a subject, they created an experiment with an easy recall condition

and a difficult recall condition. In the easy recall condition, participants were asked to provide *three* reasons for their attitude toward medically assisted suicide. In the difficult recall situation, other participants were asked to provide *seven* reasons for their attitude on this subject. Participants asked to provide seven reasons found the exercise much more difficult than those who were asked to provide three. After the exercise, all participants were asked how certain they were of their attitudes. Those in the difficult condition were less sure of their attitude than those in the easy condition. Those who were asked to provide seven reasons for their attitude found the exercise very taxing, sometimes impossible; this made them doubt what their attitude was. This was especially true of participants who did not have extreme attitudes.

This phenomenon is especially relevant for helping recent converts grow in certainty concerning their new found faith. Young Christians who practice expressing what they believe to others will become more certain of what they believe. This may occur through singing, small group discussions, telling the story of their conversion, or any other opportunity they have to express what they have experienced and what they believe. However, participation in these experiences should not be so cognitively demanding as to cause people to doubt the validity of their faith (e.g., requesting people to provide seven reasons for their faith). Positive experiences will help them clarify their beliefs and make them more accessible, thus leading to greater attitude certainty. Such verbalizations of one's faith are certainly congruent with practices encouraged in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 12:8, "Whoever confesses me before men. . .", Rom. 10:9, "If you declare with your mouth. . .")¹.

Resisting Persuasive Counterarguments.

In a study entitled *What Doesn't Kill Me Makes Me Stronger: The Effects of Resisting Persuasion on Attitude Certainty*, Zakary Tormala and Richard Petty (2002) from Ohio State University demonstrated that people who resist counterarguments to (arguments against) their beliefs grow more certain of their own beliefs, but only if they believe the counterarguments were perceived to be strong and convincing. If the counterarguments are perceived to be weak, resisting them does not affect attitude certainty.

As a missiological application, this phenomenon could be used to help people increase their faith-related certainty in many contexts. For example, a small group leader may want members of the group to have a stronger faith concerning God's existence in the midst of a rising tide of atheism. A good way

¹ In light of this phenomenon, it is interesting to note that, in Jesus' only recorded post-resurrection dialog with Peter, Jesus asks Peter three times to verbally acknowledge that he loves him (John 21:15-17). After having denied Jesus three times, it was likely Peter was unsure of his faith in him. This experience of expressing his faith repeatedly likely had the effect of making him more certain.

for the leader to approach this would be to find several strong arguments against God's existence (e.g., Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2008) and prepare responses to these arguments². The leader would then present the atheists' arguments against the existence of God as well as how to respond to them. To help the group members learn to resist strong arguments, the leader could then show a video of an atheist such as Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens using one or more of the arguments against God's existence. In response, the leader should ask the group participants how they would respond to each of these arguments, providing any help necessary so that they can verbally respond to the strong arguments that they have heard. They will most likely leave the study with the assurance that, if they can resist and argue against the strong arguments of Dawkins or Hitchens, they will be able to face the challenges to their faith that they may experience in their day-to-day interactions with their peers.

Online Evaluation vs. Evaluation by Memory.

When presenting the gospel or biblical principles to a person (either individually or in a group), a typical goal of the missionary is that the individuals respond in faith, that is, form a strong positive attitude toward the subject, believe that it is true, and act upon what they have heard. For example, if a missionary is presenting the person of Christ, he or she would most likely hope that individuals in the audience would form a positive attitude toward him and believe that the message is true. If individuals form a strong, positive attitude about Christ and are certain that this attitude is correct, they are more likely to act upon it than if they are less certain it is correct. How individuals evaluate the information they have received will determine what their attitude will be towards Christ.

George Bizer of Union College and colleagues discovered that the process by which a person evaluates information affects the certainty of his or her attitude (Bizer, Tormala, Rucker, & Petty, 2006). *Online processing*, or gradual continuous processing, occurs when information is evaluated as soon as one receives it, forming an attitude about the attitude object gradually, incorporating each new piece of information into their attitude. *Memory-based processing* occurs when one does not evaluate the information as it is received, but does so later, perhaps when asked to, relying on one's memory to provide the information to evaluate. Bizer's experiment consisted of presenting participants with 20 statements about a fictitious girl named Marie. Some participants formed online evaluations of Marie. After each statement (some were positive and some were negative), these participants were asked to provide a global evaluation of

² As a scientist, my own experience indicates that, even for those who hold to biblical inerrancy, it will be easier to find strong arguments to resist atheists' attacks by using a framework of theistic evolution (Collins, 2006; Ross, 2004) rather than one of young earth creationism.

Marie's likeableness. After the final evaluation, they were asked how sure they were that their impression of Marie was correct. Other participants formed memory-based evaluations of Marie. After reading the 20 statements, they were asked to provide a global evaluation of Marie's likeableness, and how sure they were that their impression was correct. Not only was Marie significantly evaluated as more likeable by those doing gradual, continuous evaluations, these evaluators were more certain that their attitudes were correct than were the memory-based evaluations.

In teaching and preaching contexts, this would mean that the missionary may be more successful in helping members of his or her audience develop their faith by encouraging online processing. For example, if the missionary is sharing a four principle presentation of the gospel with an individual (e.g., Bright, 1965), instead of waiting to the end of the presentation to ask the person to form an evaluation of the message, the missionary may ask the individual to form an evaluation of each one of the principles before moving onto the next one. Given that the individual forms a positive (rather than negative) evaluation of the message, he or she is likely to be more certain it is true if he or she has done an online evaluation throughout the process rather than a memory-based evaluation at the end of the presentation.

Peer Support for an Attitude.

It has long been known that our attitudes are strongly influenced by the people around us (I Cor. 15:33, Prov. 13:20; Festinger, 1954). People use the beliefs and attitudes of others both to form their beliefs and to determine how certain they are that their beliefs are true. When people are with another person who shares their belief, they are more certain that their belief is true than when they are with someone who does not share their belief. (Fazio, 1979). More recent experiments have shown that this phenomena also occurs in social networks and not just with individuals (Visser & Mirabile, 2004). People who are in *attitudinally congruous networks* (networks where all members share the same attitude) are more certain that their attitude is correct than people who are in *attitudinally heterogeneous networks* (networks where members have a range of attitudes concerning an object). These experiments have demonstrated that this phenomenon occurs both in spontaneous created networks where the members did not know each other previously and in networks composed of close friends and family members. Furthermore, this effect was found among all ages, not just among young adults who might especially be influenced by peers. Visser and Mirabelle (2004) also found that over 90% of the participants in their study believed that a majority of people in their network shared their attitudes (in this case, their attitude toward the death penalty, either for or against), indicating that the relationship between the attitudes of the members of one's network and one's own attitude is very strong.

The clear missiological implication is that it is essential that young believers be incorporated into a close network of people who will support their faith. Without a network of individuals sharing the same attitudes toward Christ and his Word, the faith of a young believer is likely to be weak, perhaps even dying. This is highly congruent with the New Testament example of almost all believers being connected with communities of other believers. It is likely face-to-face networks would be the most effective at supporting one's faith since this is the way that humans are biologically predisposed to communicate. However, as was the case in Visser and Mirabelle's (2004) study, virtual networks using computer mediated communication can also make one's beliefs more certain.

It should be noted that there is a cost involved in developing one's faith through attitudinally congruous networks. By primarily associating with other believers, relationships with non-believers may weaken and the opportunities to share one's faith with them may decrease. To combat this phenomenon, young believers should be encouraged to develop their faith in other ways (such as repeated expression of their beliefs or practice in resisting persuasive counterarguments), and to share their new found faith with their networks as early as possible before their relationships with non-believers begin to weaken.

Components of Attitude Certainty

Researchers at Northwestern University and Indiana University have attempted to deconstruct attitude certainty in order to better understand its components (Petrocelli, et al., 2007). They hypothesized that attitude certainty (measured by questions such as "How certain are you of your attitude toward this idea?") would have two components: 1) *Attitude clarity* (measured by questions such as "How certain are you that you know what your true attitude on this topic really is?") and 2) *Attitude correctness* (measured by questions such as "To what extent do you think other people should have the same attitude as you on this issue?"). A factor analysis of surveys concerning topics such as people's attitudes toward the death penalty or the need for students to show an identity card to enter into university buildings confirmed that both attitude clarity and attitude correctness are both strong but relatively independent factors of attitude certainty.

Further experiments (Petrocelli, et al., 2007) indicated that the antecedents of attitude clarity and attitude correctness are different. When participants were asked to repeatedly (6 times) express their attitudes (cf. the studies described above: Haddock, et al., 1999; Holland, et al., 2003), both their attitude correctness and attitude clarity significantly increased. However, the effect was much stronger for attitude clarity. By repeatedly expressing their attitude, participants felt that they understood what they believed much better.

In this same study, participants were given information that either 89% of their peers agreed with them (high consensus condition) or 11% of their peers

agreed with them (low consensus condition) before being surveyed on their attitude certainty. Both attitude correctness and attitude clarity were higher in the high consensus condition. However, the effect was much stronger concerning attitude correctness. Learning that the vast majority of their peers shared their attitude made the participants surer that their attitudes were correct and should be held by others.

From a missiological perspective, both attitude clarity and attitude correctness are important. Attitude clarity should enable people to act more in accordance with what they believe. Attitude correctness should motivate them to more readily try to persuade others to believe. Thus the missionary should seek to enable the development of both of these components of faith. Let us now examine the consequences of attitude certainty in more depth.

Consequences of Attitude Certainty

If the psychological concept of attitude certainty approximates the cognitive aspects of faith described in the New Testament (e.g., Heb. 11:1), then their psychological consequences should be similar. It should have cognitive consequences (stability and perseverance of beliefs, James 1:2-8), affective consequences (inner peace and confidence, Rom. 5:1-2, 14:23, Mark 4:38-41), and behavioral consequences (behavior consistent with the content of one's faith, Heb. 11:1-40, James 2:14-26).

Cognitive Consequences

Two cognitive consequences of attitude certainty have been studied: attitude stability and resistance to counterarguments. Both of these cognitive phenomena have similarities to the biblical concept of perseverance which is associated with faith. Faith which has been tested and found to be true develops perseverance; such faith is stable and not accompanied by doubt (James 1:2-8). Likewise, attitude certainty has been found to predict stability of attitudes. Even over a period as short as 10 days, people who are more certain of their attitude demonstrate less change in their attitude during the period (Bassili, 1996). In the same way, attitude certainty increases resistance to strong counterarguments. In the study *What Doesn't Kill Me Makes Me Stronger*, people who became more certain of their attitudes were less persuaded by strong counterarguments than people who did not become more certain (Tormala & Petty, 2002).

Because perseverance (ὑπομονή, e.g. Luke 8:15, 21:19, Rom. 5:3-4, I Thess. 1:4) is generally recognized as a very desirable trait for Christians and is sometimes described as the one characteristic needed to eventually be saved (Matt. 10:22, 24:13, II Tim. 2:12), a missiological application is clear. Missionaries should work to help believers increase attitude certainty concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. The processes described previously, such as

direct experience with Jesus Christ and repeated expressions of one's beliefs concerning him, are goals that missionaries should help people achieve.

Affective Consequences

In addition to the beneficial cognitive effects of attitude certainty, the affective consequences resulting from increased attitude certainty concerning Jesus Christ would also be beneficial to the people with whom the missionary works. A team of scholars from Stanford and Indiana university found that increased attitude certainty concerning beliefs that were central to a person's self-concept produced greater *self-certainty* (Clarkson, Tormala, DeSensi, & Wheeler, 2009) which is a measure of "the sense of clarity one has about one's personality or self-concept and the sense of confidence one has about one's general competence and abilities" (p. 436) This concept could be considered an element of the inner peace and confidence that should be a result of faith (c.f. Rom. 5:1-2, Mark 4:38-41). Certainly the peace that results from faith as described in the Bible is broader than self-certainty, but self-certainty is undoubtedly at least a small part of this peace (Phil. 4:13 NIV, "I can do all things through him who gives me strength").

In the experiment done by Clarkson and colleagues (2009), the self-certainty of participants was measured before and after an exercise designed to increase attitude certainty concerning beliefs that participants held central in their life (this exercise consisted of repeated attitude expression or receiving peer support, described above as antecedents of attitude certainty). When attitude certainty increased, self-certainty did as well. Thus any successful efforts that missionaries make to increase the attitude certainty of people to whom they minister concerning their beliefs in Jesus Christ are likely to result in greater certainty concerning their self-concept and abilities, especially if Jesus Christ is seen as being central to their life.

Behavioral Consequences

Perhaps the most important consequence of attitude certainty is greater consistency in beliefs and behaviors. In general, there is limited consistency between what people believe and how people behave (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Wicker, 1969). For Christians, this is especially bothersome (Rom. 7:14-25, James 2:14-26). However, greater attitude certainty has been found to result in greater behavioral consistency (Bizer, et al., 2006), that is, behavior that corresponds to what would be expected by a person holding a belief and acting upon it. Thus once again, the interventions that increase the cognitive aspects of faith related to attitude certainty are likely to produce very positive results in the believer's life: Their behavior will tend to be more consistent with their beliefs,

as should be the case for the faith which is necessary to please God (James 2:14-26).

Conclusion

The psychological concept of attitude certainty is quite similar to the cognitive aspects of faith described in the Bible. The concept includes both clarity of beliefs and certainty that the beliefs are correct. The consequences of increased attitude certainty (persistence, endurance, inner peace, and greater consistency between beliefs and behavior) are important in missiological contexts. Empirical research has demonstrated that attitude certainty is malleable by outside forces and contexts, such as what can be said and taught by missionaries. When missionaries' words and teaching lead people to directly experiencing Jesus Christ, repeatedly expressing their beliefs, resisting persuasive arguments against their beliefs, making gradual, continuous evaluations while their beliefs are being formed, and encouraging peer support for their beliefs, it is likely that their attitude certainty concerning Jesus Christ will increase, that is, their faith will increase. These missio-logoi can thus be extremely influential in the lives of the people whom the missionary serves.

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Author biography

David R. Dunaetz is a social psychologist whose research focuses on interpersonal processes in Christian organizations, especially mission organizations and churches. He was a church planter in France for 17 years and holds a PhD from Claremont Graduate University.