

Toward a More Pro-life Campus: Insights from Attitude Research

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ABSTRACT: Attitude research applied to pro-life persuasion provides a fruitful framework that includes cognitive, motivational, and relational/network approaches to attitude change. The pro-life *aim* of persuasion, empowerment to think more deliberately, is contrasted with propaganda, which reduces critical faculties. *Cognitive* research shows that the perceived outcomes of making abortion illegal carry important associated subjective likelihoods and value judgments, and that pro-life attitude shifts occur simply by contesting pro-choice claims with novel challenges. *Motivational* approaches show that defensiveness will hinder persuasion attempts, but these may possibly be reduced through affirmation of the sense of self. *Relational* and *network* perspectives show that attitudes are socially infectious, and people are embedded in clumpy-segregated echo-chambers that produce extreme positions. Using this framework, pro-lifers can have more influence through an outreach-oriented mindset by forming relationships within targeted clusters, reducing defensiveness, and challenging pro-choice ideas with novel information using a framework of outcome likelihoods and value-judgments.

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PERSUASION IS CRUCIAL to promoting a culture of life.¹ During the annual March for Life in 2007, then President George W. Bush urged pro-life advocates to persuade others: “As we move forward, we’ve all got to remember that a true culture of life cannot be built by changing laws alone. We’ve all got to work hard to change hearts.”

Changing hearts. Decades of psychological research on attitudes have much to say about changing hearts. An attitude is simply an evaluation of virtually any aspect of the social world, a posture of assessment that is “for” or “against” some *attitude object*, in this case, abortion. Attitude researchers study how these stances are formed, maintained, and changed. Their focus is on mental, emotional, and social processes involved.

The campus setting is of special interest because life-long attitudes are frequently formed during the college years when students are often searching for a meaningful worldview and young persons are exposed to college faculty that are likely to hold extreme pro-choice positions. In fact, according to a rare representative study of U.S. college faculty attitudes on social issues in 1999, 67% strongly agreed with a statement affirming “a woman’s right to an abortion” and an additional 17% somewhat agreed with this statement.² The college environment, then, is an important – and deeply challenging – arena in which to promote pro-life attitudes.

What can psychology, particularly the psychology of attitudes, tell us about pro-life persuasion? This article will address three pertinent topics: First, what is the difference between persuasion and propaganda? Second, what are current student attitudes on abortion? Third, what does the application of attitude research to the task of pro-life persuasion tell us? I will focus primarily on two studies that used a cognitive framework, then touch upon emotional and relational approaches.

It is important to reflect on the distinction between persuasion attempts and propaganda. Knowledge is neither good nor bad, but how we use it and what we use it for will make all the difference. We can use attitude research in an unfair manner and for personal gain at the expense of others – this is done

¹ A shorter version was published in the November 2011 issue of *First Things*, available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/11/changing-minds-saving-lives>.

² Stanley Rothman, S. Robert Lichter, and Neil Nevitte, “Politics and Professional Advancement among College Faculty,” *The Forum* 3 (2005), available at: <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol3/iss1/art2>. DOI: 10.2202/1540-8884.1067

all the time. But we can also use it to foster wisdom, clear thinking, and good judgment for noble aims. My intent is the latter. In the late 1970s I attended a retreat devoted to viewing and discussing the video documentary *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (named after the book of that title by the late Swiss-American theologian Francis Schaeffer and the former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop). The five-lecture series discussed abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. The series was dense and quirky, but it caused me to think about an important question: is the fetus a human being? This event highlights the distinction between persuasion and propaganda. The film series and the weekend discussion prompted and equipped me to consider the issue in an informed manner.

To persuade someone means to change their attitude by motivating and enabling informed and wise deliberation; it builds them up. To propagandize them is to reduce their motivation and ability for such thought; it tears them down. Propaganda does this by employing (to one degree or another) deceptive tactics, such as dishonest communication, factoids, false rumors, misinformation, dirt, lies, distortions, deceit, manipulation, and psychological warfare. Perhaps the most important distinction is whether messages are processed in a mindless or in a thoughtful manner. In a word, the propagandist hopes you will not think too carefully. The persuader asks you to consider. The goal then is deliberative informed consideration.

What is the current situation on campus? Student attitudes toward abortion are split evenly upon entering college but then lean slightly pro-choice on exit. In research from a 2009 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey of 13,500 students from 111 baccalaureate institutions in the U.S., students were asked how strongly they agreed with the statement “Abortion should be legal.”³ Overall, opinions were evenly balanced but a bit more extreme than the normal bell-shaped curve. The numbers of those who agreed strongly and those who disagreed strongly were each just over a quarter of the sample, while the remaining 45% or so displayed weaker attitudes.

Students on average become slightly more liberal as they complete their

³ Ray Franke, Sylvia Ruiz, Jessica Sharkness, Linda DeAngelo, & John Pryor, “Findings from the 2009 Administration of the College Senior Survey (CSS): National Aggregates,” CIRP: Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 2010, p. 102, available at: http://www.heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/Reports/2009_CSS_Report.pdf.

education. Upon entry, students in the HERI survey were roughly split on this issue, with 52% assenting to the statement that abortion should be legal, but by exit agreement had increased twelve points to 64%. Trend research by Gallup also points toward the association of higher education and more liberal abortion attitudes. While among U.S. adults approval of the statement “Abortion should be legal under any circumstance” has been declining since around 1992, educational level correlates reliably with favoring the extreme liberal position. The more education one has, the more approving one tends to be about abortion-on-demand.

In sum, campus attitudes are mixed, about half are extreme and half are weak or moderate, with students becoming slightly more liberal as they progress through college. Education is a strong predictor of more liberal attitudes toward abortion.

Cognitive approaches to attitude change. Cognitive approaches to attitude change focus on mechanisms associated with attention, memory, and retrieval. Attitudes toward an issue can be strongly predicted by the salient outcomes associated with that issue, and especially by how *likely* those outcomes are expected to be as well as by how *bad or good* those outcomes are considered to be. For example, individuals are likely to be pro-choice if they judge the outcome of making abortion illegal to be that many women are very likely to seek “back-alley” abortions and that this outcome is a great evil. Individuals are more likely to be pro-life if they perceive that making abortion illegal is very likely to save the innocent lives of babies and regard this result as a great good.

Testing this idea, researchers Kristina Petkova and colleagues in 1995 asked students at the University of Massachusetts the following questions: what outcomes would occur if abortion became illegal? Students then rated each outcome on how likely or unlikely, and how bad or good, it was.⁴ Students identifying themselves as pro-choice thought it *likely* that making abortion illegal would result in:

⁴ Kristina G. Petkova, Icek Ajzen, & B. L. Driver, “Salience of anti-abortion beliefs and commitment to an attitudinal position: On the strength, structure, and predictive validity of anti-abortion attitudes,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 25/6 (1995): 463-83. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.1995.tb01762.x>

- Women seeking “back-alley” abortions, which they considered to be *bad*.
- The infringement of fundamental human rights of privacy and freedom of choice, which they rated also as *bad*.
- Teenagers would pay a high price for being careless, which they considered a *moderately bad* outcome.

Pro-choice students also thought it *moderately likely* that making abortion illegal would result in:

- The birth of babies conceived in incest or rape; this they considered *bad*.
- The birth of unwanted children, which they rated as *moderately bad*.
- Exposing families to the risk of poverty and welfare, also considered *moderately bad*.
- The birth of “retarded and genetically unfit babies,” which they rated as only *slightly bad*.

In sum, pro-choice students considered these variously bad outcomes to be likely to one degree or another. Importantly, pro-*life* students considered almost all of these outcomes to be significantly less likely than pro-choice students had, and except for the back-alley abortions, to also be significantly less bad.

What did pro-choice students consider to be *less likely* or even *unlikely*? They thought it *slightly likely* that making abortion illegal will result in:

- Lives of defenseless unborn babies saved, which was considered to be *slightly good*.
- More babies available for adoption, which they thought was *moderately good*.
- People being held responsible for the consequences of their actions, also rated as *moderately good*.

The expectation “Lives of defenseless unborn babies saved” (rated only as “slightly likely” and “slightly good”) deserves special mention, for pro-lifers consider this outcome to be solidly likely and a good result of making abortion illegal. These results suggest that to pro-choice students, it is not obvious that “saving babies’ lives” is a likely and good outcome of making abortion illegal. Pro-choicers may (mistakenly) be thinking, for example, that the abortion rate

would not significantly decline if the procedure were made illegal. Therefore, this idea (saving babies lives is a *likely* and *good* outcome of making abortion illegal) needs to be explicitly and convincingly articulated in campus subcultural contexts.

Finally, pro-choice students thought it *moderately unlikely* that making abortion illegal will result in:

- The prevention of women using abortion as a method of birth control, which was considered *slightly good*.
- The revival of the idea of life as a precious gift, also perceived to be *slightly good*.

In sum, pro-choice students considered these variously good outcomes to be unlikely to one degree or another.

This study suggests that pro-choice attitude change is more likely to occur if we persuade others (a) that these likely and bad outcomes are in fact unlikely and/or not as bad as perceived and (b) that these unlikely good outcomes are in fact likely and/or better than they are perceived. One can imagine, for example, attempting to reduce the perceived likelihood of widespread “back-alley” abortions or the perceived probability of births associated with rape and incest. In a similar vein, pro-lifers can argue that the restriction of this freedom – like many other freedoms – is not an unqualified evil and is likely to result not only in good for the child but also for the mother.

The main insight to be gained from this study is that it puts forward a fruitful framework to understand and persuade others. Outcomes associated with making abortion illegal are accompanied by subjective probabilities and by judgments of value. This suggests that persuasion efforts might fruitfully focus on specific outcome probabilities, value-judgments, or both.

Pro-life and pro-choice persons also differ on the degree to which they have considered their own and opposing arguments. It turns out that pro-choice students tend to be aware of fewer challenges to the pro-choice position, as compared with pro-life students’ awareness of challenges to the pro-life position. This means that pro-choice students are more susceptible to simple challenges.

In a 2001 study by Ronan Bernas and Nancy Stein,⁵ pro-choice and pro-life students at the University of Chicago each read four of eight possible cases in which a woman was seeking an abortion. Each of the eight possible cases challenged either the pro-life position or the pro-choice position.

The cases challenging the pro-life position described a woman seeking an abortion because her physical health and life were in danger if the pregnancy continued, a woman who was psychologically unstable and suicidal during pregnancy, a woman pregnant by rape, and one pregnant by incest. The cases challenging the pro-choice position described a woman seeking an abortion who had had multiple abortions in the past and was using abortion as birth control, a woman's whose life was in jeopardy if she underwent abortion, a woman who wanted an abortion because the unborn was of an undesired gender, and a woman who wanted an abortion because her husband threatened to leave her if she carried the pregnancy to term. One-third of the participants read the four cases supporting their own position, one-third received four cases challenging their own position, and the final third received an evenly mixed set of cases.

Results were enlightening. First, those presented with any challenges whatsoever changed their stance more frequently than those who only read cases supporting their own position. More importantly, pro-choice students changed stances more frequently than pro-life students did. This was largely a function of the fact that pro-life students had already considered challenges to their own position, whereas pro-choice students tended not to have done so.

In sum, pro-choice attitudes were more susceptible to challenge than pro-life attitudes *because they had not been critically evaluated*. These results suggest that persuasive pro-life strategies ought to include multiple simple challenges to the pro-choice position that are unlikely to have been considered. For starters, pro-life conversationalists and media campaigns can use the challenges presented in this study, listed here in slightly revised form:

What about cases where the abortion is coerced by a boyfriend or mother?

What about cases where the unborn child is aborted because it is a girl?

⁵ Ronan S. Bernas & Nancy L. Stein, "Changing Stances on Abortion during Case-Based Reasoning Tasks: Who Changes and Under What Conditions," *Discourse Processes* 32 (2001): 177-90.

What about cases where the woman has had multiple abortions and is using abortions as birth control?

What about cases where *having an abortion* jeopardizes the life of the woman?

Similarly, we have all heard the old pro-choice one-liner: *What about cases of rape, incest, or life of the mother?* It is a common argument that has usually been considered by pro-choicers. In place of this I suggest a succinct pro-life one-liner that will probably not have been considered by the average pro-choicer: *What about cases where abortion is coerced, used for sex-selection, or repeatedly used as birth-control?*

Emotional aspects of persuasion. One's position on abortion is rarely a matter of parlor room debate. It usually involves personal and typically emotional interests. People may want to maintain their current attitude because change is viewed as a threat, especially to their sense of self or to their self-oriented interests. People who feel threatened and defensive resist persuasion attempts. There is some evidence for this in the abortion domain. Liberal attitudes toward sex outside marriage are correlated with approval of abortion- on-demand. People who have assisted others in getting an abortion are also more strongly pro-choice.

A person may be better able to bear a threat to their sense of self from one area if their sense of self is built up from another area. This is the strategy of *self-affirmation* in which people have an opportunity to affirm important personal characteristics or to tell their own stories. In a 2007 study by Geoffrey Cohen and associates,⁶ pro-choice students who were asked to assume the role of a Democratic legislator conceded more to a pro-life negotiator when they had written about a personal characteristic that was important to them, for example, their sense of humor, relations with family or friends, or their creativity. In the self-affirmation condition participants were asked: "Please describe a time when your #1 personal characteristic or life domain was important to you and explain why this characteristic is meaningful to you."

⁶ Geoffrey L. Cohen, David K. Sherman, Anthony Bastardi, Lillian Hsu, Michelle McGoey, & Lee Ross "Bridging the Partisan Divide: Self-Affirmation Reduces Ideological Closed-Mindedness and Inflexibility in Negotiation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93/3 (2007): 415-30, DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.93.3.415

Notably, pro-choice participants who self-affirmed were more willing to make pro-life concessions in the negotiation task – and did this, paradoxically, in conditions where their pro-choice identity was made salient. This is instructive.

The insight to be gained here is that, at the very least, it is important to take into account underlying defensive motivations in persuasion attempts. One cannot ignore defensive sentiments and rely solely on cognitive challenges or logic.

Relational aspects of attitude research. Attitudes are indeed influenced by others, by the strength of their influence over a targeted person, by the closeness of their relationship with the target, and by the number of people influencing the target. For example, a man confronted with numerous “Vote Democrat” signs on his neighbors’ front lawns and with one lone “Vote Republican” sign at the end of the street is likely to vote Democrat.

Over time, this sort of exposure results in the *geographical* or *spatial* organization of attitudes and beliefs. That is, we end up with pockets or clusters of attitudes. This process has been used to explain the emergence of pockets of similar attitudes and behaviors, such as eating norms and obesity, drinking habits in dormitories, culture itself, and voting in U.S. presidential elections.

Spatial organization of attitudes is clearly seen in the maps of red and blue states, and the clustering of voter preferences has occurred in every election since the beginning of the nation. Politically, people tend to be regionally segregated into relatively homogenous attitude or belief networks. The same emergence of clusters occurs in the World Wide Web. Computer scientist Lada Adamic and colleagues have shown that conservative weblogs are overwhelmingly more likely to be hyperlinked to other conservative weblogs, and liberal weblogs are just as overwhelmingly likely to be hyperlinked to other liberal weblogs.⁷

Thus, citizens are increasingly segmented into segregated clumps of people who adopt vastly different lifestyle and values. Discussion in such clumpy-segregated networks leads to attitude *polarization* because people keep hearing the same arguments, hearing them repeatedly, and hearing them from

⁷ Lada Adamic & Natalie Glance, “The political blogosphere and the 2004 election: Divided they blog” (4 March 2005), retrieved March 1, 2008, from <http://www.blogpulse.com/papers/2005/AdamicGlanceBlogWWW.pdf>.

close others, while people with minority attitudes or beliefs remain silent or exit. As a result attitudes become more extreme. In addition, derogatory attitudes toward the other group itself (e.g., “Pro-lifers are from Mars”) become stronger and each side tends to vilify the other more stridently. In a word, echo-chambers form. As in real echo chambers, people only hear the reflection of their own voice.

This insight suggests an important missionary-like strategy in pro-life work: target *clumps* of people in the pro-choice community. We can exist as openly pro-life individuals within those pro-choice clumps, forming connections, earning trust, and gaining credibility by living, eating, and working alongside pro-choice people. Within a genuine solidarity we can develop messages specifically for that community. Examples of this type of strategy are used by such groups as pro-life feminists, the pro-life democratic caucus, and University Faculty for Life. By dint of common identity, values, and relational forces, each of these “indigenous” groups is most able to influence others in a pro-life direction.

Insights from attitude research. We started by defining our goal as getting people to think in an informed deliberative manner. We saw that pro-life student attitudes are roughly split, with about half holding extreme views and the other half in the middle, and that students overall become slightly more pro-choice in college. We saw that perceived outcomes of making abortion illegal carry important associated subjective likelihoods and value judgments and that pro-life attitude shifts can occur by contesting pro-choice cognitions with novel challenges. We noted that defensive motivations resist persuasion attempts and may possibly be reduced through self-affirmation, that attitudes are socially infectious, and that people are embedded in clumpy-segregated echo-chambers that produce extreme positions. In light of these results we can enact an outreach-oriented mindset by forming relationships within targeted clusters, reducing defensiveness, and challenging pro-choice ideas with novel information using a framework of outcome likelihoods and value-judgments.

It will also be important to think about how to stimulate deliberation, especially when we need to do this from a minority position in our local cluster: *Getting people to consider something more deeply is crucial to the success of minority opinion influence.* Over time, minority opinion holders can influence majorities if they: (a) hold their positions consistently across time and situation, and in the face of opposition, challenge, and personal cost, and (b)

root their opinions firmly in bedrock values of the larger society. Civil rights advocates, for example, persistently called for equal rights despite enduring contempt, hatred, and even violence, and they grounded their movement in biblical injunctions about equal dignity for all human beings. Maintaining consistency despite the cost and making an appeal to common bedrock values cause the majority to think more deeply about the issue. Private opinions then form and later surface as public admissions when they become socially acceptable.

These ideas were dramatized poignantly in the classic film *Twelve Angry Men*, where Henry Fonda plays the lone dissenting juror in a murder trial. At first, simply because of his consistent objections in the face of reproach, ridicule, and rejection, another juror decides to think more deeply about the evidence. The dialogue then dramatizes collective deliberation of the evidence presented in the case. Fonda's character keeps pressing them to think about the evidence and testimony given at the trial, and he appeals to their sense of justice, equality, and sober judgment. Reasonable doubt spreads – slowly at first, then more rapidly as the minority opinion becomes the majority position, ending finally in a unanimous acquittal. May our efforts to promote a pro-life culture follow a similar path.