

[Changing \(un\)ethical behavior: The causes, consequences, and solutions to motivated resistance](#)

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Understanding how to change behavior is critical to a healthy and functioning society, especially when that behavior has harmful consequences for others. It is these ethically problematic behaviors – e.g., meat-eating, environmental behavior, prejudicial treatment – that behavior campaigns challenge on ethical grounds. Challenging behavior on ethical grounds is powerful and increasingly relied on in many domains. Yet, to be effective, policy makers need to be aware how such an approach might lead to motivated resistance, and further still, backfire effects.

What makes an effective campaign?

Effective campaigns seek to achieve change. By convincing people that their current behavior (e.g., meat-eating) does not align with important personal or social standards (moral reference points), they create a state of discomfort (dissonance) which in turn motivates change.

What happens when people don't want to change (motivated resistance)?

When people are committed to their behavior (e.g., meat-eating), rather than change, they will find other ways to reduce this feeling of discomfort. Broadly, this means changing their perception of the behavior to diminish its perceived harmfulness, reducing their personal responsibility for it by viewing it as natural, normal, or necessary, and diffusing the extent to which it tarnishes their perception of themselves as a good and moral person by seeing it as culturally or socially prescribed.

What are backfire effects?

Perhaps most important is to understand that when people become motivated to resist behavior change, they are also more likely to commit to their behavior compared to if they had never been challenged in the first place. This is because they put more effort into convincing themselves it is still the right thing to do, a process that is especially apparent in the case of ethically relevant behaviors. People are especially motivated to defend against accusations that their behavior is unethical or that they are unethical and will work hard to justify it. This process can even lead people to want to influence others (so others behavior does not present a challenge to their own, e.g., vegetarians can threaten meat-eaters) and for resistance to set in within a given cultural context (e.g., when a meat-eating becomes an important element of cultural rituals).

How to avoid motivated resistance and backfire effects?

Calling for behavior change on ethical grounds represents a powerful motivational tool, yet it needs to be handled carefully. Finding ways to avoid making people feel they are being framed as ‘immoral’ or ‘unethical’ is a good start. Below are some ideas for how this might be achieved.

1. Link behavior change messages to pride about future positive behavior, rather than guilt about past negative behavior.
2. Target behavior, but don't target people. Sometimes highlighting the unethical consequences of other's actions may be a way to get people to reflect non-defensively on the consequences of their own actions.
3. Use people who are seen to be ‘on their side’ and part of their own group to deliver messages. People tend to be less defensive when criticized by people they see as part of their own group.

4. Use nudges rather than direct challenges. This helps people to adjust their behavior, without having to feel confronted by strong messages characterizing them as unethical.
5. Focus on incremental change rather than radical change. This allows people to engage with the issue in a less black and white way.
6. Target the perceived necessity of the behavior. This allows people to see viable alternatives and reduces resistance.

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