

Attitudes

Introductory article

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Measurement

Tripartite model of attitude structure

Constructed versus stored attitudes

Strong and weak attitudes

Explicit and implicit attitudes

Attitude change

Attitude-behavior consistency

Conclusion

An attitude is a global and relatively enduring evaluation (e.g. good or bad) of a person, object, or issue. Attitudes can be based on affective, cognitive, or behavioral information and can vary in their strength (e.g. how enduring, how resistant to change, and how predictive of behavior they are).

INTRODUCTION

What drives our behavior? When we choose a candy bar at the grocery store or decide for whom to vote in an election, what determines the choices that we make? Attitudes, the mental representations of what we like and dislike in our world, help to explain these choices.

Attitudes are one of psychology's fundamental concepts because they help to explain people's decisions and actions. An attitude is a global and relatively enduring evaluation of a person, object, or issue – a representation of whether we think the target is generally good or bad, desirable or undesirable. We can hold attitudes towards tangible objects such as ice cream or trees, people such as the President or a sister, ideas such as democracy or wealth, and issues such as the death penalty or tax increases. Simply put, the more favorably we evaluate something, the more positive our attitude towards the object is; the more negatively we evaluate something, the more negative our attitude is.

Attitudes serve various functions. As noted by Daniel Katz and others, some attitudes serve a utilitarian function in that they help us to achieve rewards and avoid punishments (e.g. having the correct evaluation of one's mortgage company can save you money). Other attitudes serve an ego-defensive function in that they foster our own self-images (e.g. holding prejudiced attitudes

might make some people feel superior). A number of additional functions have also been identified.

MEASUREMENT

Researchers have developed a wide array of tools to measure attitudes. These techniques can be categorized into two broad groups. *Explicit* measures directly ask people to report their attitudes; in contrast, *implicit* (or indirect) measures are assessments that allow inferences about a person's attitude without having to ask him or her directly. The latter method is commonly used in situations in which people either do not want to or are unable to provide their true evaluations of an object. No measure of attitudes is perfect, however, as assessments can be affected by the measurement context. Seemingly innocent influences like the weather or answers to previous questions can have a considerable impact on people's reported attitudes.

Explicit Measures

Two common explicit measures are the *Likert scale* and the *semantic differential*. The Likert procedure presents respondents with series of evaluative statements along with a series of response options for each. For example, an attitude scale on ice cream might contain the statement 'Ice cream tastes good' and choices of various degrees of agreement from which the respondent can choose ('strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'). Participants report the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. Likert scales include a wide variety of evaluative statements regarding the object, and scores from all the statements are combined to create a measure of the attitude.

With the semantic differential technique, developed by Charles Osgood and colleagues, respondents are presented with the name of the attitude object and some evaluative adjectives that might describe that object. Participants then rate how well the adjectives describe the object. For example, a series of items might prompt respondents to report the extent to which they think ice cream is beneficial versus harmful, good versus bad, and pleasant versus unpleasant. These scores are combined to form one global attitude measure.

Implicit Measures

Implicit measures come in various shapes and sizes. They range from monitoring simple behaviors from which evaluation can be inferred (e.g. how close one person chooses to sit next to another) to complex physiological techniques. A good example of an implicit measure is Russell Fazio's priming procedure. To assess racial attitudes with this technique, participants are presented with images of Caucasian or African-American faces to make the concept of one or the other race more accessible. Immediately after being shown a face, participants are asked to judge whether a particular concept (e.g. ice cream) is 'good' or 'bad'. Over many pairings of faces and concept words, the amount of time it takes the participant to report 'good' or 'bad' for each word following a face is measured. The pattern of reaction times is used to infer the person's implicit attitude. Since one negative attitude tends to activate or prime others, if a participant dislikes African Americans, showing an African-American face should make the evaluations of other negatively perceived objects (e.g. 'dirt') faster, but make the evaluations of positively perceived objects (e.g. 'ice cream') slower. Thus, if a person needs more time to report that a good word like 'ice cream' is 'good' after seeing an African-American face and less time to report that a bad word like 'dirt' is 'bad' (compared to seeing a Caucasian face), there is evidence that the person holds a more negative attitude towards African Americans than Caucasians.

TRIPARTITE MODEL OF ATTITUDE STRUCTURE

As global and enduring evaluations, attitudes can be based on up to three separate types of input: affective, cognitive, and behavioral. An attitude can be based on any one or a combination of these three information sources. Attitudes, once formed,

also guide affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to the object.

The *affective* basis of an attitude is made up of feelings, moods, and emotions that have become associated with the attitude object through past or current experience. It is possible to have multiple affective responses to an object based on the same, or different, experiences with it. Each affective response has an evaluation made up of valence (positive to negative) and magnitude (strong to weak). Researchers often measure the affective basis of the attitude by asking to what extent individuals *feel* good or bad about the object, or the extent to which the attitude object makes them feel 'happy', or 'disgusted', or 'angry'.

The *cognitive* basis is made up of particular attributes that are ascribed to the object. An *attribute* is any characteristic, quality, trait, concept, value, or goal associated with the object. The impact of an attribute is determined by the evaluation of whether the attribute is good or bad, and the perceived likelihood that this attribute applies to the object. Thus, if the attitude object is 'ice cream', one attribute associated with this object might be 'fattening'. If the person thought this attribute was negative and highly associated with ice cream, the attribute would contribute to a generally unfavorable evaluation of ice cream. Of course, any one attitude object can be associated with many attributes that contribute to the overall evaluation.

In practice, researchers such as Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen suggest obtaining a listing of attributes about an object and then the evaluation and likelihood associated with each attribute. The evaluation and likelihood are multiplied together for each attribute and the products are added across attributes to estimate the cognitive component of the attitude. One implication of this approach is that two individuals endorsing the same attributes can have different attitudes if they evaluate the attributes differently, and individuals believing in different attributes can hold the same attitude.

The *behavioral* basis is made up of two kinds of information, past behaviors and intentions to commit future behaviors. Daryl Bem's *self-perception theory* holds that we sometimes infer our attitudes directly from our past behaviors towards an object. For example, if a person looks back on his or her life and realizes that he or she has never eaten at a Chinese restaurant even though he or she had many chances to do so, the person might infer that he or she does not like Chinese food. This inference occurs as long as there is no memory of external forces compelling the behavior – the behavior needs to be seen as voluntary.

CONSTRUCTED VERSUS STORED ATTITUDES

When an object is encountered for the first time, there is no information about it in memory. An attitude must therefore be *constructed* by making inferences from the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that occur in the current social environment. Irrelevant features of the current context can bias the constructed attitude even though they have little to do with the attitude object itself. For example, one's attitude towards the economy might be more favorable on a sunny than a rainy day. Norbert Schwarz and colleagues have documented a wide variety of contextual influences on attitude reports.

After information is gathered about an object and an evaluation is formed, the attitude can be stored in memory and subsequently retrieved directly. A *stored attitude* is an evaluation that is linked to the object in the form of a thought (e.g. 'I like candy'). If the attitude object is brought to mind again, and the object–evaluation link is strong enough, the stored attitude is brought to mind as well.

Generally, the attitudes people report fall somewhere in between purely constructed and purely retrieved. That is, even if a person has already formed a global evaluation, the specific evaluation that is reported at any moment in time is dependent on a wide variety of factors. In general, the stored attitude acts as an anchor point and is adjusted based on affective, cognitive, and behavioral information that is currently salient in memory or in the immediate context. That is, when an attitude is retrieved, some information related to that attitude may also be retrieved and pull the attitude report in its direction. For example, on one occasion the 'taste' attribute of ice cream might be especially salient, but on another occasion, the 'fattening' attribute might be more salient. The immediate context can influence which attitude-relevant information is retrieved, providing a source of contextual bias. Because 'strong' attitudes are less likely to be influenced by context effects than are 'weak' attitudes, the study of attitude strength is also important in attitude research.

STRONG AND WEAK ATTITUDES

Attitudes fall along a continuum from weak to strong, such that stronger attitudes are more durable and impactful. A durable attitude is persistent over time, meaning that it does not decay in memory, and is resistant to change when

faced with counter-attitudinal information. An attitude has impact when it influences information processing and guides behavior. Attitudes can possess these strength properties to varying degrees. Also, these strength properties can be independent. Thus, it is possible for an attitude to persist over time but not influence behavior, or to greatly influence thought at a given point in time, but not resist attempts to change it.

A number of variables contribute to making attitudes stronger or weaker. First, extreme attitudes (i.e. when people rate the object as intensely good or intensely bad) tend to be stronger than more moderate attitudes. This may be because extreme attitudes tend to have a number of structural properties that contribute to this strength. For example, extreme attitudes may be based on high amounts of consistent knowledge, and they may come to mind more rapidly (i.e. are more accessible) than more moderate attitudes.

Subjective beliefs about our attitudes are also related to strength. For example, strength can result from perceptions of how much knowledge we have on a topic (regardless of actual knowledge), how important the attitude object is to us personally, or how confident we are in the validity of our attitudes. Finally, the manner in which an attitude is formed can contribute to its strength. Most notably, if an attitude is created through extensive thinking and careful scrutiny of information, it tends to be stronger than if it was formed by means requiring less effort.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT ATTITUDES

To this point, we have discussed attitudes as global evaluations we are aware of and can control. These conscious or *explicit attitudes* result from integrating information from one or more components into an evaluation. These attitudes can vary from strong to weak, and from mostly stored to mostly constructed. Retrieval or construction of these explicit attitudes can either be relatively automatic or require considerable cognitive effort.

In addition to these explicit attitudes, researchers such as Anthony Greenwald and Mazarin Banaji have argued that people can also hold *implicit attitudes* – attitudes of which they are generally not aware. Implicit and explicit attitudes can sometimes be in opposition to each other, such that the implicit attitude can lead people to think and behave in ways they do not consciously intend. For example, a person who holds a prejudiced implicit attitude based on negative stereotypes learned as a child, but now consciously rejected,

may also hold an explicit unprejudiced (and conscious) attitude learned later in life. In such situations, conscious attitudes direct behaviors that are generally under constant conscious control (such as deciding the guilt or innocence of a black defendant). However, more automatic behaviors such as one's body language and eye contact can reflect a person's implicit attitudes.

ATTITUDE CHANGE

Although attitudes are generally considered to be relatively stable and enduring, they are subject to change over time. Being exposed to new information and new experiences can lead people to change their attitudes. Numerous studies have demonstrated the processes by which attitudes change.

Central and Peripheral Routes to Change

Much contemporary research is guided by the idea that attitudes are sometimes changed thoughtfully, but sometimes are changed with very little cognitive effort. The *elaboration likelihood model* (ELM) of persuasion developed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo presents a framework that helps explain the various processes and outcomes of attitude change. Although the amount of thinking involved in attitude change forms a continuum from none to extensive, the model divides the specific processes of attitude change conveniently into two 'routes' to persuasion.

The first or *central route* to attitude change occurs when people are relatively careful in scrutinizing the issue-relevant information available. If, after careful consideration, a person finds the information to be compelling, attitudes change accordingly. If, however, the information is deemed specious, attitudes will not change, or can even change in a direction opposite to that advocated – a boomerang effect. For example, a person following the central route when processing a magazine advertisement for a car will carefully assess the perceived validity of the information presented in the ad. The person might examine the information presented about the horsepower, price, resale value, safety record, and so forth. The person will be influenced if his or her *cognitive responses* – the thoughts generated during message processing – are positive. The person is not likely to be influenced, however, by the beautiful sunset pictured in the background or the cute puppy sitting in the driver's seat because these are peripheral cues that are unrelated to the central merits of the car.

Sometimes, however, people follow the *peripheral route* when exposed to a persuasive communication. In such cases, people are not likely to pay attention to all of the issue-relevant information within the message. Rather, people seek a short-cut way to evaluate the ad. In this case, they might be influenced by the mere number of arguments in the ad (regardless of their quality). Or, the cute puppy in the driver's seat might lead to a positive feeling that becomes associated with the car.

An important consequence of the route to persuasion that a person takes is the strength of the attitudes that result. Specifically, when people change or form an attitude through the central route to persuasion, attitudes tend to be stronger than those created or changed through the peripheral route. Attitude changes that occur because a person has carefully considered issue-relevant information have a substantive backing which contributes to the durability and impact of the attitude. In contrast, attitudes formed under the peripheral route do not have this substantive support. Because they lack supporting cognitions, these attitudes are much less durable and impactful. This does not mean that peripheral route changes are completely unimportant. For example, advertisers can take advantage of the short-term effects of the peripheral route by continual pairing of peripheral cues with their products in repeated messages. Also, in some cases, what starts out as a peripheral cue can become an argument if people subsequently think about the cue in a way that gives it substantive meaning.

Amount of elaboration

What determines whether a person will follow the central or the peripheral route? This depends on whether the person has the *ability* and the *motivation* to think carefully about the message. Variables influencing ability (whether a person is able to think) include distraction and time pressure. If a person is distracted or under great time pressure while exposed to a persuasive communication, it is simply not possible to follow the central route, and thus the peripheral route to persuasion is more likely. Variables influencing motivation (whether a person wants to think) include personal relevance and accountability. For example, if people are told that a message is of low relevance to them (the product advertised is available only in a faraway country), or that they will not be accountable for the attitude they report on the topic (questionnaires will be completed anonymously), it is likely that they will feel little motivation to think carefully. They are likely to follow the less taxing peripheral

route to persuasion instead. All else being equal, people prefer to save their cognitive energy for the most important tasks and decisions in life. People who are high in their *need for cognition* tend to enjoy thinking about a wide variety of topics and thus tend to follow the central route to persuasion. People who are low in this need tend to follow the peripheral route.

Objective and biased processing

In addition to the amount of information processing that takes place, it is also important to consider whether that processing is relatively objective or biased. Objective processing refers to the case in which thinking is guided by the qualities of the information at hand. If the information is cogent, people's thoughts are favorable, but if the information is specious, their thoughts are largely negative. However, people can process messages in a biased manner. For example, people may be forewarned that a message will attempt to change their attitudes. In such cases, people tend to think negatively about all of the arguments – regardless of their actual quality – in an attempt to assert their individual freedom not to be influenced. There are a number of motivations besides asserting freedom that can induce biased processing, such as the motive to be consistent, or to maintain one's self-esteem. Each of these motivations selectively directs people's information-processing activity to favor one attitudinal position over another.

Multiple roles of variables

The ELM highlights the fact that variables can influence attitudes by serving in different roles in different situations. For example, the physical attractiveness of the source of a persuasive message might influence attitudes in a number of ways. First, such a source might serve as a simple peripheral cue when the situation constrains people's motivation or ability to think about the message to be low. For example, when people are distracted, they might go along just because the source is attractive, regardless of the merits of what the source says (peripheral route). On the other hand, if people are highly motivated and able to think about the message, an attractive source might bias that thinking in a favorable way, or the source itself might be scrutinized to see whether it provides information central to the merits of the issue (central route). Finally, if thinking is not already constrained to be high or low, an attractive person might encourage recipients to pay more attention to the message – leading to more agreement if the message is sound, but to less agreement if the message is not. Under

this scenario, then, attractiveness would serve as a determinant of elaboration.

Thus, although a variable can serve as a determinant of elaboration in one scenario (unconstrained elaboration), it can serve as a cue in others (low elaboration) or can bias processing or serve as an argument in still other situations (high elaboration). The ELM thus limits the fundamental roles a variable can play in persuasion situations and provides a guiding framework for assessing when variables take on each role.

Mood and Persuasion

One persuasion variable that has been studied extensively in its multiple roles is a person's mood state – whether he or she is feeling good or bad. As with other variables, the effect of mood on persuasion depends on the amount of elaboration taking place during the message presentation. Under low-elaboration conditions, a person's mood can serve as a peripheral cue. In such situations, people may associate their mood with the message's object. The pairing of a good mood with the object can produce positive attitudes towards that object, but bad mood can produce negative attitudes. Second, when elaboration is high, a positive mood can bias people's reactions to the message arguments. In particular, positive mood states make good consequences (e.g. living longer if you stop smoking) seem more likely than when in a neutral or negative mood state, but make negative consequences (e.g. getting cancer if you don't stop smoking) seem less likely. Negative mood states have the opposite consequences. Finally, under moderate elaboration conditions, positive moods affect the amount of thinking people do about the message. If the message appears to be negative or depressing, positive moods decrease information processing compared to negative moods. People in positive moods do not want to think about negative information. On the other hand, if the message appears to be positive or uplifting, positive moods increase thinking over negative moods.

Persuasion from Our Own Behavior

Leon Festinger's theory of *cognitive dissonance* suggests that sometimes our own behavior can lead to attitude change. Specifically, the theory holds that cognitive conflict occurs when people believe that they have behaved in a way that is inconsistent with their attitudes. This cognitive conflict produces tension that people are motivated to reduce in order to restore consistency. Since behavior is

often difficult to undo, one way to restore attitude-behavior consistency is to change one's attitude to be in line with one's behavior. This is not the only way to reduce dissonance (people could reduce the importance of the conflicting attitude or behavior), but it is a common one. Dissonance theory explains such processes as why people come to favor products more after they purchase them, and why people come to like groups more if they have voluntarily exerted considerable effort to join them. Dissonance can also lead people to process information in a biased fashion. That is, they think about attitude objects in a way that restores consistency.

Resisting Persuasion

Although there are many different ways in which people can be persuaded, there are some techniques through which attitudes can be made more resistant to change. One way to create resistant attitudes is simply to make those attitudes stronger. This can be done by increasing issue-relevant thinking prior to the attacking message. For example, if a positive attitude towards obeying the speed limit is weak, a person could spend time thinking and learning about why he or she holds the attitude. This additional thinking and learning should serve to strengthen the once-weak attitude.

Perhaps surprisingly, an attitude can in some situations be made more resistant to persuasion through attempted counter-persuasion! Some attitudes are weak because they have very little substantive basis at all. These attitudes may have been created through peripheral processes or may simply be 'cultural truisms' – attitudes we hold just because we have always been taught to think that way (such as favorable attitudes towards freedom of speech). If cultural truisms are mildly attacked, they can actually become stronger. This process of *inoculation*, as outlined by William McGuire, occurs because although the weak attack may not be enough to change the attitude, it may be strong enough to make the recipient think (often for the first time) about why he or she holds that attitude in the first place. This additional thought can serve to create a basis for holding the attitude and motivate individuals to effectively counter-argue subsequent attacking messages.

ATTITUDE – BEHAVIOR CONSISTENCY

One reason why attitudes are a principal area of research in psychology is that, under the right circumstances, attitudes guide people's behavior, and thus are useful to know in order to predict voting,

consumer purchases, jury decisions, and so forth. According to Russell Fazio's model of attitude-behavior consistency, exactly *how* attitudes guide behavior depends on the type of behavior in question – is the behavior one that is engaged in spontaneously or one that elicits reflection prior to action?

Some behaviors in which we engage are not well thought out. When it comes to impulse purchases, such as the candy people buy while waiting at the checkout line, people may not spend much time in making decisions. In such cases, people simply look to their attitudes to make a choice. In such situations, whether our attitudes drive behavior is determined by whether we can recall the attitude easily and quickly (i.e. if the attitude is accessible).

Other behaviors are not as spontaneous. When we have the motivation and opportunity to choose our behaviors more carefully, accessibility alone is less important. Instead, according to Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action, behavior is determined by one's behavioral intention, which is in turn determined by several factors. First, intention is determined by one's attitude towards the particular behavior under consideration. Attitude towards the behavior in any given situation (e.g. baking a cake for your spouse's birthday on Wednesday) will depend on the beliefs that come to mind in assessing this action – if an attitude relevant to this behavior is not readily retrievable. Intentions are also determined by subjective norms – what other people we admire would want us to do in the situation. Perceptions of our own abilities to carry out some action also play an important role in determining deliberative behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Attitudes have a profound impact on virtually every aspect of our lives. From fundamental issues, such as how attitudes can be measured, to more complex ones, such as the nuances of how attitudes can be changed, a long and rich array of research has helped us to understand the nature of the attitude construct. Space limitations have allowed us to provide only a sampling of what is known about attitudes; the extensive literature on this topic requires further exploration.

Further Reading

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