

PSYCHOLOGY OF
ATTITUDES AND
ATTITUDE CHANGE: A
BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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ISBN: 978-1-904542-06-3

PUBLISHED BY

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Grays,
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RM16 3EW

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ATTITUDES

WHAT ARE ATTITUDES?

Attitudes are not easy things to define in psychology. Allport (1935) gives the traditional definition: "An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness which exerts a directing influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related" (p810).

Bem (1979) simply sees them as likes and dislikes. More formally, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) see attitudes as "learned dispositions to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable way towards a given object, person or event". The focus of the attitude is known as the attitude object.

Secord and Backman (1964) believe that attitudes have three components (example 1):

- i) cognitive component - beliefs about the object;
- ii) affective component - feelings about the object;
- iii) behavioural/conative component - individual's behaviour towards the object.

Attitudes combine to form values and world-views of the individual.

EXAMPLE 1

COGNITIVE	Britain is a great country to live in
AFFECTIVE	Proud about British things
BEHAVIOURAL	Buy British things and express patriotism

Attitudes fulfil a number of functions for the individual:

- i) adaptive - help in identifying aspects of the world; those to choose and avoid;
- ii) knowledge - helps in understanding of social world;
- iii) self expressive - part of the expression of the self and of identity;
- iv) ego defensive - helps in the protection of the self.

Table 1 gives examples of the functions.

FUNCTION	EXAMPLE	TERMS USED BY:	
		KATZ (1960)	SMITH ET AL (1956)
adaptive	"eating certain foods is unhealthy"	adjustive	social adjustment
knowledge	"people are only interested in themselves"	knowledge	object appraisal
self expressive	"I like a particular type of music"	value-expressive	quality of expressiveness
ego defensive	"certain behaviour, that I don't do, is not normal"	ego-defensive	externalisation

Table 1 - Examples of different functions of attitudes.

Researchers in the field of attitudes are faced with two issues:

- a) how to measure accurately individual's attitudes?
- b) what is the relationship between an attitude and the relevant behaviour?

ATTITUDE MEASUREMENT

Attitudes can be measured in three different ways (example 2):

- i) direct measures - ask directly for judgment on the attitude object (eg: Likert Scale);
- ii) quasi-direct measures - ask about related information to the attitude object (eg: Semantic Differential Scale);
- iii) indirect measures - measure information relevant to the attitude without reference to the attitude object (eg: projective tests).

The direct and quasi-direct measures of attitudes make three basic assumptions (Hayes 1994):

- that attitudes can be expressed by verbal statements;
- that the same statements have the same meanings for all individuals;
- that the expressed statements can be measured and quantified.

Table 2 compares the advantages and disadvantages of the three ways of measuring attitudes, and figure 1 shows who is interpreting the questions with each method.

	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
DIRECT	- simple to use - easy to construct	- problems of honesty of replies, particularly for controversial topics
QUASI-DIRECT	- simple to use - overcome problems of honesty in part	- time consuming to design
INDIRECT	- best if need for honesty	- validity: does it measure what it claims to measure? - problems of interpreting results

Table 2 - Advantages and disadvantages of three ways of measuring attitudes.

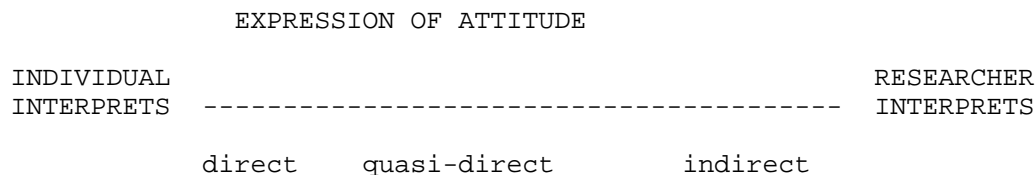


Figure 1 - Ways of measuring attitudes and interpretation.

EXAMPLE 2: Attitudes to condom use during sexual intercourse

Direct - Likert Scale

"A condom should always be used during sexual intercourse"

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	UNSURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
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Quasi-direct - Semantic Differential Scale

		CONDOMS			
good	-		-		bad
reduces	-		-		increases
pleasure	-		-		pleasure

Indirect - Projective test

Picture of couple walking hand in hand towards the bedroom. Write story about what happens next.

Likert Scale (Likert 1932)

Measures cognitive component of attitudes. A series of statements about the attitude object, and participants choose their level of agreement or disagreement. Usually involves five choices (each with a score which added together produces the total).

STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	UNSURE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
5	4	3	2	1

Advantage - provides clear numerical scores.

Disadvantage - vulnerable to lying and "social desirability bias"; ie: telling the researcher the socially acceptable answer.

Semantic Differential Scale (Osgood et al 1957)

Measures affective part of attitudes using as little language as possible. The aim is to gain a more instant response than the Likert scale, so less risk of social desirability bias. Individual ticks line that relates to their attitude.

		TOPIC			
good	-	-	-	-	bad
happy	-	-	-	-	sad

Advantage - few words to influence attitudes.

Disadvantage - "position response bias": tendency to tick the middle position.

Projective Tests (eg: Rorschach Inkblot Test 1921)

The individual responds to a particular stimulus, like an Inkblot, and their answers are analysed and interpreted. What is reported is assumed to be a projection of unconscious motives and emotions. This technique has its origins in psychoanalysis, and is able to discover the non-verbal part of attitudes (ie: the affective component). More likely to write an essay with this technique, rather than give single answers as in the other methods.

Advantage - overcomes problems of asking direct questions.

Disadvantage - validity of the technique.

ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

The traditional view is that if attitudes can be measured, then it will be possible to predict behaviour and vice versa. In other words, individuals are consistent.

However, it is quite clear that attitudes and behaviour have an inconsistent relationship, and it is not possible to predict one from the other.

Wicker (1971) found only 30% agreement between them (based on 46 studies). The main reason for this is that individuals are inconsistent. This is shown in the classic study by La Piere (1934).

Example of Research: La Piere (1934)

The researcher visited 251 hotels and restaurants in America with a Chinese couple (during a period of anti-Chinese feeling). On no occasion were the three visitors refused service. La Piere then wrote to all the places six months later that were visited, asking if it was alright to bring the Chinese guests. Of the 128 replies, 92% refused. Similar refusal rates were found with hotels and restaurants that had not been visited.

Evaluation

i) Different people may have filled out the questionnaire as to who served the visitors.

ii) What about the non-respondents to the questionnaire? What views might they have held?

iii) The Chinese couple spoke good English, had good social skills, and smiled a lot. La Piere noted that "even where some tension developed due to the strangeness of the Chinese it would evaporate immediately when they spoke in unaccented English" (p232).

iv) If the Chinese couple had been by themselves, the reaction may have been different, but they were with an American.

Factors that explain the inconsistency between attitudes and behaviour:

a) Immediate determinants of behaviour - much behaviour depends on the situation (eg: evaluation of others); habits; situational norms and conformity pressures.

b) Strength of particular attitudes - individuals are more flexible for less important or weakly-held attitudes.

c) Problems of measuring attitudes accurately.

d) General and specific attitudes and behaviour - often attitude questionnaires measure general attitudes, and behaviour can be specific. The link between a specific attitude and a specific behaviour is quite consistent.

Conditions for attitudes to predict behaviour (Myers 1993):

- minimal influence on how people express attitudes;
eg: anonymity of questionnaire;
- influences on attitude-related behaviour are minimized;
eg: situational norms;
- attitude is specific to behaviour;
- attitude is made salient before behaviour performed;
ie: emphasised or individual reminded of the relevant attitude.

ATTITUDE CHANGE

In the post-World War Two period in the USA, and in the advertising industry generally, there is a lot of interest about how to change attitudes. In particular, how to persuade people to buy certain products, or hold certain views.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Cognitive dissonance is an explanation put forward by Festinger (1957) to account for attitude changes. When two "cognitions" are inconsistent, the individual is motivated to resolve this.

A well-known example is of a smoker who believes that "smoking causes cancer". This is a situation of inconsistency, which Festinger argued causes "psychological discomfort". The "sensible" option would be to stop smoking, but that is fixed, so the individual must change their attitudes about "smoking causes cancer".

This can be done in a number of ways:

- by belittling the evidence about smoking and cancer;
- convincing others to smoke;
- building an image around no fear of cancer;
- smoking low-tar cigarettes;
- associating with other smokers.

Another example of cognitive dissonance is the situation where individuals do something in order to gain a reward, but the reward is then not given after the individual has done that task. This causes inconsistency: the individual worked for the reward, but there was no reward.

The fact that the individual worked for the reward cannot be changed, so the motivation is what can be changed. The individual comes to believe that they worked for their own satisfaction, and so subsequently are more enthusiastic about the task now there is no reward. What this shows is that individuals are quite illogical in their behaviour.

Festinger et al (1956) first noted this phenomena of cognitive dissonance while studying a small group in USA who believed that the world would end, and they (the believers) would be saved and taken to the planet "Clarion".

The believers met at the appointed time (as set by "prophecies" given to the leader, Marion Keech), but no spaceships came to collect them. After this event, the

individuals were told (by another "prophecy") that their "good works" had stopped the destruction of the world. The believers, then, became more enthusiastic to gain new members.

Logically if an event is proved to be untrue, individuals should lose interest. But a lot of effort was involved leading up to the "end of the world", and this is hard to deny. Thus it is easier to believe that they were right, and seek others to bolster their endangered beliefs. If lots of people believe the same thing, individuals feel that they cannot be wrong.

Aronson and Mills (1959) call this "effort justification". The more effort it takes to gain something, but that something is not as great as expected the more cognitive dissonance will exist. To resolve this, the individual will increase their liking for what they have gained.

In an experiment with unethical aspects, Aronson and Mills led female students to believe that a particular class was worth joining. In order to join this class, the students had to go through an initiation task with varying degrees of embarrassment. But when they joined the class, it was really uninteresting.

Those who had the most embarrassing initiation task, rated the class most interesting.

Aronson and Mills sum up:

If he has undergone an unpleasant initiation to gain admission to the group, his cognition that he has gone through an unpleasant experience for the sake of membership is dissonant with his cognition that there are things about the group he does not like. He can reduce this dissonance in two ways. He can convince himself that the initiation was not very unpleasant, or he can exaggerate the positive characteristics of the group and minimize its negative aspects (1959 p177).

Cognitive dissonance has also been found in two other situations:

1. Post-decision

Following a decision for two equally desirable objects, and the individual is forced to choose one. Cognitive dissonance produces the situation where the individual highlights all good points of their object and all the bad points of the other objects.

Brehm (1956) found this change in a study on

attitudes towards household appliances. For example, where two objects were equally desired, and only one could be chosen, the liking of this chosen appliance increased by a third on average following the choice, and for the appliance not chosen, the liking fell by half.

2. Counter-attitudinal behaviour

If individuals voluntarily perform a behaviour that is opposite to the attitudes held, this also produces cognitive dissonance.

Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) had participants doing a boring task, and then convincing others that the task was interesting. The participants were paid either 1 or 20 dollars for convincing others. The group paid 1 dollar suffered cognitive dissonance. They had done the boring task then convinced others of its interest, therefore cognitive dissonance produced a change in their attitude ie they came to believe that the task was not that boring.

Evaluation of Cognitive Dissonance

i) Problems of measuring cognitive dissonance.

ii) Artificial lab experiments in most cases, but original work by Festinger et al from real life situation.

Situations of Cognitive Dissonance

EFFORT JUSTIFICATION

- 1 = want to join group
- 2 = effort to join
- 3 = group not as expected

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

cannot change 1 or 2; must change attitude 3

conclusion - like group despite boring

POST-DECISION

- 1 = product A
- 2 = product B (equally desirable)
- 3 = purchased A but not B

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

cannot change 3; thus attitude changes towards 1 and 2

conclusion - increased liking for A but decreased for B

COUNTER-ATTITUDINAL BEHAVIOUR

- 1 = boring task
- 2 = told others interesting
- 3 = paid 1 dollar for 2

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

cannot change 1 and 2, attitude change towards task

conclusion - increased liking for task

PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

The work of the Yale Communication and Attitude Change Programme in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s has produced many factors used today in persuasive communications (eg: advertising). It is based around three groups of factors: source, message, and recipient as the means of changing attitudes.

1. Source factors

Who is doing the persuading eg government or a particular individual. Source factors include status and credibility of the source; attractiveness; and perceived trustworthiness and motives of the source.

Example of Research: Hovland and Weiss (1951)

The aim of this research was to persuade participants about the benefits of building atomic submarines (before they existed).

A baseline measure of attitude was taken before the experiment. Then the participants read an article arguing for the benefits of such submarines. But the article was attributed to Robert Oppenheimer (nuclear scientist) or Pravda (Soviet news agency).

When the attitude was measured after the experiment, the article attributed to Oppenheimer (expert) produced a greater attitude change.

2. Message factors

The content of the message used to persuade people. Factors include: making the argument explicit or implicit; using fear; presenting one or both sides of the argument; and the order of presentation of the arguments.

Example of Research: Janis and Feshbach (1953)

This research set out to persuade participants about dental hygiene using different levels of fear about tooth decay in the message.

There were three conditions; each seeing a slightly different film about tooth decay, while the control group saw a film about the eye. The main film varied the number of references to the unpleasantness of tooth decay. In the "high fear" condition, there were 71 references to unpleasant effects of tooth decay, compared to 49 references in the "moderate fear" condition, and 18 in the "low fear" condition.

The "high fear" condition produced the greatest immediate attitude change. But, in the longer term, the "low fear" condition produced the most behaviour change. Creating a small amount of fear allows the individual to feel they can control it by doing something. Too much fear produces a feeling of helplessness and behaviour does not change.

3. Recipient factors

The individual who is being persuaded will be influenced by certain factors. These include the latitude of acceptance or rejection; personality variables; and the function of the attitude.

Example of Research: Mackie and Worth (1989; quoted in Lipka 1994)

This research looked at the effect of mood, and the strength of the argument about saving the environment. In the "good mood" condition, participants were unexpectedly given two dollars, and, in this case, a weak argument produced greater attitude change. However, in the "neutral mood" condition, it is the stronger argument that is more effective.

Table 3 summarises the influence of different factors.

DUAL PROCESSING MODEL OF ATTITUDE CHANGE

Petty and Cacioppo (1981) (Elaboration Likelihood Model) argue that there are two basic routes to persuasion. Central route processing and peripheral route processing.

The former involves attitude change because the

FACTORS IN PERSUASION

PRODUCES ATTITUDE CHANGE

1. SOURCE FACTORS

- | | |
|--|---|
| a) status/credibility | expert/high credibility |
| b) attractiveness | physically attractive
But unattractive source
produces "boomerang effect"; ie:
change in attitude in opposite
direction to persuasion |
| c) perceived trustworthiness/
motives | arguing against self interest |

2. MESSAGE FACTORS

- | | |
|---|---|
| a) explicit/implicit | implicit argument for high
intelligence; explicit for low
intelligence |
| b) use of fear | low fear best for behaviour
change |
| c) one vs both sides of
argument | one side for those already
persuaded; both sides for those
opposed or higher education |
| d) order of presentation of
argument | primacy effect: 1st argument
directly followed by 2nd; 1st
more effective
recency effect: 1st argument
followed by gap before 2nd; 2nd
argument more effective |

3. RECIPIENT FACTORS

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) latitude of acceptance
or rejection | nearer argument to own beliefs |
| b) function of attitudes | eg: self expression function (ie:
attitudes as part of self
identity): adverts based on
image better |
| c) personality variables | - level of education: see
message factors
- gender: no differences
- characteristics: no trait of
"persuability" |

Table 3 - Different factors in persuasion.

individual has thought carefully about the issues. This is a more stable change.

Peripheral route processing is attitude change without thought about the issues, and is more temporary.

Chaikin (1987) asked participants to listen to a series of arguments and were told they would be interviewed or not about them afterwards. Those told they would be interviewed used central route processing and were more persuaded by the number of arguments. The other group, using peripheral route processing, were more influenced by whether they liked the speaker or not.

Furthermore, Chaikin notes that peripheral route processing is quicker, and makes use of shortcuts (known as heuristics). For example, attractive source means trustworthy. Also the level of involvement in the issues is important. High involvement is linked to central route processing.

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