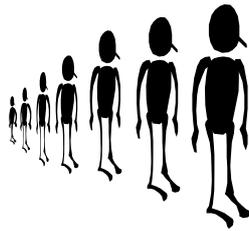


International Baccalaureate



Social Psychology

The Structure and Function of Attitudes

Whenever we interact with others it seems that we are involved in finding out what each other thinks, in telling each other our opinions and beliefs or in trying to change someone else's. If we know someone's attitude about something, we feel we are in a better position to predict and explain what they will do, feel or think in a given situation.

Advertisers, for example, are constantly trying to change our attitudes in such a way that we actually behave differently and buy that CD or extra pair of jeans that we don't need. Many a heated argument centres around differences in attitudes and this points to the emotional content of attitudes.

It is easy to see therefore that the study of attitudes is central to the study of people in social situations. Indeed, some psychologists maintain that it is the cornerstone of social psychology. Allport (1954), for example, thought that the concept of attitude was "the most distinctive and indispensable concept in ... social psychology." How you see others, stereotyping, prejudices, attraction, voting, which subjects you study, your hobbies and interests, which TV programmes you watch, religious views, political views, who your friends are, whether you attribute blame/responsibility to someone, how you make decisions in a group - all of these are areas of social psychology and all of them reflect attitudes that you hold. So what exactly is an *attitude*?

Introductory textbooks are notorious for telling you that something is difficult to define or that there's little agreement *and then* they go on to attempt a definition! In the case of attitudes perhaps this is because they are abstract constructs, not something we can directly observe and are able only to infer them from behaviour. On the other hand they seem so obvious that surely we must be able to define the term. (Of course, much of psychology concerns this kind of concept and this presents a problem for scientific psychology generally, not just for social

psychologists). Another difficulty is that the word 'attitude' is used so widely and in diverse ways. Here's a definition! Proshansky and Seidenberg (1965) say that "[a]n attitude is a complex tendency of the person to respond consistently in a favourable or an unfavourable way to social objects in [the] environment" (p97) and if you're still hankering for definitions, here are some slightly adapted from those Gross (1994 p 515) has brought together:

Allport 1935	<i>An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related.</i>
Rokeach 1968	<i>A learned orientation, or disposition, toward an object or situation, which provides a tendency to respond favourably or unfavourably to the object or situation</i>
Mednick et al 1975	<i>An attitude is a predisposition to act in a certain way towards some aspect of one's environment, including other people</i>
Bem 1979	<i>Attitudes are likes and dislikes</i>

Attitudes are *about* things. There is an object involved about which we feel, think and behave in certain ways. An attitude object does not have to be an object in the concrete sense of things that can be touched. You can have an attitude about fox hunting or a piece of music as well as about Manchester United. Whatever an attitude is about is referred to as the *attitude object*. Attitudes can be *for* or *against* something, *favourable* or *unfavourable*. They are closely related to behaviour, though any given piece of behaviour may reflect different or contradictory attitudes.

There are two broad approaches to the analysis of attitudes. One looks at what all attitudes share, a common structure. The other looks at how attitudes differ, their functions.

The structural approach

Secord and Backman (1964) point out that most definitions of attitude tend to agree that attitudes are comprised of three components (a sort of **abc** of attitudes):

- * an **affective** component that reflects the person's feelings about or valuing of the object
- * a **behavioural** component, sometimes called the **conative** aspect, how the person behaves towards the object
- * a **cognitive** component, the beliefs about the attitude object

According to Pennington (1986) the components are structured in such a way that the beliefs and values (cognitive and affective) combine to give the attitude which is a negative or positive evaluation of something about which we hold certain beliefs. This then gives rise to an intention to behave in a certain way resulting, in appropriate circumstances, in behaviour. For example, a certain MP might **believe** that smoking cannabis is okay, she might **value** open and frank discussion about smoking cannabis and this leads (through intention) to her **behaving** in a way that makes this known.

Notice that two people can share the same belief or can share the same value but nevertheless have different attitudes. You and I might both believe that meat is something edible but we might evaluate the eating of meat differently and so one of us might be vegetarian whilst the other isn't. Similarly two people might value an attitude object in the same way but because they have different beliefs about it, their attitudes are different. We might both value animals but one of us might think eating them causes more to be bred and therefore means we are giving more animals a life than if we didn't eat meat, so it's okay to eat them. The other person, however, might think that breeding them for eating is exploitative, therefore immoral so it's not okay to eat them.

The assumption behind the structural approach is that if we can see how values and beliefs combine in relation to very specific attitude objects, we should be able both to predict and explain someone's (intentional) behaviour. This approach may tell us what an attitude *is* but it does not tell us *why* you have one attitude and I have another. It doesn't say why people hold the attitudes they do, what *function* having the attitude serves for the person.

The functional approach

The development or formation of attitudes may be a consequence of a range of different motives the person has. They are developed, maintained and may change because of the functions they serve. Katz (1960) suggests that every attitude serves at least one of four functions:

1. **Adaptive:**

The attitude helps us to avoid unpleasant things and obtain desirable things.

2. **Knowledge:**

The attitude helps us to understand the otherwise overwhelming amount of information in the world. They are short-cuts, helping us to simplify our perceptions of the world so that it becomes more manageable, predictable and safer.

3. **Self-expressive** (sometimes *ego-expressive*):

Attitudes help us to relate to ourselves and to others, presenting a fairly unified image with which others can interact and which help to establish our identity for both ourselves and for others

4. **Ego-defensive**

Attitudes help to protect us from our selves and from others, to explain why we've done something that could be seen as undesirable.

For example, the Master might have a positive attitude towards the School because it pays his salary (*adaptive*) or you might like The Levellers because it gets you in with a particular group of people (*adaptive*). Someone you might know someone who has a negative attitude towards the Sixth form because they think it's just like school (*knowledge*) or a person might discriminate against someone on the basis of the stereotype that 'all X people are Y' therefore 'this person is Y since they are X' (*knowledge*). The cost of this is a tendency to over-simplify and expect the social world to be more predictable, less diverse than it is. Having a positive attitude towards students could be seen to help teachers relate to themselves, their jobs and to their students better (*self-expressive*) or being a loving child or an antagonistic sibling allows someone to behave in certain ways in their family (*self-expressive*). Having a generally positive attitude towards myself as a rational being

may help me face the morning after rather too heavy a drinking session the night before when I may have potentially embarrassed myself (*ego-defensive*) or your racist friend may be unable to accept his or her own hostile feelings and so blame the object of the racism instead for the feelings (*ego-defensive*).