

Social Psychology

Lecture 4: Attitudes

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In our previous lesson (Lesson 3: Social Perception), we explored how we form perceptions of others, the cognitive biases that color our social world, and the significant impact of mood on our thinking. Let us now shift our focus to the evaluations that guide our reactions to the world: our attitudes.

Attitudes constitute a major area of social cognition that has been an enduring focus of social psychologists since the emergence of the discipline. This interest in attitudes arises from the fact that, as a concept, they are indispensable to the explanation of people's thinking, feelings, and social interactions. In this lesson, we will define the concept of attitudes, discuss how attitudes influence behavior, and conclude with the discussion of how behavior changes attitudes.

At the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Name the ABCs of attitude and analyze the relationships between them.
2. Enumerate ways to assess implicit and explicit attitude.
3. Explain the processes underlying attitude formation.
4. Explain how we change our attitudes to justify things we've already done.
5. Apply the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain why certain attitudes successfully lead to behavioral intentions while others do not.

What is an Attitude?

- are evaluations people make about objects, ideas, events, or other people.
- Beliefs and feelings related to a person or an event (often rooted in one's beliefs, and exhibited in one's feelings and intended behavior).
- Each of us has thousands of attitudes about many different things, and these attitudes constitute an important part of the self-concept.

Attitude Types

Our attitudes are formed by the balance of positive and negative reactions we have toward an object, person, or idea.

- a. **Positive attitude** – occurs when people experience a high level of positive reaction paired with a low negative reaction.

Example: *“I like grapefruit. It’s my favorite citrus fruit.”*

- b. **Negative attitude** – occurs when people experience a high negative reaction and a low positive reaction.

Example: *“I despise grapefruit! I’ll never eat a bit.”*

- c. **Indifferent attitude** – occurs when both positive and negative reactions are low.

Example: *“I’ve never tried grapefruit so I really have no opinion.”*

- d. **Ambivalent attitude** – occurs when a person experiences high levels of both positive and negative reactions simultaneously.

Example: *“I like grapefruit, but I’m allergic to citrus fruits”*

COMPONENTS OF ATTITUDE

Social psychologists have defined three components of an attitude – the **ABCs of Attitude**: Affect, Behavior, and Cognition.

- **Affect** – feelings and emotions associated with an attitude object
- **Behavior** – past and future activity associated with an attitude object
- **Cognition** – thoughts and beliefs associated with an attitude object

To illustrate: When a typhoon hits your home, your attitude isn’t just a single thought but a complex psychological response. Using the ABCs of Attitude, we can break down how a disaster victim might evaluate the experience:

- **Affect:** *“Feeling bad for the families in the flooded areas.”*
- **Behavior:** *“Dropping off donation supplies like clothes, medicine, hygiene kits, or canned goods at a local collection point.”*
- **Cognition:** *“Recognizing that flood control systems are a vital necessity in disaster-prone regions.”*

Some attitudes are stronger than others. When the three components (Affect, Behavior and Cognition) are consistent, the attitude becomes significantly more resilient to outside influence, and a more reliable predictor of a person's actions. The example below illustrates this:

Cognition: *James believes reading broadens his horizons.*

Affect: *James feels a sense of excitement and satisfaction whenever he reads.*

Behavior: *James sets aside 1 hour every evening to read and consistently finishes two books per month.*

Conversely, when the components of an attitude are misaligned, the attitude becomes significantly weaker. Using the example below, since James' feelings (**Affect**) don't match his beliefs (**Cognition**), his overall attitude toward reading is weak. He is likely to give up on his reading goals because there is no "internal harmony."

Cognition: *James believes reading broadens his horizons.*

Affect: *James dislike taking the time to read.*

Behavior: *As a result, James read less than his belief that he should.*

ATTITUDE FORMATION

The attitudes we form can be expressed either implicitly or explicitly.

Explicit attitude

- Refer to the opinions (evaluations) that we consciously hold and that people may readily articulate.
- An attitude that one recognizes and can control.
- If you asked a person, "How do you feel about [topic]?", they would provide a clear, reasoned answer reflecting a stance of which they are fully aware.

Implicit attitude

- Attitudes that are automatically formed and activated without our even being aware of them; they are outside of our conscious control.
- They often stem from cultural conditioning, evolution, or repetitive social messaging.
- For instance, a child may harbor a profound fear of snakes despite never having encountered one. Simply thinking about a snake evokes an immediate sense of fear.
- Another example: Implicitly associating men with science, math and leadership while associating women with liberal arts, nurturing and support.
- Implicit biases represent the most common form of implicit attitudes. Because these automatic associations often persist even after a person's explicit beliefs have changed, they remain a central focus in the study of social behavior, prejudice, and human decision-making.
- Experiment: Research by Correll et al. (2002) demonstrated the prevalence of negative implicit attitudes toward Black individuals. Using a simple videogame, the effect of ethnicity on shoot/don't shoot decisions was examined. In this "Shooter Task," participants were required to quickly "shoot" targets holding weapons and "not shoot" those holding harmless objects, such as cell phones, while the race of the targets (White or African American) was varied.

Result: The results revealed a consistent pattern of implicit bias across multiple dimensions.

- **Study 1 (Speed):** Participants reacted faster to shoot armed Black targets but were quicker to spare unarmed White targets.
- **Study 2 (Errors):** Under time pressure, speed turned into mistakes; participants "accidentally" shot unarmed Black men more frequently.
- **Study 3 (Cause):** The bias was driven by an awareness of cultural stereotypes. Even people who didn't personally agree with the stereotype still showed the bias.
- **Study 4 (Pervasiveness):** Both White and Black participants showed the same level of bias, suggesting that these implicit attitudes are deeply ingrained cultural products rather than simple personal prejudice.

How are attitudes formed? Attitudes are not always innate; rather, many of them are learned through our interactions with the world, primarily shaped by the principles of classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and social learning. Attitudes can also be influenced by social roles (expected behavior of an individual in a given context or role) and social norms (social rules concerning appropriate behavior).

A. Genetics

- Some researchers propose that certain attitudes may be linked to our genes. A study by Martin et al. (1986) found higher attitude similarity in identical twins compared to fraternal twins.
- However, as Stangor (2011) explains, there are no particular attitude-determining genes; instead, they shape the underlying personality and temperament traits that ultimately influence our perspective on the world.

B. Classical conditioning

- a type of learning in which a neutral stimulus gets paired with a stimulus that elicits a response. Once conditioning has occurred through repeated pairings, the neutral stimulus by itself already elicits the response of the second stimulus.
- Ivan Pavlov (1927) uncovered this type of conditioning in his famous experiment with dogs.
- Similarly, our attitudes can be formed by associations. Examples:
 - In a billboard ad, a clothing company pairs a jeans with an attractive model who elicits a pleasant emotional response. This can make people form a positive attitude about the pants and the clothing company.
 - If Jack is eating sushi when he learns that his mother has been in a car accident, he may develop a negative attitude toward sushi. Even if he's not entirely aware of it, for him, eating sushi may now be linked with fearful and negative feelings.
- Experiment: Gibson (2008) investigated whether pairing famous brands (Coke or Pepsi) with pleasant or unpleasant imagery could subconsciously influence consumer preference. The study tested if these associations effectively altered participant attitudes.

Result: Participants who initially did not favor either brand of soda chooses the positively associated soft drink over the negatively associated one

- Individuals naturally tend to like things they are familiar with and feel uneasy about things they do not know. One does not need a specific reason to like something; often, simply being familiar with an object or concept makes a person feel positive, while unfamiliar things tend to evoke negative feelings.

- **Mere exposure effect**

- developed and popularized by Robert Zajonc in 1968.
- States that simply having been exposed to something increases our liking for it.
- Experiment: Zajonc (1968) exposed participants to various neutral stimuli, such as "nonsense" words, Chinese-like characters, and photographs of strangers. He discovered that frequency was a deciding factor in preference; the more often an individual was shown a specific character or face, the more likely they were to rate it as "good" or "pleasant." Subsequent research into subliminal processing revealed that this effect remains remarkably potent even when the exposure occurs so quickly that the subjects aren't consciously aware they have seen the stimuli at all.
- The mere exposure effect has its limits and can sometimes backfire. If you see a commercial too often, it can become annoying, making you dislike both the ad and the product. Furthermore, the effect doesn't work if your first impression is negative; if you hate a song the first time you hear it, listening to it more will usually only make you dislike it more.
- A recent discovery that highlights how exposure boosts positive attitude is known as the **Name-letter effect**. This is the tendency to show a preference for letters in our own name and prefer stimuli that contain those letters simply because they encounter them so frequently.
- Example of Name-letter effect: *Mark prefers eating at McDonald's, living in Miami, and shopping at Marks & Spencer; he even chooses to drive a Mercedes-Benz over other luxury brands.*

C. Operant conditioning

- A method discovered by Edward Thorndike and elaborated by B.F. Skinner.
- A method of learning that occurs through rewarding desirable behavior and punishing undesirable behavior.
- Operant conditioning forms attitudes in this way: when an individual behaves in a certain manner and is praised for that behavior, repeatedly, he will develop a positive attitude toward it. If, on the other hand, the behavior repeatedly meets with negative feedback, the individual will eventually develop a negative attitude toward it.
- Operant conditioning occurs through the mechanisms of reinforcement and punishment.
- Reinforcement increases the likelihood that a behavior will be repeated, while punishment decreases the likelihood of the behavior.
 - a. **Positive reinforcement** – adding desired things to increase behavior
Example: *You studied hard and earned 98%, and your parents rewarded you with an additional allowance of PHP 500.*
 - b. **Negative reinforcement** – removing aversive event to increase behavior
Example: *You studied hard and earned 98%, so your parents rewarded you by exempting you from washing dishes for a week (a chore you typically dislike).*
 - c. **Positive punishment** – adding aversive event to decrease behavior
Example: *You did not prepare or study for an important exam at all. When you get the results back, the teacher makes you stay after class for a mandatory, boring remedial lecture on how to study properly.*
 - d. **Negative punishment** – removing desired things to decrease behavior
Example: *You did not prepare or study for an important exam at all. When you get the results back, the teacher revokes your privilege to attend the upcoming school field trip because of your poor performance.*
- **Study:** Berg and McQuinn (1986) demonstrate how operant conditioning specifically through positive reinforcement helps maintain romantic bonds. Their study found that couples who provide each other with reinforcements such as favors, running

errands, giving gifts, and so forth, are more likely to be together four months down the line than those who do not provide many rewards.

D. Observational learning

- Also known as modeling or social learning; proposed by Albert Bandura in 1977.
- Seeing others display a particular attitude and watching people be reinforced for expressing a particular attitude can make someone adopt those attitudes.
- Example: If a girl grows up watching her father act distrustful of a particular racial or ethnic group, she may very likely adopt those same views.

E. Social Roles

- Roles are set of norms that define how people in a given social position ought to behave.
- For example, gender roles tell people how a particular society expects men and women to behave. Role requirements can change over time in society.
- A person who violates the requirements of a role tends to feel uneasy or to be censured by others.
- If you are promoted to a management role, you may find yourself defending company policies you used to complain about.
- **Experiment:** In the 1970s, the psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted a famous study called the Stanford Prison study. One group of college student volunteers plays the role of prison guards in a simulated prison environment. The other group of students play the role of prisoners.

Result: Zimbardo found that as time went on, some of the “guard” students became increasingly harsh and domineering. The “prisoner” students also internalized their role. Some broke down, while others rebelled or became passively resigned to the situation.

ASSESSING ATTITUDES

Attitudes can be measured in several ways.

Explicit measures of attitudes:

- a. **Observation** – recording overt behaviors that reflect a person's beliefs

- b. **Likert scales** – It asks people to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a specific statement.
- c. **Semantic differential scales** (Osgood et al., 1957) – this scale measures the connotative meaning or "feeling" you associate with a specific topic using bipolar adjectives such as Good and Bad, Helpful and Useless or Exciting and Boring.

Implicit measures of attitudes:

- a. **Unobtrusive observation** – happens when the subject doesn't know they are being studied. Researchers could watch "micro-behaviors" that are hard to fake.
- b. **Evaluative priming** (Fazio, 1995) – This measure how quickly your brain connects a concept with "good" or "bad." In this measure, you are briefly shown a "prime" (like a photo of a spider). Immediately after, a word appears (like "Pleasant" or "Ugly"), and you must categorize that word as good or bad.
- c. **Implicit Association Test** (Greenwald et al., 1998) – a computer-driven assessment test that uses reaction times to measure people's automatic associations between attitude objects and evaluative words. Easier pairings and faster responses are taken to indicate stronger unconscious associations.
- d. **Affect Misattribution Paradigm** (Payne et al., 2005) – it relies on the idea that our emotional reactions to one thing can "leak" onto our judgment of something else.

Prime image → Neutral stimulus → rate the neutral photograph

DO ATTITUDES INFLUNCE BHAVIOR?

Below are statements that determine your attitude. Indicate your agreement by providing a "Yes" or "No" response.

1. It is important to save our planet.
2. It is important to study hard.
3. World hunger is a serious problem that needs attention.
4. Do you engage in environmentally friendly behavior?

5. Do you study hard for all of your classes, all of the time?
6. Do you personally do anything to lessen world hunger?

Did you respond consistently with “Yes” across all items, or was there a disparity between your answers for the first three and the final three questions?

Social psychologist Allan Wicker (1969) shook up the field of psychology by proving that attitudes don't actually predict behavior. After looking at dozens of studies, he found that what people say they believe rarely matches how they actually act.

In a classic 1937 study, researcher Stephen Corey set out to see if students' moral beliefs actually matched their actions. He first surveyed 67 university students and found that most claimed to dislike cheating. To test this, he gave them weekly quizzes that he secretly graded beforehand, then returned them unmarked and asked the students to grade themselves. This gave the students a perfect opportunity to cheat by changing their answers. Corey found that in 76 percent of the cases, students cheated, regardless of their previously stated attitudes toward cheating.

If attitudes don't always predict behavior, what does? To solve this puzzle, Icek Ajzen (1985) proposed the Theory of Planned Behavior.

- **Theory of Planned Behavior**

- States that there are three factors that promote occurrence of behavior:
 1. One's own attitude toward the behavior
 2. The attitudes of others toward that behavior (subjective norms)
 3. The perceived feasibility of the behavior (perceived behavioral control)
- Example: *Sarah is evaluating the possibility of ending an abusive relationship.*
 - **Attitude Toward the Behavior:** Sarah writes a list of pros and cons. Since the "pros" of leaving outweigh the "cons," she develops a positive attitude toward the prospect of breaking up. She has concluded that the outcome of this behavior will be more beneficial than staying.
 - **Subjective Norms:** Sarah considers what her mother and her best friend would think. She realizes they would both be pleased and happy if she left.

- **Perceived Behavioral Control:** Sarah feels she has the power, resources, and emotional strength to execute the plan. This is the perceived control required to turn a wish into a reality.

WHEN DOES BEHAVIOR INFLUENCE ATTITUDES?

Attitudes are complex, and sometimes we may be unaware of them. We may even disagree with our own attitudes. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they're so deeply ingrained that we can't change them. Let us examine the role of cognitive dissonance in attitude change.

Cognitive Dissonance theory

- Proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957.
- Proposes that people want their behavior to be consistent with their beliefs, and feel uncomfortable with any inconsistency between the two.
- If people's behavior are inconsistent, they feel the need to justify or rationalize their behavior
- Three fundamental assumptions:
 1. Human beings sense when their behavior is inconsistent with their attitudes.
 2. Once inconsistency is recognized, the individual is in a state of cognitive dissonance and will be motivated to resolve it.
 3. There are three ways to resolve dissonance:
 - a. Making sure not to repeat the behavior in order to stay in line with the attitude.
 - b. Changing an attitude to match the behavior.
 - c. Rationalizing the behavior so that it no longer seems to clash with the attitude.
- Example: Timmy believes that smoking is deadly, but he lights a cigarette anyway.
- To resolve dissonance:
 - a. **Change the Behavior** – *Timmy quits smoking so that his actions finally match his belief that it is harmful.*

- b. **Change the Belief** – *Timmy convinces himself that the medical research is exaggerated or “fake news” so he can keep smoking without feeling guilty.*
- c. **Rationalize the Behavior** – *Timmy rationalizes his behavior by claiming, “I only smoke two sticks a day, so the health risks don't apply to me”.*
- **Experiment:** Dickerson and colleagues (1992) wanted to see if they could use guilt (hypocrisy) to encourage water conservation among environmentally conscious students. The participants were first reminded of their own past water-wasting habits and then asked to sign a public commitment to take shorter showers. By doing both, the researchers forced the students to face the fact that their actions did not match their public stance. This created a strong sense of cognitive dissonance.

Result: to resolve this mental tension and regain a sense of integrity, these students significantly reduced their shower times compared to those who were not made to feel inconsistent.
- When we spend a lot of time and energy making something happen, we more often than not see value in that accomplishment even if we shouldn't. Why? Because working hard to achieve something and then finding it wasn't worth the effort is a sure source of cognitive dissonance. To combat this, we justify effort that was spent. This is referred to as **effort justification**.
 - **Effort justification**
 - refers to the idea that if people work hard to reach a goal, they are likely to value the goal more. They justify working hard by believing that the goal is valuable.
 - In essence, we convince ourselves that something is worth it because we suffered for it.
 - Seen in:
 - **Hazing and initiation rites** – When people go through a painful or difficult initiation, they feel a psychological need to justify why they put themselves through it. To make the suffering "worth it," their brains convince them that the group is incredibly special, leading to deeper loyalty and a stronger bond.

- **Work and career** – People who invest years of study, long hours, and significant personal sacrifices into their careers are more likely to value their jobs and careers, even if they are not entirely satisfying.
 - **Relationships** – People may stay in unsatisfying or even abusive relationships because of the time, emotional energy, and effort they have invested.
- Cognitive dissonance also plays a role in affecting our attitudes toward the choices we have already made. After making a difficult choice, we often experience psychological tension and worry that we might have made the wrong decision. This phenomenon is known as **post-decision dissonance**.
- **Post-decision dissonance**
 - cognitive dissonance that results from having to reject one appealing choice in favor of another.
 - **To combat this:** We enhance our opinions of what we've chosen to justify our choice cognitively.
 - **Experiment:** Lieberman and colleagues (2001) asked participants to rate several photographs, choose between their favorite pairs, and then re-rate the same photos later.
- Result:** Participants increased their ratings for the photos they had chosen and decreased their ratings for the ones they had rejected. Remarkably, this shift occurred even in amnesiacs who had no memory of making a choice or even seeing the photos previously.

In a nutshell:

- Attitudes, behavior, and cognition have a reciprocal relationship with one another.
- Research on attitudes helps us to understand our behaviors and interactions with one another.
- Everything we say and do starts with an attitude, whether negative, positive, or somewhere in between.
- Research allows us to not only understand how attitudes, behaviors, and cognition interact with each other, it also allows an opportunity for change.

- The more we know about our attitudes and how they are linked (or not linked) to our behaviors, the more resources we will have for ensuring that our attitudes and subsequent behaviors reflect ourselves.

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