

The Dynamics of Persuasion

Chapter 2 Attitudes: Definition & Structure

The Concept of Attitude

- Attitude is a psychological construct
- Attitudes are never directly observed
- An attitude is a learned, global evaluation of an object (person, place, or issue) that influences thought and action

Characteristics of Attitude

- Attitudes vary as a function of religion, social upbringing, even the cultural landscape in which an individual was raised
- People tend to cluster with those who share their attitudes
- Individuals do not have an attitude until they first encounter the attitude object (or information about it) and respond

Values and Beliefs

- Values and beliefs are learned and shape the ways we interpret information
- Values
 - Defined as “desirable end states or behaviors that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and are ordered by relative importance” (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551)
 - More global and abstract than attitudes
- Beliefs
 - Beliefs are cognitions about the world —subjective probabilities that an object has a particular attribute or that an action will lead to a particular outcome (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)
 - Frequently confused with facts
 - Descriptive beliefs are perceptions or hypotheses about the world that people carry around in their heads
 - Prescriptive beliefs are “ought” or “should” statements that express conceptions of preferred end-states

Structure of Attitudes

- Social scientists have proposed several models to aid in understanding the structure of attitudes

The expectancy-value perspective

- Asserts that attitudes have two components: cognition and affect (or head and heart)
- An attitude is a combination of:
 - Strength of beliefs that an object has certain attributes (and)
 - Evaluations of these attributes

Symbolic Approach

- Symbolic approach of attitude structure:
- Attitudes are characterized by emotional reactions, sweeping sentiments, and powerful prejudices
- These symbolic predispositions lie at the core of people's attitudes toward social issues

Role of Ideology

- Some people's attitudes are guided by broad ideological principles
- Assumes people operate on the basis of one set of ideological beliefs

Consistency of Attitudes

- Attitudes are not always consistent. An individual may feel both positively and negatively about a person or an issue
- People strive for balance

Ambivalence

- Ambivalence occurs when we feel both positively and negatively about a person or issue
- Characterized by uncertainty or conflict between attitude elements
- Ex. Incompatible beliefs

Expectancy-value Theory

- Expectancy-value theory stipulates people can have strong beliefs about two or more outcomes, but evaluate the outcomes very differently.

Balance Theory

- Cognitive elements have a positive or negative valence
- Attitudes are in harmony when the signs multiplied together yield a plus

Information Processing

- Strong attitudes influence message evaluations and judgments of communications

Social Judgment Theory

- Emphasizes that receivers do not evaluate a message purely on the merits of the arguments
- People compare the advocated position with their attitude and then determine whether they should accept the position advocated in the message
- *Latitudes*: attitudes consist of a continuum of evaluations - a range of acceptable and unacceptable positions, as well as positions toward which the individual has no strong commitment.
- The *latitude of acceptance* consists of all those positions on an issue that an individual finds acceptable, including the most acceptable position.
- The *latitude of rejection* includes those positions that the individual finds objectionable, including the most objectionable position.

- The *latitude of noncommitment*, consists of those positions on which the individual has preferred to remain noncommittal

Attitude Accessibility

- *Accessibility theory* calls on a cognitive model of associative networks to explain attitude strength.
- *Accessibility* means the degree to which attitude is automatically activated from memory.
- *Associations* are links among different components of the attitude. The stronger the linkages are, the stronger is the attitude
- The more frequently that people mentally rehearse the association between an object and evaluation the stronger the connection will be

Social Judgment Theory

- Individuals with strong - in particular, extreme - views on a topic have large latitudes of rejection.
- *Assimilation*: people pull a somewhat congenial message toward their own attitude, assuming the message is more similar to their attitude than it really is.
- *Contrast effect*: individuals push a somewhat disagreeable message away from their attitude, assuming it is more different than it really is.

Implicit Attitudes

- Some strong attitudes are outside conscious awareness, we are not consciously aware that we harbor certain feelings about the person or issue.
- Implicit attitudes are defined as:
- Evaluations that have an unknown origin (i.e. people are unaware of the basis of their evaluation)
- Are activated automatically
- Influence implicit responses, namely uncontrollable responses and ones that people do not view as an expression of their attitude and thus do not attempt to control.