

Module: Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 4 Beyond basic cognition and emotion

Topic 1 Attitudes – Part 3 of 4

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Lecture transcript

Slide 3

In the previous lectures, you learned about what attitudes are, what functions they fulfil, and where they originate from. Furthermore, you learned how these are broadly related to mental health. Attitudes and beliefs in general can clearly be maladaptive or inaccurate in some cases, such as in psychosis or stigmatisation. How can we change people's attitudes and beliefs? This is the topic of the current lecture.

Slide 4

To understand how attitudes can change, let's take a simple everyday example-- advertisement. In fact, a lot of what we know about attitude changes comes from psychologists researching persuasion. Look at this advertisement for a Lexus car. What methods are the advertisers using to make you adopt a favourable attitude towards the Lexus in the hope that you buy one?

A flashy picture of high speed driving, a catchy statement at the top, appealing design, and also a considerable amount of small font details-- price, engine details, information about the interior. Some of these elements could be considered to be critical to making a good decision-- the price, for example. Other pieces of information, say, the design of the advertisement, are of course not very important sources of information. They are more peripheral. How do these pieces of information then influence or change our attitudes?

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A famous model that describes how attitudes change in response to information we get is the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo. According to this model, there are two ways in which people process the information-- a central route and a peripheral route. The central route involves deprocessing of the information that we are presented with. In particular, we look at details, make calculations, search for more information, and so on.

The peripheral route, on the other hand, involves more shallow information processing. We look at

superficial pieces of information that are easy to process. The central processing route leads to enduring, long-lasting changes in attitudes. The peripheral route, on the other hand, leads to short-term changes in attitudes that are easily disappearing over time.

Attitudes change as a result of the central processing route leads to more long-term commitment to an attitude. The peripheral route may lead to action-based and temporary changes, such as buying a product in a spur of the moment. The Elaboration Likelihood model is an example of a dual process model-- a psychological framework that postulates two modes of information processing which differ in the extent to which individuals engage in effortful thought about message content. There are several other dual process models across psychological domains.

What, then, determines whether people use the central or peripheral route? This is an important question as the choice of route will determine whether attitude changes are lasting or not. The answer, according to Petty and Cacioppo, is motivation. People use only the central route if they are highly motivated to make good decisions. For example, because the decision is very important for them. If, on the other hand, people find a decision not so important, then motivation is low and people tend to process the information through the peripheral route.

Accordingly, whether attitude change attempts are successful depends on both the type of information that is contained in a persuasive message and the motivation of the person that is being persuaded. Let's have a look at the advertisement again and see how this may work.

Slide 6

We identified several pieces of information before contained in the persuasive message-- a flashy picture of high speed driving, a catchy statement at the top, appealing design, price, engine details, information about the interior. But keep in mind that what information will be effective in convincing people to buy the car depends on their motivation.

People who are not really motivated to make a good decision will be persuaded more by peripheral cues that are easy to process, such as the flashy design of the advertisement, the apparent speed of the car in the picture, and a good sounding statement at a top of the ad. They are not likely to process or be convinced by detailed information. In fact, people who are instead highly motivated to make a good decision are more likely to use detailed information-- price, engine details, further information on the website, et cetera.

More generally, attitudes are susceptible to change when people are confronted with peripheral and more central pieces of information. Which of these two pieces of information will persuade them, however, critically depends on their motivation. If they are about the attitude topic, they will attend to central information. If they care little, they may be persuaded by peripheral information instead. Thus, if in the future you wish to convince someone of something, it is important to keep in mind what their motivation is and what kind of information you therefore need to present.

Slide 7

The discussion of persuasion and attitude so far assumed that people are aware of their attitudes, that is to say, they know what they like and dislike. But is this really the case? Or is it possible that we like and dislike things and people without even being aware of it? For example, if someone claims not to be a racist, can we be sure that this is indeed the case? Or could it be that unconsciously they still hold negative views towards other groups of people?

Slide 8

You may be surprised to hear that it seems, indeed, very likely that people hold attitudes that they are not even aware of. We call these implicit attitudes. These are evaluations whose origin is unknown to the individual and they affect implicit responses. These are different from normal or explicit attitudes, which are evaluations whose origin we know and that effect explicit responses.

You can think of implicit attitudes as part of the proverbial iceberg that hides underneath the water surface. Explicit attitudes are the only ones we consciously notice. There are sophisticated ways to measure people's implicit attitudes, including reaction time tests and various computer tasks. We will not go into detail about these methods, but it is good keep in mind that attitudes can be both conscious and unconscious. Indeed, a wealth of research indicates that people who believe not to be, for example, racist or sexist do, nonetheless, have these attitudes implicitly. And these implicit attitudes, while unaware of them, make them sometimes behave in racist and sexist ways.