

# Module: Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

## Week 4 Beyond basic cognition and emotion

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### Topic 1 Attitudes – Part 1 of 4

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### Lecture transcript

#### Slide 3

The world around us is full of information, and we constantly have to evaluate the objects and people around us. What clothes do you want to wear? Where do you want to go for lunch? What route will you take from home to the store? What will you have for dinner this evening? Do you want to have a chat with your neighbour? Will you join your friend tonight for a theatre play?

To make matters worse, each of these decisions can be broken down in smaller pieces. For example, imagine that you need to decide whether to buy this car. How will you decide? Perhaps you like the aerodynamic shape, and it may be fuel efficient and eco-friendly. But on the other hand, you may find it expensive and the color dull. How do you end up with a decision?

Likewise, imagine you encounter a group of distinct looking teenagers on the street. Would you decide whether or not to make a detour to avoid them? On the plus side, the individual themselves may look friendly, but their outfits may look intimidating. With so much information to process constantly, how is it possible that we make decisions at all and doing so constantly?

#### Slide 4

Fortunately, humans are equipped with a psychological tool to be highly efficient in making our decisions. We use attitudes. Attitudes are general positive or negative evaluations of objects, such as cars, or subjects, such as people, that give us a fast answer to complex questions. Rather than going over all the information about that car or the group of teenagers, we instead rely on attitudes that give us an overall impression of whether we like them or not.

#### Slide 5

To illustrate this, have a look at this abstract painting by Kandinsky, called Composition VIII. What do you think of it? Chances are that you don't look at every single circle, triangle, colour, composition, and other feature one by one. Instead, people look briefly at the picture and pretty much immediately have some attitude towards it, whether positive or negative.

### Slide 6

Before we continue, I need to make one further clarification. Attitudes are not the only psychological tool for the evaluations that we have. In particular, attitudes are usually very specific, related to, say, a single individual or group, a car, or food. People also evaluate things that are much broader or more abstract. For example, you may have a favourable evaluation of things like justice and fairness. Psychologists typically do not refer to these kinds of evaluations as attitudes. Instead, we call them values, which are enduring beliefs about important aspects of life that go beyond specific situations.

To give an example, fair treatment of others may be a value that you hold. When you encounter a specific person who has wronged another, you may hold a negative attitude towards her or him. Values are abstract and generalised. Attitudes are concrete and specific.

### Slide 7

So far, I introduced what attitudes are, but why do people acquire attitudes in the first place? Earlier, I mentioned that attitudes help people to make decisions relatively fast. They save us the trouble of each time having to go through all the available information and make a decision. Instead, our attitudes help us to decide without the need to spend a lot of time thinking about our decisions.

Accordingly, one of the reasons why people have attitudes is that it helps them to decide what to do. In particular, attitudes should ideally help us to approach positive outcomes or to avoid negative outcomes. This function of attitudes is rather utilitarian. It tells us if something is good or bad for us. It is clear that this function of attitudes does not always work out well. One needs only to think about addictions, for example.

But this also happens in a more everyday life context. For example, many people approach and consume food that is unhealthy for them, and unfortunately, avoid healthier alternatives. These are instances where people's attitudes do not serve them well.

### Slide 8

Besides the utilitarian function of helping us to approach positive outcomes and avoid negative outcomes, attitudes also have a more symbolic function. People express attitudes to affirm their values, to express their social identity, and to affirm general beliefs. Let's make this a little more concrete. How do attitudes help to affirm values and beliefs?

### Slide 9

Think again about the fairness example. By expressing a negative attitude towards an unfair individual, people act in accordance with their fairness value. Thus, the attitude confirms for them their own commitment to their value.

### Slide 10

Attitudes may also help to express a social identity. Take the example of the famous tank man in this picture. The person blocking the road for the tanks could be described as expressing a negative attitude towards the tank. However, this is probably only part of the story. People tend to assume that the man expresses a much more broad belief or value, standing up against aggression. In other words, the attitude served a symbolic function.

### Slide 11

Social identities reflect the extent to which we feel that specific social groups are an important part of who we are. For example, it may be that you are proud to be a student at King's College London and that this is something very important to how you see yourself. Accordingly, being a student at King's College London can be considered a part of your social identity.

People can, of course, have many different social identities at the same time. For example, my social identities include working at King's College London, being an inhabitant of London, and being

Dutch. So how do these social identities relate to attitudes? Well, attitudes can help us to express our social identities. For example, if a soccer match would be held between the Netherlands and England, my cheering for the Dutch team may make me feel more connected to the Dutch. Thus, by expressing my attitude, I can shape my social identity.

#### **Slide 12**

While discussing attitudes, I so far just assumed their existence. But where do they come from, and why do people sometimes have different attitudes? There are many sources of attitudes, and I will discuss four particularly important ones-- mere exposure, learning, culture, and stereotypes.

#### **Slide 13**

One intriguing source of people's attitudes is mere exposure. Simply stated, the more often people are exposed to an object or subject, the more they like it. For example, study shows that the more frequently people are exposed to nonsense words or yearbook photographs of unknown others, the more they like these. Basically, the more familiar things become, the more we tend to like them.

One of the reasons psychologists think that this happens is that when you see, hear, or otherwise perceive something repeatedly, then it is easier for us to process the information. Let me illustrate this with a simple example.

#### **Slide 14**

Think of a difficult word, such as "anachronistic." At first, it may take you a second to read the word and pronounce it correctly. The second time, however, this is already much easier. The third time you see it, it is still easier to read and pronounce. And after a while, you have no problem processing the word. You have established great processing fluency.

This processing fluency feels comparatively pleasant to people, that is, people tend to find it more pleasant when processing information is easier rather than difficult. This positivity subsequently gets associated with the object itself. In this particular example, you may come to like the word "anachronistic" and use it in all your essays. In a broader context, fluency can explain why people like others more when they see them more often and why people tend to prefer the familiar over the unfamiliar.

Of course, there are also limitations to the mere exposure effect. In fact, in some cases, mere exposure leads to more negative attitudes. When an object or subject is already aversive to begin with-- for example, an angry or scary person-- then repeated exposure tends to make us dislike it even more. Therefore, it seems that mere exposure can explain particularly well how people start liking things that they first did not have a clear attitude about.

#### **Slide 15**

Also, learning plays an important role in the formation of attitude. As covered in week 1 by Professor Richard Brown, learning can lead to the association of stimuli with rewards or punishments. This accordingly results in attitudes towards the stimuli or that category from which there are derived. Learning processes will be briefly discussed as part of lecture 4 of this topic, delivered by Dr. Aitken Deakin.

#### **Slide 16**

Besides mere exposure and learning, there are a range of social processes that give rise to attitudes. One particularly important one is cultural beliefs. The culture we are part in shapes what attitudes we hold, and there are important cross-cultural differences in attitudes between people. For example, cultures are often compared in terms of the way they view the self as relatively independent of others, independent self, or more as part of a larger social group, interdependent self.

**Slide 17**

People in China and India, for example, have relatively interdependent self-concepts, meaning that they define themselves relatively strongly in terms of their social context. People in the USA and England have comparatively more independent self-concepts, meaning that they view the self more as an entity separate from others. Of course, these are just differences in averages, and you will find many people with an independent self-concept in China and India and an interdependent self-concept in the USA and England.

Cultural characteristics, such as independent versus interdependent selves, shape our attitudes. For example, growing up in a culture where an interdependent self is more common may lead people to hold more positive attitudes towards family or their community. Cultures that emphasise an independent self may instead shape more positive attitudes towards autonomy.

**Slide 18**

Another important factor that shapes people's attitudes are stereotypes or beliefs about groups. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and accurate or inaccurate. An example may be the belief that women cannot be good at math or that the English all wear bowler hats, both of which are incorrect. On the other hand, the stereotype that there are many windmills in the Netherlands is fairly accurate.

Stereotypes influence attitudes quite directly. If you encounter someone or something that belongs to a group that you hold a stereotype about, then chances are that your attitude will follow the stereotype. For example, if you encounter the aforementioned group of alternatively-looking teenagers, your attitudes towards them may be shaped by the stereotype you have of this group. In fact, it costs people considerable effort not to use stereotypes when forming an attitude. For example, experiments show that people who are under cognitive load-- they are performing a task that requires their cognitive capacities-- are more likely to use stereotypes when passing judgement about others, even if they know they should not use the stereotype.