

Attitudes

Rationale: This lesson orients students to attitudes and their importance in persuasion research

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Define attitude
- Describe the relationship between attitudes and behaviors
- Recognize common ways researchers measure attitudes
- Identify situations where attitude more strongly predicts behavior

{video}

You may download a copy of the visual aid used in this video: [L03-attitudes-visual-aid.pdf](#)

Outline of the Lesson

- I. Review of previous session's content
- II. Lesson opening: What's in an "attitude"? We use the term "attitude" in our everyday talk. But what does it mean?
 - A. "I like your attitude."
 - B. "Attitude is everything."
 - C. "You have an attitude."
 - D. "Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference."
 - E. "Your attitude, not your aptitude, will determine your altitude."
- III. Overview
 - A. Defining "attitudes" for communication research
 - B. Components of attitudes
 - C. Functions attitudes serve
 - D. Measuring attitudes
 - E. Conditions under which attitudes are consistent with behavior

Body

- I. Defining "Attitude", Essential features
 - A. A learned predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably toward some attitude object.
 - B. Attitudes are not innate.
 - C. Attitudes are not static; they can change over time.
- II. Attitudes have several components:
 - A. Affective: positive/negative, favorable/unfavorable
 - B. Behavioral: actions
 - C. Cognitive: knowledge
- III. The functions that attitudes serve:
 - A. Utilitarian:
 1. Helps us to maximize rewards and minimize punishments in our environment.

2. Helps you decide whether an attitude object will give you “pleasure” or “pain.”

B. Knowledge:

1. Attitudes organize and structure our environment and provide consistency in our frame of reference.
2. Example: When we know someone’s political attitudes (conservative vs. liberal), we feel like we know something about what they’re like as a person.

C. Social Identity or Value:

1. Helps us to foster identification with important reference groups and gain acceptance. This is a social identity function.
2. What can the attitude object help you say about yourself?

D. Self-Esteem Function of Attitudes (aka “Ego Defense”)

1. Helps us to develop defense mechanisms for coping with psychological conflict. (Bad experiences in gym class; Dislike of sports.)
2. Keeps us from associating with “stigmatized” out-groups that might alienate us from our in-groups.
3. What self-doubts does the attitude object help you overcome?

IV. Measuring attitudes

A. Measuring them (well) is not easy!

1. Organ donation
2. Drug use
3. Sex education

B. The most common types of measurement scales:

1. Likert-type scales: 5 or 7 point scales that ask people’s degree of agreement with a statement.
2. Semantic differentials: use bipolar terms and have individuals indicate where in “semantic space” their attitude falls.

C. Response Biases: The Limitations of Scales and Measurement

1. Social desirability bias: People report what they think are the most socially acceptable attitudes, not necessarily what they really think.
2. Non-attitudes: People might not care about an issue but feel pressure to have an opinion.
3. Acquiescence bias: People are much more likely to agree with a statement than to disagree with it.
4. Mindfulness: Need to know your own mind to be able to report your attitude.

D. Which of these response biases affect attitudes to organ donation? to drug use? to sex ed?

V. Attitude-Behavior Consistency

A. Discussion: We care about knowing what people’s attitudes are because they are assumed to drive human behavior.

1. Are attitudes consistent with people’s behaviors?
2. What are some examples of attitudes not being consistent with behavior?
3. What might explain this inconsistency?

B. Preview: Attitude-Behavior Link is Strongest When...

1. We don’t confuse multiple attitudes with single attitudes.
2. There are repeated opportunities for behavior.

3. Attitudes are based on personal experience and direct observation (as opposed to “hearsay”).
4. Attitudes are central to a person’s value system.
5. The possibility of social desirability is minimized.
6. An individual is a low self monitor.
7. The possibility of non-attitudes is minimized.
8. The accessibility of our attitudes is high.
- C. We don’t confuse multiple attitudes with single attitudes.
 1. A person’s attitudes are often a collection of attitudes on multiple issues.
 2. Exercise, technology, “eating healthy”
- D. There are repeated opportunities for behavior.
 1. Consistency across time is more reliable indicator than a one-shot observation.
- E. Attitudes are based on personal experience and direct observation (as opposed to “hearsay”).
 1. “Aunt Shirley says that Hondas are unreliable.”
 2. “Your grandfather never exercised or ate vegetables and he lived to be 94.”
- F. Attitudes are central to a person’s value system
 1. Some attitudes are more important than others.
 2. Example: staying healthy for your kids’ sake vs. “vanity” weight loss.
 3. Example: vegetarians aren’t as likely to eat bacon as someone who is just dieting.
- G. The possibility of social desirability is minimized
 1. When not on public display, we may act differently.
 2. You might respond differently to a survey about your eating habits depending on who contacted you. (Health insurance company vs. market research firm.)
- H. An individual is a low self monitor
 1. Less likely to adapt behavior to circumstances.
 2. Low self-monitors are more likely to be happy to “eat poorly” in front of others than high self-monitors.
- I. The possibility of non-attitudes is minimized
 1. People don’t like to look dumb, so they sometimes make up attitudes.
 2. This is one reason why opinion polls are often unreliable.
- J. The accessibility of our attitudes is high
 1. Whether our attitudes are “at the top of our mind.”
 2. If a family member is diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, most people become more concerned with their dietary habits.
 3. Similarly, a celebrity’s cancer diagnosis can prompt other people to get screened for cancer.
- VI. Attitude accessibility creates greater bias in message processing AND motivates critical processing.
 - A. Factors affecting attitude accessibility
 1. Expectations
 - a. When you know you will have to evaluate an object in the future, you will think more about your attitudes.
 - b. Example: you know you will be buying a car so you start thinking

about what's most important to you about a car (gas mileage, appearance, safety, reliability).

2. Cognitive elaboration

- a. The more work you do to evaluate an object, the more solid and accessible your attitude will be.
- b. Example: If you show up to a car dealership without having done a lot of research or thinking, you'll probably leave the car lot feeling like you don't know what you want. (Or, you may feel regret having bought a car that wasn't "right.")

3. Recency of activation

- a. If not re-activated, new attitudes could fade quickly and be less accessible.
- b. Example: By the time you need to buy another car, you will have to think about your attitudes all over again because so much time has passed.

4. Frequency of activation

- a. The more often you think about something, the more accessible your attitude toward it will be.
- b. Example: If you sell cars for a living (or if your friends are always buying new cars), you will know what your attitudes are even if you're not in the market for a car yourself.

VII. Some final thoughts:

- A. We look for information that supports our attitudes; counter-attitudinal information is counter-argued.
- B. Sometimes you can get people to more fully process a message that runs counter to their attitudes by asking them to try to hold "correct" attitudes.
- C. Attitudes don't work alone, they tend to be part of associative networks
 - 1. We link attitudes toward one object with attitudes toward other objects
 - 2. This is the basis for image-oriented advertising as well as the use of celebrity endorsements
- D. We desire consistency between our attitudes and our behavior
 - 1. Our desire for cognitive consistency can help us understand why our attitudes do or do not change
 - 2. Building a brand and capitalizing on loyalty to it (or rather, its image) is often effective in helping to sell products.
 - 3. Cognitive inconsistency can generate enough guilt that it will drive behavior or behavior change.

Conclusion

I. Review

- A. Defining "attitudes" for communication research
- B. Components of attitudes
- C. Functions attitudes serve
- D. Measuring attitudes
- E. Conditions under which attitudes are consistent with behavior

II. Learning activity

III. Lesson closing

References

Learning Activity

Complete one of these two class activity options.

In the Classroom

1. Divide into small groups
2. Discuss the challenges that researchers might encounter when measuring attitudes toward controversial topics such as:
 - Organ donation
 - Drug use
 - Sex Ed
3. What other attitude objects do you think might experience similar challenges?
4. Share the results of your discussion with the class

Remote

1. Review the examples of scales used to measure attitudes in the visual aid: [L03-attitudes-visual-aid.pdf](#)
2. Choose an attitude object that you are interested in
3. Create a scale that you think could be used to measure attitudes toward this object
4. Ask two people to complete your scale and provide feedback
5. Upload a copy of the scale that you used to this assignment.
 - Describe in one paragraph (not one sentence) what you learned about measuring attitudes from developing this scale.
 - Describe in a second paragraph (not one sentence) what you learned about the relationship between attitudes and behaviors from developing this scale.

Variations and Accommodations

Follow guidance from local accommodation authorities. Please contact your instructor if any accommodations are necessary