
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO ATTITUDE AND STEREOTYPES

Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Nature of Attitudes
 - 1.2.1 Characteristics of Attitudes
 - 1.2.2 Attitude and Beliefs
- 1.3 Theories of Attitude Organisation
 - 1.3.1 Heider's Balance Theory
 - 1.3.2 Katz's Functional Theory
 - 1.3.3 Kelman's Three Process Theory
- 1.4 Stereotypes
 - 1.4.1 Characteristics of Stereotypes
 - 1.4.2 Development and Maintenance of Stereotypes
 - 1.4.3 Stereotype and Social Life
 - 1.4.4 Difference between Stereotype and Prejudice
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Unit End Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Readings

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Attitude is a word frequently used by us in our day to day life. In its common sense it refers to an individual's specific state of mind through which he expresses his opinions and feelings towards some conditions, things, event and persons in his social environment. For example, a person who feels favourably for widow remarriage may advocate widow remarriage, write some article in favour of it or even remarry his widow daughter, thus expressing his attitude towards the issue of widow remarriage. Psychologists, Sociologists and other social scientists have taken undertaken various researches to throw light on different aspects of attitude and related concepts like stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. In this unit we will try to understand the meaning, characteristics, causal and maintenance factors of these various concepts. To begin with we will start from attitude.

1.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- 1 Define and describe attitude in your own words;
- 1 Describe the characteristics of attitude;

- 1 Elucidate theories of organisation of attitude;
- 1 Define stereotype;
- 1 Describe the characteristics of stereotype;
- 1 Analyse the formation of stereotype;
- 1 Differentiate between stereotype and prejudice;
- 1 Analyse the factors contributing to stereotype and prejudice; and
- 1 Analyse factors causing and maintaining prejudice and discrimination.

1.2 NATURE OF ATTITUDES

In the beginning psychologists defined attitude in terms of one dimension i.e. attitude is a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given object. Thus the essence of attitude was a person's intensity of feelings toward some object. However, some psychologists tried to explain attitude in terms of two dimensions namely, affective and cognitive components.

Cognitive component refers to a person's opinions and beliefs toward some object or event. For example, a person's beliefs and opinions regarding widow remarriage. Affective component means how strongly a person feels for the event or object in question. This feeling may be for or against. Some were of the view that attitude has three dimensions i.e. affective, cognitive and behavioural. This approach is known as ABC of attitude. Behavioural component indicates action a person would take in favour of or against the event or object of attitude. As said earlier a person having favourable attitude towards widow remarriage may organise meetings, give lectures in favor of widow remarriage or even go to the extent of marrying a widow.

These three components of attitude have some characteristics, understanding of which is imperative, in order to understand the nature of attitudes.

Valence— it refers to the degree of favorableness or unfavorableness to the object or event in question.

Multiplexity— components of attitude have the characteristic of multiplexity. It means the number of elements a component has. Higher the number of elements in a component the more complex it would be.

Consistency— it is found more among the valence factors than among multiplexity.

1.2.1 Characteristics of Attitudes

- a) **Attitude is learnt:** A person is not born with attitude but he or she acquires it through the process of becoming an acceptable member of the group he/ she belongs to. Also a person develops attitude from the experiences of life. These experiences and process of socialisation may predispose a person favourably or unfavorably to the object or event in question.
- b) **Attitude gives direction:** Attitude directs our behaviour in either away from an object or toward the object. For example, a favourable attitude

toward education will impel the person to send his children to school for formal education for the betterment of their life, while an unfavourable attitude may prompt him for not sending children to school.

- c) **Relative permanency:** It means attitudes are stable over time and changes in them take place only gradually.
- d) **Attitude is always related to some issue, object or thing:** This means for the development of attitude occurrence of some event, thing or person is a must. Attitudes do not take place in vacuum.
- e) **Attitude has motivational properties:** Attitude motivates a person to do some behaviours more readily than others. For example an individual having positive attitude for sports may readily go for play than pass his time reading some book.

1.2.2 Attitude and Beliefs

An attitude is closely related to belief. Before exploring the relation between the two it is important that we first understand their meaning. A belief is defined as “an enduring organisation of perceptions and cognitions about some aspect of the individual’s world.” Beliefs are cognitions or thoughts about the characteristics of objects. As of attitude we know that it is an organised system of cognitive, affective and behavioural component. Analysis of the definitions of the two concepts reveal following similarities:

Both are enduring organisation of different components.

Like attitude belief also has cognitive component.

Despite above mentioned similarities, the two concepts have following differences:

Attitude has all the three components i.e. cognitive, affective and behavioral while belief primarily has cognitive component and behavioral component is secondary. For example, a person may think that reservation in jobs is against natural justice. This is only his thinking (cognitive) and lacks any kind of feelings (affective) but he may be prompted to deliver a lecture about his views on this issue (behaviour).

An attitude has motivational properties and it directs our efforts in specific direction while a belief does not have this property.

Belief is part of attitude. All attitudes toward an object have relevant beliefs about that object.

Beliefs are based on real facts while attitude is based more on imagination and less on reality.

Change in attitude comes faster than in beliefs.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Discuss the nature of attitudes. Give suitable examples.

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- 2) List out the characteristics of attitudes.

- 3) Differentiate between attitudes and beliefs. Give examples.

1.3 THEORIES OF ATTITUDE ORGANISATION

Social psychologists gave a number of theories to explain attitude organisation. These theories can be clubbed under four categories.

- 1) Cognitive consistency theories- it includes following theories:

- 1 Heider's Balance theory.
- 1 Newcomb's A-B-X theory.
- 1 Festinger's Cognitive dissonance theory.
- 1 Rosenberg's affective-cognitive consistency theory.
- 1 Congruity theory.

- 2) Social learning theories include in it the following theories:

- 1 Theory based upon classical conditioning.
- 1 Theory based upon instrumental conditioning.

- 3) Functional theories include following theories:

- 1 Katz and Stotland theory.
- 1 Smith, Bruner and White theory.

- 4) Miscellaneous theories are:

- 1 Kelman's three process theory.
- 1 Assimilation contrast theory.
- 1 Adaptation level theory.

Here we will discuss a few select theories.

1.3.1 Heider's Balance Theory

Heider's Balance Theory-also known as P-O-X model it was given by Heider in 1946,1958. It has three elements.

- 1) First is the perceiver known as P.
- 2) Second, another person called O and
- 3) Third X an object of perception.

Pairs thus formed of these elements have two kinds of relationships, that is, unit relations and affective relations. Unit relations between pairs of elements depend on similarity, ownership, and similar membership. Affective relations are based on liking and disliking. Unit relations and affective relations may be positive or negative. Heider further stated that elements may be in a state of balance or imbalance. When balanced the individual feels relaxed and there is no tension. However, a state of imbalance between elements creates tension and motivates individual to restore balance.

Let us understand through an example.

Suppose Sunil (P) likes Krishan (X) and also likes Preeti (O) as well.

But Preeti is not liked by Krishan.

Here relations between Sunil and Krishan, Sunil and Preeti are positive but relations between Krishan and Preeti are negative.

This state of affairs is disturbing for Sunil. Now Sunil has to change his relations either with Krishan or Preeti. If he starts disliking Krishan, balance is restored or he should start disliking Preeti to restore balance.

1.3.2 Katz's Functional Theory

Katz (1960) Katz and Stotland (1959) opined that motivational basis is the key to understanding attitudes. The motivational basis is conceptualised in terms of functions which an attitude performs for the person. According to them an attitude serves the following four functions:

1) **Instrumental, adjustive or utilitarian function**

It means that individual tries to maximise the rewards and minimise punishment. Thus he develops favorable attitude towards those objects which result in reward and unfavorable attitudes toward those which lead to punishment.

2) **The ego-defensive function**

Attitude protects a person from acknowledging unpleasant realities about himself or environment. For example, a person filled with feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem may develop strong prejudice against members of minority group to compensate for feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem.

3) **The value-expressive function**

Holding attitudes commensurate with our personal values or self-concept gives us satisfaction.

4) **The knowledge function**

Every individual is presumed to have a basic drive to understand, to make sense out of, to structure his experience. Elements of experience that are inconsistent with what a person knows are rearranged or changed to achieve consistency.

1.3.3 **Kelman's Three Process Theory**

Kelman suggested that attitude organisation is influenced by three distinct processes of social influence namely, Compliance, Identification and Internalisation.

- 1) Compliance can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence from another person or from a group because he hopes to achieve a favorable reaction from the other.

Here, the expression of opinion, despite the fact that privately the person may not agree with it, is instrumental in gaining some reward or avoiding it. Thus an employee knowing that his boss is proud of the jokes he tells may laugh heartily at them even though he does not think they are funny. In this way he is able to avoid his boss's displeasure.

- 2) Identification can be said to occur when an individual adopts behaviour derived from another person or a group because this behavior is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship to this person or group.

This is a means of establishing or maintaining a desirable relation to the other or group and of supporting the self-definition that part of the relation. One form which identification takes is shown in attempts to be like the other person or to actually be the other person. This is commonly observed in children who copy the behaviour and attitude of their parents or other models. However, identification like compliance does not occur because the behaviour or attitude itself is satisfying to the individual. It occurs because of the satisfying relation to another person or group and it requires the activation of the relation in order for it to occur.

- 3) Internalisation occurs when an individual accepts influence because the induced behavior is congruent with his value system.

Here the content of induced attitude or behaviour is internally rewarding. The attitude or behaviour helps solve a problem or is demanded by the values of the individual.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) What are the various theories of attitude organisation?

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- 2) Discuss Katz' functional theory.

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3) Discuss Kellman's theory of attitude organisation.

4) List the various cognitive consistence theories and elucidate one of them.

1.4 STEREOTYPES

A stereotype is a cluster of beliefs usually lacking a rational basis regarding the members of some group. The word 'stereotype' was first used by Walter Lipman in his book "Public Opinion" (1922).

According to Albrecht, Thomas & Chadwick (1980) "A stereotype is a belief about some particular trait being prevalent among all members of a social group. Whatever be the characteristic it is assumed to vest all people in that category. Therefore, all members of the group are perceived and understood alike." From above definitions it can be concluded that:

- 1 Stereotype is a set of beliefs used to categorise people.
- 1 Such categorisation is exaggerated and lacks in truth.
- 1 This categorisation provides for the basis for gross generalisation about people.
- 1 Some particular physical, social and cultural characteristics are ascertained which serve to identify people of that group.
- 1 There is general consensus as to the prevalence of a particular trait among people of that category.
- 1 It is assumed that a person will exhibit all the traits of that category simply because he is member of that group.

1.4.1 Characteristics of Stereotypes

Stereotype is a mental picture or image about people of a community or category on the basis of which we ascribe traits or characteristics to people.

Stereotype is a widely agreed belief about people of some category or community. For example, it is widely agreed that politicians are opportunist.

Stereotype involves gross and exaggerated generalisations. An important characteristic of stereotype is that they develop out of experiences with individuals of other community and are then extended to apply to all members of that community. For example, it is generally believed that Bengalees are timid by nature. This may be true for some people of Bengali community but certainly not for all Bengalees.

Stereotypes usually are not amenable to change despite information and evidence to the contrary. For example, when we encounter a brave, fearless and bold Bengali we do not change our stereotype about them instead we say that this person is exception among Bengalees.

Positive or negative stereotype: A stereotype can have either direction i.e. it can be positive or negative. For example, Japanese are generally believed to be industrious and diligent and Bengalees are usually thought to be timid and shy.

1.4.2 Development and Maintenance of Stereotypes

Stereotypes are acquired. Psychologists have delineated following factors that go into development and maintenance of stereotypes.

A major cause of development of stereotypes is inadequate and improper experience and information about people of other group. Experiences with handful of people of other community lead to formation of wrong notions about them and it is then generalised to all members of that community.

Socialisation: Process of socialisation plays an important role in the formation of stereotypes. Most important agent of socialisation are parents. Many parents encourage their children to develop stereotypes thinking it will better prepare them to deal with people of other community.

Imitation: In order to become an acceptable member of the community or society we live in, we simply imitate beliefs, opinions and attitudes held by them without even thinking their desirability and logical validity. Result is that knowingly or unknowingly we develop stereotypes. Perhaps this is the reason a person born in Hindu community easily adopts stereotypes held by other people of Hindu community but he will not with that ease adopt stereotypes held by Muslim community.

Traditions and folkways: Traditions and folkways prevalent in a culture also help foster stereotypes. Everybody tries to behave according to the traditions, customs and folkways prevalent in the society because doing so brings prestige and social reputation.

Social and cultural distance: Social and cultural distance is another important factor in the development and maintenance of stereotypes. Social distance prevents us from gaining right knowledge and information about people of other community and society. Similarly, due to cultural distance we lack knowledge about living style, habits, customs, beliefs, opinions and attitudes of people of other culture. This lack of correct knowledge and information about other people provides breeding ground for development and maintenance of stereotypes.

1.4.3 Stereotypes and Social Life

Stereotypes have profound importance in social life as they directly affect social interactions. For example, teachers are usually thought to be idealistic and

accordingly we expect conversation with teachers to take idealistic tone. Thus our behaviour naturally orients toward idealistic patterns.

Stereotypes serve a number of social functions as given below:

- 1) Stereotypes help understand social behaviour. Stereotype that politicians are opportunist helps us understand their behaviour and we are not easily taken in by their statements and claims.
- 2) Stereotypes help control social behaviour. In fact stereotypes equip us with a power that automatically directs our behaviour in a specific direction. For example, Americans are known to be friendly. Therefore when dealing with an American we are in relaxed mood and try to be frank and friendly with them.
- 3) Stereotypes help in prediction. Whether right or wrong stereotypes control our social interaction. We even predict behaviour on the basis of stereotypes. For example, Nepali servants are believed to be brave, honest, and reliable. Thus we can predict that our house and property will remain safe in the hands of a Nepali servant, when we are out on vacations.

1.4.4 Difference between Stereotype and Prejudice

Since our next topic would be Prejudice and Discrimination it would be relevant to differentiate between stereotypes and prejudice. The two concepts are very similar with very fine difference between them. Following are the differences between the two:

In stereotype all members of a community are treated alike as they are believed to have same characteristics while prejudice can take any direction it can be positive or negative both.

A prejudice is a type of attitude and has all the three components i.e. affective, cognitive and behavioural. However, stereotype is cognitions and expectations from person simply because the person is a member of a particular group or community.

Stereotypes are comparatively more stable than prejudices.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Define stereotypes.

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- 2) Describe the characteristics of stereotypes.

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3) How are stereotypes developed and maintained?

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4) Differentiate between stereotypes and prejudice.

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1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we studied the concept of attitude and the three components of attitudes namely cognitive, affective and behavioural. We also discussed how these components direct our behaviour. This was followed by a discussion on characteristics of attitudes. We now understand the nature of attitudes in full. We know that attitudes are acquired through process of socialisation and learning. We also understand why people differ in intensity and strength on the same attitude. Next we discussed the concept of stereotypes, their characteristics, how stereotypes are formed and developed. We also studied the functions of stereotypes in social life and the difference between stereotypes and prejudice.

1.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you understand by the term attitude? Discuss in detail how attitudes are formed and maintained.
- 2) Write an essay on stereotypes and their utility in social life.
- 3) Discuss Katz's functional theory of attitude organisation.
- 4) How do stereotypes contribute to prejudice?
- 5) Discuss the various theories of attitude organisation.

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Secord, P.F. and Backman, C.W. (1974). *Social Psychology*. McGraw Hill , New York

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