2025-26 FALL

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Faculty of Arts & Sciences

WEEK 10

Attitudes and Persuasion

Core Questions

1. What are attitudes, and do they predict behavior?
2. From where do attitudes come?
3. How are attitudes measured?
4. Why does cognitive dissonance influence attitudes?
5. How do attitudes change?
6. What persuasion techniques are used to change attitudes?

What Are Attitudes, and Do They Predict Behavior?

- Attitudes are a good example of a psychological construct, an abstract and theoretical idea.
- **Attitude:** An inner tendency to judge or evaluate something or someone either positively or negatively.
- Attitudes are directed at an attitude object, something that you explicitly or implicitly evaluate.

Structure of Attitudes

- Attitudes structure can be described in terms of **three components**:

➢ **Affective component**: this involves a person's **feelings / emotions** about the attitude object.

For example: "I am scared of spiders".

➢ **Behavioral (or conative) component**: the way the attitude we have influences **how we act or behave**.

For example: "I will avoid spiders and scream if I see one".

➢ **Cognitive component**: this involves a person's **belief / knowledge** about an attitude object.

For example: "I believe spiders are dangerous".

- This model is known as the **ABC model** of attitudes.

What Are Attitudes, and Do They Predict Behavior?

- You may not be aware of them, but beneath the surface of those attitudes are different kinds of beliefs:
  - ➢ believing that Santa Claus exists and lives at the North Pole is an **informational belief** about an attitude object (Santa Claus)
  - ➢ liking Santa Claus because of the perception that he is kind and unusually generous (even toward naughty children) is an **evaluative belief**
- Beliefs become attitudes when the attitude object is judged as either positive or negative.

The Model of Dual Attitudes

- We often have **dual attitudes** that represent contrasting beliefs about the same attitude object.
  - An addict will both love and hate whatever he or she is addicted to.
  - A teenager might both love his parents yet also feel embarrassed and annoyed by them.
- How do we arrive at all these love-hate attitudes in our lives?
- The model of dual attitudes proposes that **new attitudes override** (rather than replace) **old attitudes** (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000), meaning a small piece of an opposing attitude might linger.
- That is why former lovers may fondly remember one another even in the midst of a bitter breakup; the old beliefs and feelings do not magically disappear— they just acquire another complicating layer of beliefs.

- **Attitude object:** The object, person, place, or idea an individual explicitly or implicitly evaluates and directs his or her attitude toward.
- **Informational belief:** A fact-based belief that includes no positive or negative judgment.
- **Evaluative belief:** A belief about an object, person, place, or idea that leads to or includes a positive or negative judgment.
- **Dual attitudes:** When an individual holds contrasting positive and negative beliefs about the same attitude object.
- **Model of dual attitudes:** A model for understanding attitudes that proposes that new attitudes override, rather than replace, old attitudes.

Implicit Versus Explicit Attitudes

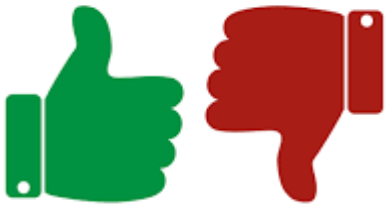
- We might develop contradicting attitudes toward the same attitude object, because:
- attitudes come from three different sources: **affect (emotions), behavior, and cognition**—and they don't always come to the same conclusions (Smith & Nosek, 2011).
- For example, we may get a feeling (the affective or emotional component) that we should not trust someone. Nevertheless, we may act (the behavioral component) as if we trust the person because the individual belongs in the mental category of someone—such as a teacher or coach—that we believe (the cognitive or logical component) we can trust.

Implicit Versus Explicit Attitudes

- Second, we may not even be aware that we have an attitude toward something because we have both **implicit and explicit attitudes**. Implicit attitudes are based on **automatic, unconscious beliefs** about an attitude object. Explicit attitudes are the product of **controlled, conscious beliefs** about an attitude object.
- Many people have positive explicit attitudes toward eating chocolate, but when asked to eat a chocolate cockroach, you might have **mixed feelings**.

Attitudes Facilitate Decision Making

- Attitudes help us make **uni-valenced** decisions that an attitude object is **either good or bad**—but **not both**.
- Gordon Allport (1935) called attitudes a "predisposition or readiness for response." They are **premade judgments** that allow us make a quick thumbs-up or thumbs-down heuristic decision (Priester & Petty, 1996).
- But just like all of the mental shortcuts we've discussed so far, **preformed beliefs are risky** because we know that **we might be wrong**.



Do Attitudes Predict Behavior?

- If you like waffles, you'll order waffles at your favorite breakfast restaurant.
- If you are politically conservative, you'll vote for the conservative political candidate.
- If you're racist, you'll refuse to work with people of color.
- But researchers discovered that the **link between attitudes and behaviors wasn't that simple** after all.
- The **specificity principle** proposes that the link between attitudes and behaviors is stronger when the **attitude and the behavior are measured at the same level of specificity**.

Self-Perception Theory

- The old question of which came first, the chicken or the egg, also describes the "attitude-behavior problem." Attitude predicting behavior assumes that the attitude came first—but could it be the other way around?
- Self-perception theory states that we infer our own attitude from our own behavior (Bem, 1972). In other words, maybe behavior comes first.
- People **gain knowledge** about who they are, and **their attitudes**, by examining their **own actions** and asking: 'Why did I do that?'
- Bem's theory suggests that **people act**, and **form attitudes**, **without** much deliberate **thinking**.
- For example, if you often go for long walks, you may conclude that 'I must like them, as I'm always doing that'. But there may be other reasons not taken into account – e.g. wanting to escape temporarily from the house.

Self-Affirmation Theory

- **Self-affirmation theory:** The idea that individuals try to impress themselves to preserve their **sense of worth and integrity**; they focus their thoughts and attitudes on what makes them **feel good about themselves**.
- Some attitudes are nothing more than impression management, a way of strategically trying to manipulate or influence how others perceive us.
- Thus, sometimes expressed attitudes do not predict behavior because they are merely **temporary or disingenuous beliefs designed to manage the impressions we make on others** (Gordon, 1996; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Yukl & Tracey, 1992).
- Long-term impression management often has a different **audience: yourself.** We need to preserve our sense of worth and integrity.

Theory of Planned Behavior

- This theory suggests that attitudes are only one of three categories of belief—**attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control**—that together predict behavioral intentions. These intentions, in turn, predict behavior.
- In short, attitudes are just one of three categories of reasons that predict how we will behave (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980).
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJhKheZNGpM

Subjective Norms and Perceived Control

- For example, you may have a **negative attitude toward cheating** but be more likely to cheat if you perceive that cheating is the **subjective social norm** ("everyone else is cheating—so I might as well do it too") and if you think that you can get away with it (**perceived control**).
- The theory of planned behavior helped restore the importance of attitudes as **a powerful—but now qualified—predictor of behavior**.

From Where Do Attitudes Come?

- Both **nature and nurture** are at work in the formation of attitudes that we carry around with us every day.
- For example, Kandler, Bleidorn, and Riemann (2012) used twin studies to explore political orientation, an attitude that would appear to lean heavily toward the nurture side of the debate. But they also found that personality dispositions shaped by our genetic inheritance influence political attitudes.

Attitudes Come From Experience

- Most of psychology has focused on the nurture side of the debate, and we can offer insight into how "nurture" or experience leads to attitudes from three separate lines of research:

- **social learning** (learning by observing others),
- **classical conditioning** (learning by experiencing associations),
- **operant conditioning** (learning from experiencing consequences).

Social Learning Theory

- Social learning theory proposes that we learn attitudes by **observing and imitating** others (Bandura, 1977).
- One research team (Morgan, Movius, & Cody, 2009), for example, found that people showed more positive attitudes toward organ donation after viewing four television shows featuring characters in need of organ transplants: *CSI: NY, Numb3rs, House*, and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Classical Conditioning

- Attitudes are also acquired when we learn to **associate one thing in the environment with another** due to **personal experience**, a process called classical conditioning.
- Advertisers have long known, for example, that humor enhances a consumer's attitude both to the advertisement and to the brands shown (Chung & Zhao, 2003; Gelb & Zinkhan, 1986; Lee & Mason, 1999).

Classical Conditioning

- Once the **reward network** in the brain has us laughing, or at least amused, **positive associations** can take place—sometimes below the level of our awareness (Strick, van Baaren, Holland, & van Knippenberg, 2009).
- We might feel positive and happy about a product not because of the product itself but because we have learned **an association between that product and happiness** due to exposure to commercials.

Operant Conditioning

- The process of learning to **predict outcomes of given behaviors** based on the **outcomes we've experienced** for those same behaviors in the past.
- If a certain behavior is **rewarded**, you'll be more likely to **do it again**; if that behavior is **punished**, you'll be **less likely to repeat** it—because you assume the same consequence might occur.
- If people laugh at your jokes, for example, then you are more likely to use humor and eventually develop a self-attitude that you are a good joke-teller.

How Are Attitudes Measured?

- Do you always tell the truth (the whole truth and nothing but the truth)? Probably not. But that is the assumption when we present people with many scales intended to measure attitudes.
- Direct Measures of **Explicit Attitudes**: In psychology research, this approach often comes in the form of **self-report measures**, or **surveys** people take in which they simply answer questions about their beliefs.

Social Desirability and the Bogus Pipeline

- “They’re lying,” “I know these people, and they were just trying make themselves look good.”
- It is one of the **main difficulties** when studying **human behavior**.
- **Bogus pipeline:** A fake lie detector machine used to prevent social desirability bias.
- The bogus pipeline does seem to scare some people into telling the truth. However, the bogus pipeline did not seem to work in certain studies.

Indirect Measures of Implicit Attitudes

- For social psychologists, the indirect approach to measuring attitudes seems to be particularly useful under two circumstances:

1. when people might **not want to admit** to their true attitudes,
2. when we are trying to **assess beliefs** that participants **can't articulate or are not aware of**—in other words, **implicit attitudes**.

- For example, in the early history of television, portrayals of African Americans were almost exclusively negative or demeaning. For the children growing up with those images, the messages may have led to subtle but persistent mental associations between African Americans and negative stereotypes.

Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Study

- College students were asked to complete an extremely boring task for several minutes: turning knobs over and over.
- Then, the experimenter asked them for a favor: Would they mind telling the next participant (who was actually a confederate, a researcher pretending to be a participant) that the task was super exciting and fun?
- Participants were told they would be paid for telling the lie, but here's where the experimental manipulation came in (the independent variable):
- Half were given $1 for telling the lie; the other half were given $20.
- After the participant had lied, they were then asked to report their true feelings about the task. How much fun was it really to turn those knobs?

- Most people don't like to think of themselves as liars. When we're offered $20 for a simple lie that doesn't seem to do much harm, though, we can easily tell ourselves that we're **willing to lie for $20**; we have **sufficient justification**. Here, we're not particularly motivated to believe in our own lie; **dissonance is very low**.
- However, consider the mind-set of people who were only paid $1 to tell a lie. A dollar isn't much—so if you're willing to tell a **lie for only $1**, what kind of person are you? **Most of us wouldn't** want to believe that we're willing to lie to an innocent stranger for a measly $1, an idea that Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) called **insufficient justification**.

Cognitive Dissonance Motivates Attitude Change

- Lying for just $1 creates cognitive dissonance.
- We've already told the lie, so how can we **avoid even more anxiety and discomfort** at this violation of our self-concept?
- The simple solution is to tell ourselves that hey, it's not a lie . . . Turning those knobs was actually kind of fun after all!
- Festinger and Carlsmith found that the participants in the $1 condition were more likely to **convince themselves that the boring task really was enjoyable**.
- Their **higher levels of cognitive dissonance led to attitude change**.
- **Self-justification** is the desire to explain one's actions in a way that preserves or enhances a positive view of the self.

Cognitive Dissonance

- It is a state of psychological tension, produced by simultaneously having two opposing cognitions.
- People change their attitudes because they can not change their behaviours. (chocolate cake and diet)

Cognitive Dissonance

- Tavris and Aronson (2007) have suggested that **cognitive dissonance has influenced the course of human history**.
- President Johnson's stubborn justification for continuing to commit American troops to Vietnam,
- President George W. Bush's ever-shifting justifications for invading Iraq after failing to discover weapons of mass destruction.
- Tavris & Aronson (2007) concluded that **self-justification leads to "foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts**." They even identified the **distinctive language marker** (**the passive voice**) that public officials use to **admit fault without taking blame**: "Mistakes were made" with the silent implication "but not by me."

Beware of the Rationalization Trap

- **Cherry-picking data** occurs when people select only the data that support what they want to believe and ignore contradicting data.
- That's why Festinger turned from historical data to controlled laboratory settings such as the famous lie-telling experiment.
- But self-justifications don't begin as big lies. We **get seduced by telling ourselves little lies** that grow bigger with more elaborate justifications.
- **Rationalization trap**: Progressively larger self-justifications that lead to harmful, stupid, and immoral outcomes.

Individual, Situational Differences in Dissonance

- Some researchers try to explain such differences by emphasizing the **emotions involved in dissonance** (Guild, Strickland, & Barefoot, 1977).
- **Extroverts** can tolerate more dissonance than **introverts** (Matz, Hofstedt, & Wood, 2008), as do people with more symptoms of being a psychopath (Murray, Wood, & Lilienfeld, 2012).
- **Situations also matter**; we're more likely to experience dissonance when we're **worried about being perceived as a hypocrite** (Aronson, 1999) or when our **self-concept is threatened** (Steele, 1988).

Cultural Differences in Dissonance

- The **independent-minded** Americans experienced dissonance when their personal **sense of competency was threatened**.
- By contrast, **interdependent-minded** Asians experienced **more dissonance** when they were **threatened with group rejection** (Kitayama, Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004).
- These cultural differences in dissonance reflect how **different cultures conceive of the self**.

How do attitudes change?

- Attempts to persuade us will also be more or less influential based on four elements:

1. **source variables** (such as credibility or attractiveness),
2. **message variables** (such as personal importance or message framing),
3. **recipient variables** (such as our personality or self-esteem), and
4. **context variables** (such as whether we're distracted or if the message is repeated multiple times).

What persuasion techniques are used to change attitudes?

1. **Commitment and consistency:** people like to think of themselves as reliable and consistent.

- **The lowball technique** comes from this idea because it's when someone sticks with a decision (such as to buy a product) even when the original reason to buy it has been taken away. This occurs because people convince themselves they want the product anyway.
- **The foot-in-the-door technique** happens when people who agree to an initial, small request then become more likely to agree to a larger request because their first action indicates commitment to a cause or product.

examples

- A classic **example of low-balling** is when a car dealership lists a car for $14,000 to get you to agree to buy it and later changes the price to $16,000. The low-balling technique is commonly used among salesmen and advertisers. It was first demonstrated by Robert Cialdini and colleagues in the 1970s.
- **The foot-in-the-door technique** is when a small request is initially made in order to get a person to later agree to a bigger request. An **example** of this is when a friend asks to borrow a small amount of money, then later asks to borrow a larger amount.

What persuasion techniques are used to change attitudes?

- **2. Social norm of reciprocity:** we should respond to "favors" from others by returning a favor.
- **The door-in-the-face technique** occurs when someone asks a large favor of us that they assume we'll turn down; when they follow this with a request for something smaller, we're more likely to say yes than if they didn't ask us for the larger favor first. We are persuaded to do the second request because we feel that they have compromised, so we should as well.
- **"free" samples** are often used as a way to get people to feel that they "owe" you something, so people who have received a small gift (even without asking for it) are more likely to then comply with requests.

examples

- **An example** is when a friend asks to borrow an unreasonable sum of money, to which you say no, only to turn around and ask for a smaller sum that you agree to give. **The door-in-the-face technique** is commonly used to get people to donate their money, time, or effort.

the piano stairs experiment

- The experiment is about long-term human behavior and attitude change.
- The Fun Theory campaign was run by Volkswagen in Stockholm in 2009.
- "The principle behind the Fun Theory is that the easiest way to change people's behavior for the better is to make whatever they need to do fun. By making climbing the stairs more fun, more people (% 66) chose to ignore the neighboring escalator." (https://land8.com/the-fun-theory/)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lXh2n0aPyw