

Attitudes and attitude change

What's it about?

(Social Psychology pp. 230–273)

An **attitude** is a reaction to an attitude object that can range from a subtle (unconscious) evaluative reaction, to a more direct expression in words or deeds. Implicit attitudes can differ from explicit attitudes. Attitudes are useful because they help people to master their social environment and to express important connections with others. Attitudes are assembled from beliefs, feelings, and information about actions toward the object. Negative information and accessible information are weighted more heavily. Once an attitude forms, it becomes (closely) linked to the representation of the object.

When people are targets of **persuasion**, they often do not give persuasive communications much thought. In this case various superficial aspects of the persuasive appeal, like **persuasion heuristics**, can lead to attitude change.

The **mere exposure effect** can make people feel more positively about objects they have frequently encountered. When people do pay attention to a message, understand its content, and react to it (a process called **elaboration**), systematic processing can change attitudes. Attitudes resulting from such careful consideration are more persistent. People process messages systematically only when they have both the motivation and the cognitive capacity to do so. Messages that match people's motivational goals and their capacity states are most persuasive. Positive and negative emotional states influence persuasion because they have motivational and capacity consequences.

People often seek to resist persuasion, and one of their best weapons is awareness. People protect established attitudes by ignoring or resisting information that threatens them. However many people overestimate their ability to resist persuasive appeals. Subliminal persuasion gains some of its power because people do not realize they are the target of a persuasive attempt. Information presented outside of conscious awareness can influence attitudes and persuasion, but careful consideration of attitude objects can weaken the influence of subliminal information.

Chapter topics

- Attitudes and their origins (*SP pp. 231–241*)
- Superficial and systematic routes to persuasion: From snap judgments to considered opinions (*SP pp. 241–266*)
- Defending attitudes: Resisting persuasion (*SP pp. 266–271*)

ATTITUDES AND THEIR ORIGINS

Ask yourself

- How do people form an attitude?
- Do all attitudes have the same structure?
- Are there any cultural differences in attitudes?

What you need to know

MEASURING ATTITUDES (<i>SP p. 231</i>)
ATTITUDE FUNCTION (<i>SP pp. 231–236</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attitude functions and the environment• Cultural differences in attitude functions
ATTITUDE FORMATION (<i>SP pp. 236–241</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The informational bases of attitudes• Putting it all together• Linking attitudes to their objects

An **attitude** is any cognitive representation that summarizes our evaluation of an *attitude object*. Through the process of **persuasion**, attitudes can be developed, strengthened, and changed by communication.

MEASURING ATTITUDES

(*SP p. 231*)

Explicit attitudes can be measured using the following methods:

- Self-reports: Ask people.
- Observations: Look at people's behavior.

Weblink: Learn more about measuring attitudes

www.hkadesigns.co.uk/websites/msc/reme/likert.htm

Weblink: Measure your own explicit attitudes

www.yourmorals.org/explore.php

Implicit attitudes may be measured using:

- Muscle activity: Measure muscle tension while a person is thinking about an attitude object.
- Reaction time: How fast do people react to an attitude object?
- The Implicit Association Test.

Weblink: Do the IAT yourself

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

Implicit and explicit attitudes have different qualities; there is not one best attitude.

ATTITUDE FUNCTION

(SP pp. 231–236)

People evaluate almost everything they encounter, because attitudes are very useful.

Attitudes help people to master the environment. This is done through the *knowledge function* and *instrumental function* of attitudes.

Attitudes also help us to gain and maintain connectedness with others. This is through the *social identity function* and *impression management function* of attitudes.

CASE STUDY: The functions of attitudes: The value-expressive function [see ch07-CS-01.doc]

Attitude functions and the environment

Political orientation is an important determinant of people's attitudes toward the environment.

Politically conservative individuals tend to be less supportive of investments in energy-efficient technology. Although, if protecting the environment is couched in terms of conservative values, then conservatives will endorse more pro-environmental attitudes.

Cultural differences in attitude functions

In independent cultures, attitudes emphasize the individual and show that people are distinct from others; in interdependent cultures, attitudes emphasize group harmony and belongingness.

ATTITUDE FORMATION

(*SP pp. 236–241*)

The informational bases of attitudes

Attitudes are built from mental representations that can include:

- *Cognitive information*: What people know about an attitude object.
- *Affective information*: What people feel about an attitude object.
- *Behavioral information*: Knowledge of interactions with the attitude object in the past, present, or future.

Weblink: Affective vs. cognitive bases for attitudes

www.prenhall.com/divisions/hss/app/social/chap7_1.html

Affective information can be much stronger than cognitive information because of the intense emotions it can provoke. Habitual behavior can also dominate attitudes.

Putting it all together

All the informational components accumulate to form an attitude, following three principles:

- *Consistency*: New attitudes fit in a consistent way into existing knowledge, emotions, and experience.
- *Bad outweighs good*: Negative information has an edge over positive information.
- *Accessible information dominates*: Information that comes to mind very easily has more impact.

Strong attitudes are confidently-held extremely positive or negative evaluations that are persistent and resistant and that influence information processing and behavior.

Ambivalent attitudes reflect both positive and negative reactions to an attitude object.

Linking attitudes to their objects

Encountering an attitude object activates the attitude. The more often this joint activation of object and evaluation occurs, the closer and stronger the link becomes.

This has three consequences:

- The stronger the link, the more automatically the attitude is activated.
- The stronger the link, the more likely it is that we use this sole attitude as a source of knowledge.
- The stronger the link, the more resistant the attitude is to new information.

Weblink: Attitudes and values in Europe

www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/

Weblink: Attitudes and values throughout the world

www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp

So what does this mean?

Attitude researchers infer **attitudes** from the way people react to attitude objects. Such reactions can range from subtle evaluative reactions that people are unaware of, to more direct expressions of support or opposition in words or deeds. Attempts to assess these different reactions have demonstrated that implicit attitudes can sometimes differ from explicit attitudes.

People form attitudes because attitudes are useful. Attitudes help people to master their social environment and to express important connections with others. Attitudes are assembled from three types of information: beliefs about the object's characteristics, feelings and emotions about the object, and information about past and current actions toward the object. Negative information and accessible information are weighted more heavily. Once an attitude forms, it becomes closely linked to the representation of the object.

SUPERFICIAL AND SYSTEMATIC ROUTES TO PERSUASION: FROM SNAP JUDGEMENTS TO CONSIDERED OPINIONS

Ask yourself

- How are people influenced?
- Which information is the most persuasive?
- Do we process all information in the same way?
- Do our emotions influence our information processing?

What you need to know

SUPERFICIAL PROCESSING: PERSUASION SHORTCUTS (<i>SP pp. 242–246</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attitudes by association• The familiarity heuristic: Familiarity makes the heart grow fonder• The attractiveness heuristic: Agreeing with those we like• The expertise heuristic: Agreeing with those who know• The message-length heuristic: Length equals strength
SYSTEMATIC PROCESSING: THINKING PERSUASION THROUGH (<i>SP pp. 251–255</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Processing information about the attitude object• The consequences of systematic processing
SUPERFICIAL AND SYSTEMATIC PROCESSING: WHICH STRATEGY, WHEN? (<i>SP pp. 255–266</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How motivation influences superficial and systematic processing• How capacity influences superficial and systematic processing• Capacity and fluids: You think what you drink• How moods and emotions influence superficial and systematic persuasive processing• Motivation and capacity consequences of fear-inducing health messages• The interplay of cues and content

SUPERFICIAL PROCESSING: PERSUASION SHORTCUTS

(*SP pp. 242–246*)

Even when you are processing superficially, some information is getting through. Simple pieces of information are associated with, and activate, positive and negative evaluations, and can act as **persuasion heuristics**.

Attitudes by association

Adding positive associations to an attitude object can boost its evaluation (evaluative conditioning).

Weblink: Do we really ever know where our attitudes and ideas come from?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUA4Q5aoG74

CASE STUDY: Heuristics: When it feels good, I must like it. Positive affect in advertisements [see ch07-CS-02.doc]

The familiarity heuristic: Familiarity makes the heart grow fonder

The more often you have contact with an attitude object, the more positive your evaluation will be (the **mere exposure effect**).

Familiar stimuli can be more persuasive, irrespective of whether they are true or not.

Weblink: The mere exposure effect

www.socialpsyched.org/item/mere-exposure-effect

The attractiveness heuristic: Agreeing with those we like

We agree with people we like.

Weblink: Funny likeability commercial

www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9Egi8EoQc8

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Subtle mimicry [see ch07-RA-01.doc]

The expertise heuristic: Agreeing with those who know

An expert has the knowledge and can be trusted. A message that is delivered rapidly is also more credible. Trustworthiness is an important characteristic for a credible communicator.

Weblink: Zooey Deschenel and Samuel L. Jackson: iPhone experts, or are they just really good looking?

<http://adage.com/article/digital/consumers-love-apple-s-elitist-celebrity-siri-ads/234426/>

The message-length heuristic: Length equals strength

The longer the message, the more valid it appears to be.

CASE STUDY: Are angry sources with threatening messages more persuasive? [see ch07-CS-03.doc]

SYSTEMATIC PROCESSING: THINKING PERSUASION THROUGH

(*SP pp. 251–255*)

Processing information about the attitude object

There are four steps involved in systematic processing:

- *Attending to the information:* Make sure attention is drawn to the message.
- *Comprehending information:* Keep the message simple.
- *Reacting to information:* This is through the process of **elaboration**.
- *Accepting or rejecting the advocated position:* People have to accept the intended message.

Weblink: People are more persuaded by easy (to read) than difficult (to read) information

www.psychologicalscience.org/onlyhuman/2008/10/recipe-for-motivation.cfm

The consequences of systematic processing

Systematic processing results in attitudes that are persistent and resistant to change.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Systematic processing [see ch07-RA-02.doc]

Superficial and Systematic Processing: Which Strategy, When?

(SP pp. 255–265)

According to the **Elaboration Likelihood Model**, people will be more likely to engage in systematic processing and consider the strength of the arguments in a message (i.e., they will take the central route) when they have the motivation and capacity to do so. If either of these two things are lacking, people will engage in superficial processing and be more persuaded by heuristics (i.e., they will take the peripheral route).

Weblink: A summary of the elaboration likelihood model

www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlqUPJ_LCrS

How motivation influences superficial and systematic processing

- *Mastery motivation:* When being accurate is very important, you will be more motivated to process systematically.
 - *Need for cognition:* People with a high need for cognition are more eager to process information systematically.
- *Connectedness:* When something is personally relevant, you will be more motivated to process systematically.
 - *Self-monitoring:* High self-monitors zero in on image-focused messages; low self-monitors are more attuned to value-expressive appeals.
- *Me and mine motivation:* Students are more likely to systematically process a speech when it is self-relevant. Petty and colleagues showed that students were more persuaded by strong vs. weak messages (and were not persuaded by the expertise of the source of the message) when they thought they would have to take comprehensive exams before they graduated. In contrast, for students who thought the exams would be administered at a different school, they were more persuaded by the expert speaker than the nonexpert speaker (regardless of the strength of the message delivered). When an issue is not self-relevant, people will be more likely to use heuristic cues.

- *Promotion/prevention focus*: Promotion focused people are more persuaded by gain-oriented appeals, whereas prevention focused people find messages that talk about avoiding losses more compelling.
- *Culture*: Individuals from collectivist cultures are more likely to be persuaded by health warnings that focus on relational obligations, whereas individuals from individualistic cultures are more persuaded by messages that focus on the personal self.

How capacity influences superficial and systematic processing

- *The ability to process*: Sometimes you lack the cognitive capacity to process systematically. In terms of advertising, children are unaware that advertisements are trying to persuade them (i.e., their parents) to purchase products.
- *The opportunity to concentrate*: Distraction prevents systematic processing.

Capacity and fluids: You think what you drink

Caffeine seems to increase systematic processing.

Drugs and alcohol reduce the capacity to process systematically. Therefore, people are more sensitive to superficial cues.

CASE STUDY: Are people as naïve as persuaders think? [see ch07-CS-04.doc]

How moods and emotions influence superficial and systematic processing

There are mixed results of emotions on the way people process. Sometimes emotions increase persuasion, but sometimes they make persuasion less likely.

Positive emotions:

- When the situation is good, superficial processing may take place.
- If positive emotions are a result of the task, this can encourage systematic processing.
- If you think information will keep you in a good mood, again this can encourage systematic processing.
- Positive events may lead to less capacity, hence resulting in superficial processing.

Negative emotions:

- Anxiety can lead to less cognitive space being available, resulting in superficial processing.
- Feelings of guilt make us more susceptible to persuasion.

Motivation and capacity consequences of fear-inducing health messages

The level of fear influences motivation and the capacity for processing. If no fear is aroused, no attention is paid to a message. Extreme fear can lead to a message being avoided or ignored (self-protection). The right amount of fear leads to the motivation to process systematically. When a message includes instructions on how to eliminate the threat/fear then people will be more likely to change their behaviour.

Weblink: An anti-smoking ad: Would it get you to quit?

www.wimp.com/smokingads/

Weblink: What about graphic warning labels? Are these effective?

www.cnn.com/2011/HEALTH/06/21/cigarette.labels/index.html?on.cnn=2

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Analysis of public health posters [see ch07-RA-03.doc]

The interplay of cues and content

Individuals can use both systematic and superficial cues related to a persuasive message.

So what does this mean?

When people are targets of **persuasion**, often they do not give persuasive communications much thought. In this case various superficial aspects of the persuasive appeal, like **persuasion heuristics**, can lead to attitude change. The **mere exposure effect** can make people feel more positively about objects they have frequently encountered. Sometimes people do carefully consider the content of arguments presented in a persuasive communication.

When people pay attention to a message, understand its content, and react to it (a process called **elaboration**), systematic processing can change attitudes. Attitudes resulting from such careful consideration last longer and are much more resistant to later change than most attitudes produced by superficial processing. People process messages systematically only when they have both the motivation and the cognitive capacity to do so. Messages that match people's motivational goals and their capacity states are most persuasive. Positive and negative emotional states influence persuasion because they have motivational and capacity consequences. Finally, superficial and systematic cues may work together (or against each other) to have an effect on our attitudes.

DEFENDING ATTITUDES: RESISTING PERSUASION

Ask yourself

- How do we defend our attitudes?
- What is subliminal influence?
- Does subliminal influence always work?

What you need to know

IGNORING, REINTERPRETING, AND COUNTERING ATTITUDE
INCONSISTENT INFORMATION (<i>SP pp. 266–271</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inoculation: Practice can be the best resistance medicine
WHAT IT TAKES TO RESIST PERSUASION (<i>SP pp. 269–271</i>)

IGNORING, REINTERPRETING, AND COUNTERING ATTITUDE

INCONSISTENT INFORMATION

(*SP pp. 268–269*)

People can protect established attitudes in the following ways:

- Ignoring information that challenges our views
- Reinterpretation: Assimilation/contrast. Assimilation is the process where information that is close to our attitude is viewed as resembling our attitude. Contrast is the process where information that is quite discrepant with our attitude is seen as even more inconsistent with our attitude than it really is.
- Bias: Memory. People have a better memory for attitude consistent information than for inconsistent information. Eagly et al. (2000) [[DOI:10.1177/0146167200263007](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167200263007)] found that people remember consistent and inconsistent information equally well, but are better at dismissing inconsistent information.

Inoculation: Practice can be the best resistance medicine

Arguing against a persuasive appeal can be an effective way to resist persuasive information.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Persuasive appeals [see ch07-RA-04.doc]

Defending our attitudes can make them stronger.

Weblink: More information about inoculation theory

www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/inocul.htm

WHAT IT TAKES TO RESIST PERSUASION

(SP pp. 269–271)

People need motivation and (cognitive) capacity to defend their attitudes.

Defending our attitudes can make them more important, and we are more motivated to defend important attitudes.

Most people underestimate their vulnerability to persuasive appeals.

People are very easy to influence via subliminal stimuli. These are stimuli that we don't perceive consciously but that nevertheless have an influence on us.

There are two limitations to subliminal influence:

- It is difficult to expose people to this influence.
- Its effect is only found by using certain stimuli.

Conscious processing always dominates subliminal influence.

CASE STUDY: How to resist persuasion? Look me in the eye [see ch07-CS-05.doc]

So what does this mean?

People often seek to resist persuasion, and one of their best weapons is awareness. People protect established attitudes by ignoring or resisting information that threatens them. Being forewarned of a persuasion attempt, and having previous experience with related arguments, can help resistance. However, many people overestimate their

ability to resist persuasive appeals. Subliminal persuasion gains some of its power because people do not realize they are the target of a persuasive attempt. Information presented outside of conscious awareness can influence attitudes and persuasion, but careful consideration of attitude objects can weaken the influence of subliminal information.