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Attitudes and behavior

What's it about?

(Social Psychology pp. 274–309)

Attitudes and actions are very closely related, and are often consistent, because they influence each other in both superficial and deliberate ways. How actions influence attitudes depends on the level of processing: people can make simple action-to-attitude inferences (usually through self-perception processes), or can make deeper considerations of the implications of their actions (through cognitive dissonance processes). Self-perception theory states that actions influence attitudes because people infer their attitudes by observing their own behavior and the situations in which their behavior occurs.

The **foot-in-the-door technique** works when people process information superficially; it gets people to perform a small act consistent with an intended larger goal. As long as the initial request seems meaningful and voluntary, this makes people infer that they hold attitudes consistent with that behavior, and makes them subject to further influences. When people become aware that their freely chosen actions violate important or relevant attitudes, this inconsistency produces an uncomfortable state of arousal called **cognitive dissonance**, which motivates them to change their initial attitudes to make them consistent with their behavior, or to increase the value they place on a goal, and to emphasize the positive aspects of the chosen option.

Established attitudes can guide behavior in two ways: superficially, and in a more considered way. Attitudes can bias people's perceptions of attitude objects, because they focus attention on the consistent characteristics of an object. This bias process increases the likelihood that people's behavior will be consistent with their attitude in a direct way: people respond to the object qualities most salient to them, and behave in attitude-consistent ways. Attitudes can also influence behavior in more considered ways by prompting intentions, which trigger plans to act in certain ways.

Chapter topics

- Changing attitudes with actions (*SP pp. 275–293*)
- Changing actions with attitudes (*SP pp. 295–306*)

CHANGING ATTITUDES WITH ACTIONS

Ask yourself

- When do self-perception processes and cognitive dissonance processes explain changed attitudes?
- How does the foot-in-the-door technique work?
- What are the four crucial steps needed for cognitive dissonance to be experienced by people, and for this to lead to attitude change?

What you need to know

FROM ACTION TO ATTITUDE VIA SUPERFICIAL PROCESSING (*SP pp. 275–281*)

- Associations with action
- Inferences from action: Self-perception theory
- The foot-in-the-door technique: Would you mind doing me a small favor?
- Self-perception processes and health
- When do action-to-attitude inferences change attitudes?

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: CHANGING ATTITUDES TO JUSTIFY BEHAVIOR (*SP pp. 281–294*)

- The theory of cognitive dissonance
- Justifying attitude-discrepant behavior: I have my reasons!
- Justifying effort: I suffered for it, so I like it
- Justifying decisions: Of course I was right!
- The processing payoff: Justifying inconsistent actions creates persistent attitudes
- Dissonance processes and health interventions
- Alternatives to attitude change
- Which dissonance reduction strategy is used?
- Cultural differences and dissonance

An attitude is any cognitive representation that summarizes our evaluation of an attitude object.

People's attitudes and behaviors are related and consistent because:

1. *Actions influence attitudes*, both superficially (people make simple inferences about their actions, and then bring their attitudes in line with their behavior), and in a more deep/thorough way (when actions have more serious consequences, people work hard to justify their actions, which results in attitude change).
2. *Attitudes influence actions*, also both superficially (with very little forethought; e.g., parents focusing only on a child's positive qualities, may pamper him), and in more deliberate/thorough ways. When the process is more deliberate, attitudes produce intentions to act in particular ways, and people put much time and effort into fulfilling these intentions.

However, people's behavior isn't *always* in line with their attitudes because:

1. Several important processes are needed before attitudes can affect behavior.
2. Attitudes are only one of several factors that affect behavior. Social norms also influence attitudes greatly.

“Our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds.” Almost any kind of action can influence attitudes (e.g., people end up liking those they help, and disliking those they hurt). So behavior is an important part of the information on which attitude formation is based.

How actions influence attitudes depends on the level of processing: people can make simple action-to-attitude inferences, or can make deeper considerations of the implications of their actions.

FROM ACTION TO ATTITUDE VIA SUPERFICIAL PROCESSING

(*SP pp. 275–281*)

When people process information superficially, attitudes are based on the associations with actions. It is more likely that actions will influence attitudes in this way if people are not motivated, or do not have the ability, to process the information at a deeper/more thorough level.

Associations with action

One example of actions affecting attitudes at a superficial level involved a study on people nodding or shaking their heads while listening to a radio broadcast about an increase in tuition: those people nodding their heads agreed with the increase in tuition more than those shaking their heads.

CASE STUDY: Dial 5683 for love [see ch08-CS-01.doc]

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Feeling the push and pull of attitudes [see ch08-RA-01.doc]

Inferences from action: Self-perception theory

This theory states that actions influence attitudes because people infer their attitudes by observing their own behavior and the situations in which their behavior occurs. So people make direct inferences from their behavior to their attitude.

Numerous studies support this theory; one example includes a study on religious beliefs of students; those whose attention had been drawn to the frequency of their religious activities reported favorable attitudes towards religion, while the attitudes of those whose attention had been drawn to how seldom they engaged in religious activities were not favorable. These people inferred their attitudes from their behavior.

The process of self-perception has become a popular technique of social influence among advertisers and sales personnel (e.g., getting customers to spend hours thinking up a good slogan for their brand).

The foot-in-the-door technique: Would you mind doing me a small favor?

This technique gets people to perform a small act consistent with an intended goal. This small “foot in the door” makes people open to further influences, and so they will be more open to agreeing to a consistent/similar large request afterwards.

The **foot-in-the-door technique** works because the initial behavior triggers self-perception processes that lead people to believe their attitude is consistent with the action they have just performed. This “new” attitude then makes it more likely that they will agree to a second, larger request.

But the technique only works under the right conditions:

1. *Performing the initial request must be meaningful.* The small request has to be important, so people will make inferences about their attitudes towards this kind of behavior (i.e., it should trigger self-perception processes). One way to do this is by asking people to put a lot of effort into the small request. It is also important that the first requests remain small, or people will refuse them.
2. *Performing the initial request must seem purely voluntary.* People should not be able to attribute their behavior to external rewards or other environmental forces, as this undermines the self-perception process and they will not infer that their behavior is linked to their internal preferences/attitudes. If the behavior is attributable only to the person concerned, they will believe they hold action-consistent attitudes (and be more likely to accept the larger request).

Self-perception processes and health

Various studies show that the foot-in-the-door technique works very well for getting people to engage in healthier behaviors.

Weblink: More information on the foot-in-the-door technique
<http://changingminds.org/techniques/general/sequential/fitd.htm>

When do action-to-attitude inferences change attitudes?

People process superficially, and make simple associations between their actions and attitudes, when not much is at stake; that is, when attitudes are unformed, ambiguous, or unimportant.

When attitudes are well established or important, these associations are more difficult to make. However, actions can influence the *intensity* (but not the direction) of well-established attitudes.

So actions are more likely to lead people to adopt consistent attitudes when they think superficially. When attitudes are well established and important, people think more systematically about behavior that might contradict those attitudes. High stakes cause people to think more carefully about the implications of those actions on their attitudes. The importance of the attitude makes the attitude hard to change.

CASE STUDY: From actions to attitudes superficially: Self-perception and attitude strength [see ch08-CS-02.doc]

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: CHANGING ATTITUDES TO JUSTIFY BEHAVIOR

(*SP pp. 281–294*)

The theory of cognitive dissonance

The theory of **cognitive dissonance** states that when people become aware that their freely chosen actions violate important or relevant attitudes, the inconsistency produces an uncomfortable state of arousal called *dissonance*, which motivates people to change their initial attitudes to make them consistent with their behavior. For cognitive dissonance to occur, it is important that the attitude is important and self-relevant.

This theory was formed by Leon Festinger in 1957.

Tensions between important cognitions (attitudes, thoughts, beliefs) are often reduced by changes in thinking, not in behavior.

Weblink: An example of attitude-behavior inconsistency: Texting while driving
<http://theinvisiblegorilla.com/blog/2010/12/22/driving-and-distraction-california-survey/>

Four steps are necessary to produce dissonance, and for that dissonance to produce attitude change:

1. *The individual must perceive the action as inconsistent:* Inconsistency alone is enough to cause discomfort/dissonance. Dissonance is most likely to be provoked when actions are inconsistent with positive and important self-images.
2. *The individual must perceive the action to be freely chosen:* Dissonance is only aroused when an internal attribution is made: if people can attribute their actions to external rewards or punishments, they will not experience dissonance. Those individuals who routinely attribute their behavior to external causes don't experience dissonance in the same way as those who attribute actions to internal causes.
3. *The individual must experience uncomfortable physiological arousal:* Studies have found that dissonance is actually experienced as a state of uncomfortable or unpleasant physical arousal.
4. *The individual must attribute the arousal to the inconsistency between attitude and action:* People have to believe that their unpleasant feelings are a result of the inconsistency of their behavior with their attitudes, in order to focus their attention on that inconsistency.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: The cognitive dissonance effect [see ch08-RA-02.doc]

It is easier to change attitudes than it is to go back and change behavior that has already occurred, and so dissonance is only eliminated when attitudes are brought in line with the previous actions.

Justifying attitude-discrepant behavior: I have my reasons!

An example of a classic study by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959)

[DOI:10.1037/h0041593] is presented, which shows how cognitive dissonance works. Participants were asked to lie about how interesting they had found a study, which in fact was very boring, for either a \$1 reward or a \$20 reward. Cognitive dissonance, and a change in attitude, were only found for the first group, as participants in the second group attributed their lying to the external reward (\$20).

Dissonance theory also predicts that when people want to do something, but don't do it because of a mild threat, they will change their attitudes to convince themselves that they don't *really* want to engage in that behavior anyway.

Justifying effort: I suffered for it, so I like it

In cases where people have freely chosen to act in ways that cause them suffering (e.g., staying with an abusive spouse), they change their attitudes to justify that suffering. This is because realizing that they have personally chosen this action causes uncomfortable tension (dissonance), which can be resolved by valuing that goal/action even more.

Almost any amount or kind of effort put into an action/goal can result in a dissonance-reducing attitude change to value that goal. This is a result of the *effort-justification effect*, which explains that the more effort, time, money, pain, and so on, are put into a goal, the more people value that goal, and change their attitudes towards that valuing.

Weblink: Cognitive dissonance in cults

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/chronology.htm

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: How do cults draw you in? [see ch08-RA-03.doc]

Justifying decisions: Of course I was right!!

Decisions, by definition, involve dissonance. When people give up options (by making a choice/decision for one option) they experience *decisional dissonance* (or post-decisional regret): this is tension between the alternative they have chosen and all the attractive alternatives they have rejected.

According to dissonance theory, the more people focus on the implications of making a choice, the more this increases their feelings of dissonance, and their subsequent need to reduce that dissonance.

Dissonance processes can help people convince themselves that they have made the right decision (e.g., people are more convinced about their candidate *after* they have voted for the person than they were before).

The processing payoff: Justifying inconsistent actions creates persistent attitudes
Attitudes that result from extensive processing last longer than attitudes changed with little thought.

In order to reduce dissonance, people have to go through extensive cognitive processing. So attitude change that is brought about by dissonance reduction is very long lasting and solid, and is inoculated against further change.

Attitude change through dissonance has been shown to be just as powerful outside the lab as in it.

Weblink: Women's shift in attitudes before and after the pill
www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/sfeature/sf_attitudes.html

Dissonance processes and health interventions

Dissonance-reduction processes can help adolescent girls with body image dissatisfaction who might be at risk for disordered eating. Girls who are asked to write essays or participate in role-playing exercises that counter the thin ideal are at a lower risk of eating disorder onset up to three years later.

Alternatives to attitude change

Attitude change is not the only way people can reduce dissonance.

Examples of alternative ways to reduce dissonance include:

- trivializing the attitude-discrepant behavior;

- adding cognitions to make it consonant;
- minimizing personal responsibility;
- attributing the experienced dissonance-induced arousal to a different source;
- using alcohol;
- reaffirming one's positive sense of self-worth and integrity (or identity); or
- changing the attitude-discrepant *behavior* in the future.

Which dissonance reduction strategy is used?

People use whatever means of reducing dissonance that are most readily available.

Direct ways are preferred over indirect ways.

Motivational factors also play a role, because the more important the attitude, the less likely it is that people will change that attitude to reduce dissonance.

Cultural differences and dissonance

As dissonance arises when an important part of the self is violated (an important attitude, a central self-definition), dissonance might arise differently in people from different cultures, who define their "selves" differently.

For members of independence-oriented cultures (such as in the West), making a wrong decision is personally threatening and will induce dissonance, but interdependence-oriented (e.g., Japanese) people will not find this as threatening. A typical dissonance-inducing study was conducted in both these cultures, and an additional feature was included by telling participants that their decision had implications for important others. Western participants experienced dissonance, and justified their decisions by adjusting their attitudes in all conditions; Eastern participants only did so when the social context was made obvious to them. So behaviors that violate important attitudes about the self cause dissonance across cultures, but what exactly constitutes such a violation is culturally sensitive.

When freely chosen but inconsistent actions are trivial or small, and do not violate self-images or important attitudes, self-perception processes can explain the easy/simple change made in the attitude. However, when freely chosen behavior

violates an important attitude, people have to think extensively about, or process, their behavior, which causes dissonance; so, in this case, attitude change can be explained by the process of dissonance reduction.

Weblink: More information on cognitive dissonance

http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/cognitive_dissonance.htm

So what does this mean?

Behavior is an important part of the information on which attitude formation is based. How actions influence attitudes depends on the level of processing: people can make simple action-to-attitude inferences (usually through self-perception processes), or can make deeper considerations of the implications of their actions (through cognitive dissonance processes). Self-perception theory states that actions influence attitudes because people infer their attitudes by observing their own behavior and the situations in which their behavior occurs.

The **foot-in-the-door technique** works when people process information superficially; it gets them to perform a small act consistent with an intended larger goal. When people become aware that their freely chosen actions violate important or relevant attitudes, this inconsistency produces an uncomfortable state of arousal called **cognitive dissonance**, which motivates people to change their initial attitudes to make them consistent with their behavior, or to increase the value they place on a goal, and to emphasize the positive aspects of the chosen option.

GUIDING ACTIONS WITH ATTITUDES

Ask yourself

- When do attitudes influence behavior directly, and when do they influence behavior with more consideration and extensive thought?
- How are attitudes made accessible?
- What should attitudes be if they are to guide behavior?

What you need to know

HOW ATTITUDES GUIDE BEHAVIOR (<i>SP pp. 295–300</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attitudes guide behavior without much thought• Attitudes guide behavior through considered intentions
WHEN DO ATTITUDES INFLUENCE ACTION? (<i>SP pp. 300–306</i>)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attitude accessibility• Attitude compatibility• Implicit and explicit attitudes as guides for behavior• When attitudes are not enough

HOW ATTITUDES GUIDE BEHAVIOR

(*SP pp. 295–300*)

Attitudes can influence behaviors in two different ways: (1) they can trigger consistent behaviors directly, with little intervening thought; and (2) they can influence behaviors after extensive and deliberate consideration or processing, through the formulation of *intentions*.

Weblink: Kissing under the mistletoe – Because you said so...

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iNxHxwT-b4&feature=player_embedded#%21

CASE STUDY: I feel the need for speed: Risky attitudes predict driving violations

[see ch08-CS-03.doc]

Attitudes guide behavior without much thought

When people have well-established attitudes about certain attitude objects, they also have evaluative summaries of that attitude object (e.g., how much they like it or dislike it), which make it easier to decide what to do, and are therefore very likely to guide behavior *directly*.

Attitudes can bias or even change people's perceptions of attitude objects, because they focus attention on some particular characteristics of an object (and away from others) that are consistent with those attitudes (e.g., a favorable attitude makes positive qualities salient; a negative attitude makes negative attributes salient). People often don't see that attitude objects have changed because of their attitudes.

This bias process increases the likelihood that people's behavior will be consistent with their attitude in a straightforward way: people respond to object qualities most salient to them, and behave in attitude-consistent ways.

Attitudes guide behavior through considered intentions

When people deliberately try to make their behavior consistent with their attitude, they put a lot of effort and consideration into forming intentions to act in a particular way in order to achieve a goal. This process takes place through four steps:

Step 1: *Forming of intentions*. Intentions are the single most important predictor of actual behavior once they are in place; according to the *theory of reasoned action*, attitudes and social norms are an important source of intentions, which can then guide behavior. Getting people to form intentions powerfully increases the chance that behaviors will be performed.

Weblink: More information on the theory of reasoned action

www.cios.org/encyclopedia/persuasion/Gtheory_1reasoned.htm

Step 2: *Activation of behavioral information*. Intentions help attitudes translate into behavior by bringing to mind everything one knows about performing that behavior. The kind of information that is brought to mind is determined by the level at which one thinks: forming specific intentions brings specific behavioral options to mind that

help to achieve the behavioral goal; broad intentions allow flexibility to adopt alternative plans.

Step 3: *Planning*. The optimal way of carrying out the intended behavior is selected.

Step 4: *The intended behavior is carried out if an opportunity presents itself*. People also monitor their behavior against their intentions, to ensure that the gap between the present and the desired state is being reduced.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: How attitudes can change behavior [see ch08-RA-04.doc]

Positive and negative emotions play a role in the regulation of intentions and behavior. Positive emotions can motivate intentions, whereas negative emotions can prompt revisions of plans.

Whether or not the motivation and opportunity to engage in thinking are present determines whether attitudes will affect behavior in a direct way, or with considerable thought. When consideration is not possible, or choices are not important, behavior will follow on directly from how an attitude object is viewed (e.g., in routine behavior or habits); when the stakes are high and considerable thought is possible, attitudes will influence behavior through their impact on intentions.

WHEN DO ATTITUDES INFLUENCE ACTION?

(*SP pp. 300–306*)

If attitudes are to guide actions, they must be readily accessible and appropriate to the intended behavior. Attitudes can be made accessible through deliberate thought, self-awareness, or frequent use, or if they are particularly relevant to a particular behavior; and they are more likely to guide behavior if people believe they have control over their behavior.

Attitude accessibility

Attitudes about certain objects, events, or people must come to mind at the right time.

Sometimes, inner convictions play a role with regard to when attitudes become accessible: low self-monitors have more accessible attitudes than high self-monitors.

There are a number of ways to make attitudes accessible:

1. *Deliberately making attitudes accessible*: Attitudes are brought to mind by deliberate effort, by thinking about a relevant attitude for a few minutes before taking action. Being reminded of the relevance of an attitude to the behavior can increase the impact of that attitude on behavior. Similarly, if people think about something other than the relevant attitude, the consistency or link between attitude and behavior will decrease. So when the attitude is not the uppermost thing on the person's mind, the impact of the attitude on behavior is reduced.
2. *Making attitudes accessible through self-awareness*: Making people self-aware increases the chance that important attitudes will come to mind, because they are reminded of the extent to which they are acting in accordance with their inner convictions.
3. *Making attitudes accessible automatically*: The more often an attitude is brought to mind, the stronger the link between attitude object and attitude, and the more likely it is that the attitude will come to mind whenever that attitude object is encountered. These attitudes are built up through constant activation, deliberation, discussion, and action. So attitudes that come to mind more frequently lead to more consistent behavior. This is also true for attitudes formed on the basis of considerable issue-relevant thinking, those built up through cognitive processing, and attitudes that are personally relevant.

Attitude compatibility

Attitudes must come to mind at exactly the right time to have the greatest effect on behavior towards an attitude object.

Only an appropriate and relevant attitude can be expected to influence behavior.

To influence specific behavior, specific attitudes must come to mind (e.g., women's attitudes about birth control in general do not predict their behavior as well as their specific attitudes towards taking the pill).

Attitude–behavior consistency can only be expected when the attitude object (what you are asked your opinion about) and the target of behavior (what you act towards) are the same.

Implicit and explicit attitudes as guides for behavior

People’s implicit attitudes reflect their automatic evaluations of objects, and can diverge from their explicit attitudes (those overtly expressed). Implicit attitudes reflect more automatic, less controllable evaluations; explicit attitudes reflect conscious thoughts and considered reactions to objects.

For important attitudes, implicit and explicit attitudes are consistent, so they work together to guide both spontaneous and controlled behavior.

When implicit and explicit attitudes differ, either one might influence behavior more at any given time.

So the right attitude has to come to mind to guide behavior.

Weblink: More information on implicit and explicit attitudes

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attitude_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attitude_(psychology))

CASE STUDY: He loves me, he loves me not... [see ch08-CS-04.doc]

When attitudes are not enough

Perceptions of *personal control* have a big influence on behavior: people do not act on attitudes if they believe they cannot perform the required behavior. When people think they *can* control their behavior, attitudes are effective in guiding action. This is because perceptions of control produce intentions that then guide attitude-consistent behavior.

Weblink: The theory of planned behavior

<http://people.umass.edu/~aizen/index.html>

Because of the nature of social interaction, we don't always have the objective control over our actions to carry out our attitudes and intentions, even when we think we do (e.g., we might want to be environmentally friendly by separating our trash, but if our family doesn't also do this, it will not work).

In addition, we sometimes mindlessly engage in behavior that is inconsistent with our attitudes out of *habit*.

Research on the link between attitudes and behavior has practical implications for dealing with bad habits.

People can gain attitudinal control over impulses with tremendous effort by repeatedly activating attitudes in high-risk situations.

A change in context is one of the best predictors of successful change in habits; and when behavior is less influenced by the environment, it comes more under the control of attitudes and intentions.

Good habits can be learned and strengthened by repeatedly activating attitudes. When behavior is controlled by attitudes and intentions, it is important to make that link often, so the desired behavior is triggered by the environment once again (it becomes a habit).

Weblink: Mindless eating

<http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2587819&page=1&singlePage=true>

So attitudes are most likely to influence actions when the attitude comes to mind, when it is appropriate, and when attitude-consistent behavior is not constrained in any way.

So what does this mean?

Established attitudes can guide behavior in two ways: superficially/directly, and in a more considered/deliberate way. Attitudes can bias people's perceptions of attitude objects, because they focus attention on the consistent characteristics of an object.

This bias process increases the likelihood that people's behavior will be consistent with their attitude in a straightforward way: people respond to the object qualities most salient to them, and behave in attitude-consistent ways. Attitudes can also influence behavior in more considered ways by prompting intentions, which activate behavioral information, so people can plan and carry out the intended behavior. If attitudes are to guide behavior, they have to come to mind at the right time.

Attitudes can be made accessible through deliberate thought, self-awareness, or frequent use, or automatically through triggers from the environment. Attitudes must also be appropriate or relevant to the task at hand, and attitude-consistent behavior should not be constrained in any way; that is, people should have full control over their behavior.