

Research Activity 1

Feeling the push and pull of attitudes

Don't believe that your actions can influence your attitudes? Well, try it out for yourself! Gather together some friends and some candy and snacks of different varieties (ideally candies from the international food section that your friends have never seen before). Tell your friends that you are going to give them five snacks each and they will be asked to rate how much they like the packaging of each snack on a 1 (Very much dislike) to 7 (Very much like) scale. Each friend should receive exactly the same snacks (e.g., everyone gets one candy bar, one bag of chips, etc.), but you should ask your friends to do different things before rating the snacks' packaging. For half of your friends, start with the snacks in a pile in the middle of the table and ask for them to bring the snacks toward them one-at-a-time, look it over, and then rate each snack in turn. For the other half of your friends, have them start with the snacks right in front of them, look over the packaging of each snack one-at-a-time, place the snack in a bowl on the other side of the table, and then rate the snack. According to the research reviewed in the book, the act of moving the snacks toward them should lead your friends to like the snacks more than those snacks that they push away from themselves. Try it, and if it works, you can teach your friends that sometimes actions speak louder than words.

Research Activity 2

The cognitive dissonance effect

Imagine you want to raise the environmental awareness of your classmates. Most of the students probably say they believe in recycling, but you notice that their behaviors aren't exactly in line with these attitudes: they often simply throw their paper in with the normal trash instead of walking over to the recycling bin. In order to address this issue, ask half of them to design a campaign about recycling for the other classes in the school. A couple of days later ask them about their own recycling behavior. You will probably see that the students you have asked to firmly support recycling will start behaving differently; they will recycle more. Why is this? What theory can be used to explain this change in behavior?

This exercise demonstrates the cognitive dissonance effect, and how behavior can lead to attitude change. The participants will experience dissonance because their own behavior (not recycling paper) is not in line with an attitude they strongly endorse (being environmentally friendly, and recycling) (SP pp. 281–284).

Research Activity 3

How do cults draw you in?

The study of cognitive dissonance began when Leon Festinger and some of his colleagues went undercover and joined a cult called the Seekers in the 1950s. The members of this cult believed that a UFO was going to pick them up to save them before the rest of the nonbelievers were wiped out in a great flood. The leader of the cult predicted that the UFO would descend on a particular date, so many of the believers quit their jobs and sold their belongings in preparation of the UFO's arrival. Festinger and his colleagues joined with the knowledge that the end of the world was probably not on the horizon and that they could instead use the opportunity to study how the cult members would justify their beliefs and actions when neither the UFO nor the great flood appeared. Festinger's classic examination of how dissonance processes shape later attitudes and behaviors became a landmark theory in social psychology. In addition, it turns out that the same dissonance processes that the Seekers used to justify their continued presence in the cult (after multiple end-of-the-world dates came and went), are also the same processes used to lure people into cults in the first place. The History Channel aired a documentary on cults in 2006 that explored how cults form, and why even seemingly normal and psychologically healthy people join cults. Watch the documentary

below (or even read Festinger et al.'s classic book) and see if you can point out the number of ways that dissonance is used to draw people in. Can you find examples of effort justification, insufficient justification, and how dissonance might be aroused and then reduced? If you were in a similar position, would you behave in the same way?

Watch the documentary here:

<http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/cults-dangerous-devotion>

Reference

- Festinger, L., Riecken, H. W., & Schachter, S. (1956). *When prophecy fails: A social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the destruction of the world*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Research Activity 4

How attitudes can change behavior

Imagine you have decided you want to get into shape because you want to be healthier. You take a few minutes to think about how you can best go about this, and you plan out your intentions to use a weekly running schedule. Finally, you start following this schedule to reach the intended goal. As you go along, you monitor your weight loss and whether you are indeed physically healthier. What is this an example of?

This exercise demonstrates how attitudes can deliberately trigger behavior, through a process of forming specific intentions, activating behavioral information, planning, and finally carrying out the intended behavior. This also demonstrates the importance of motivation to engage in deliberate thinking before attitudes can change behavior (SP pp. 294–296).