SOCI 323
Social Psychology

Session 10 – ATTITUDES

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Humans are not neutral or passive observers of the social world; they evaluate what they encounter. In this session therefore, we shall explore how these evaluations culminate into what is referred to as attitudes. I shall explain the sources of attitudes and explain how attitudes are formed, measured and what functions they serve.

• At the end of the session, the student will be able to:
  • define the concept of attitudes
  • identify the components of attitudes
  • explain the processes of attitude formation and measurement
  • explain the possible biases in attitude measurement
  • explain the functions of attitudes
  • identify the situations in which attitudes are predictive of behavior
The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Definition of Attitudes
- Components of Attitudes
- Processes of Attitude Formation
- Measurement of Attitudes
- Biases in attitude measurement
- Functions of Attitudes
- Relationship between attitudes and behaviours
- Sample Question
- Session Summary
- References
• Read chapter five (5) of the required text as well as the article on session 10 posted on Sakai
Topic One

DEFINING ATTITUDES
What is Attitude?

- An evaluation of an object along a positive-negative dimension (Gilovich et al, 2016)

- Evaluation of various aspects of the social world (Baron & Branscombe, 2012).

- An overall learned core disposition that guides a person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions toward specific others and objects (Middlebrooke, 1997).

- Relatively lasting clusters of feelings, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies directed towards specific persons, ideas, objects, or groups (Rajecki, 1982).
Components of Attitudes

• Attitudes are made up of a cognitive, affective and conative components. A cognitive component consisting of your thoughts and beliefs about the attitude object. An affective component consisting of your emotions, feelings, moods, psychological responses and reactions toward the attitude object. A behavioral /Conative component consisting of your actions or observable behavior toward the attitude object.

• A concept is an attitude when it possesses to some degree components of all three. The three components are highly interrelated. For instance, you may have opinions about a particular car (Toyota Corrola). These positive thoughts lead to excitement whenever you see the car. This then leads to an action, to go buy the car or perhaps participate in a raffle that has one as the ultimate prize.

• One important finding is that though attitudes are said to have bits of all three components, not all attitudes are created equally. Thus, any given attitude can be based more on one type of experience than another (Zanna & Rampel, 1988).
Cognitively Based Attitudes

• To the extent that a person’s evaluation is based primarily on their beliefs about the properties of an attitude object, we say it is a cognitively based attitude.

• The purpose of this kind of attitude is to examine the plusses and minuses of the attitude object to decide whether we want to be associated with it.

• For example if you buy a car because of how durable, fast and fuel-efficient it is and not how nice it looks, we can then say that your attitude is cognitively based. Thus, cognitively based attitudes refer to those attitudes based primarily on people’s beliefs about the properties of an attitude object.
Affectively Based Attitudes

• These are attitudes based more on people’s feelings and values than on their beliefs about the nature of an attitude object.

• Here, decisions are not made because of the plusses or minuses of the attitude object (Breckler and Wiggins, 1989; Zanna & Rampel, 1988). For instance, consider the subjects of politics, religion and love. People are often passionate about these for no objective reasons. People seem to vote more with their hearts than with their heads; caring more about how they feel about a candidate and not his policies or manifesto (Granberg & Brown, 1989).

• Affectively based attitudes stem from several sources. One is people’s values such as their religious and moral beliefs. People’s feelings about such issues as corruption, bribery, gambling, abortion, pre-marital sex etc derive from their values and not a critical examination in most cases of the merits or demerits of these issues.
Behaviour Based Attitudes

• Behaviorally based attitudes are based on observations of how one behaves towards an attitude object.

• According to the self perception theory (Bem, 1972), people do not know how they feel until they see how they behave. For instance, suppose you asked a friend whether s/he likes African movies; if s/he replies "yes, I think I do because I find myself watching a number of them on television"; you would say s/he has a behaviorally based attitude.

• Your friend's attitude is based on an observation of her behavior than on her beliefs and feelings.
Topic Two

THE PROCESS OF ATTITUDE FORMATION
Attitude Formation Process

• Humans are not born with the attitudes they have. Attitudes are acquired. But how are attitudes formed or gained? What processes account for their formation and development?

• Two processes have been identified as helping the formation of attitudes namely, social learning (the process through which we acquire new information, forms of behavior, or attitudes from other persons) and personal experience.

• Many of our attitudes are acquired in situations in which we interact with others or simply observe their behavior as well as in situations where we pay attention or observe our own behavior in social situations.
Classical Conditioning-Attitudes

• This is a basic form of learning in which one stimulus, initially neutral, acquires the capacity to evoke reactions through repeated pairing with another stimulus.

• In a sense, one stimulus becomes a signal for the presentation or occurrence of the other. Therefore, over time people learn that when the first stimulus occurs the second one will soon follow.

• The process of classical conditioning has important implications for attitude formation. People (children) who see their parents and significant others show some negative attitude towards particular groups, tend to pick up these vibes and consequently come to associate those persons or groups of people with such negativities or relate badly towards them.
Instrumental Conditioning-Attitudes

• This is a basic form of learning in which responses that lead to positive outcomes or that permit avoidance of negative outcomes are strengthened (Baron et al, 2007).

• The principles of instrumental learning (operant conditioning) emphasize the role of reinforcements on attitude formation. When individuals receive social approval for their attitudes or behaviors, these attitudes and behaviors become reinforced and strengthened. The reverse is also true.

• If you reward your children for stating the right views, (the ones you favor) you and other adults shape the attitudes of these children. No wonder children until they reach their teen years- when peer influences become strong, express political, religious and social views that are highly similar to those of their family members (Baron et al, 2007)

• It is a similar strategy that is adopted by politicians- telling the people what they want to hear, so they will reward you for holding the right opinions and exhibiting appropriate behavior by voting for you.
Observation & Imitation - Attitudes

• Attitudes can be formed even when parents are not aware of their transmission. Thus, through observation and imitation, children acquire various attitudes from their parents and others even when these attitudes have not been expressed directly through verbal instruction.

• This process is through **observational learning** and it is a basic form of learning in which individuals acquire new forms of behavior as a result of observing others.

• Again, most observational learning occurs for both children and adults as they watch Television. If it is violence, or prejudice, or crime etc, people are affected by these exposures in the mass media, severally.

• However when you tend to think that it is rather other people, but you are affected by such exposures (e.g. Violence in the media) you are said to be suffering the **third person effect** of media exposure.
Direct Instructions-Attitudes

• Attitudes can be learned through direct instructions obtained from parents, teachers, peers and other significant others.

• A parent can teach a child to be aggressive by instruction him or her to hit back when he/she is hit by a friend.

• Mostly, people attitudes on religious matters for example derive from the direct instructions of the dos and doys they are given.
Attitude Formation Via Personal Experience

• Though others are a useful source of attitude formation, individuals come to form attitudes also from their own personal experience.

• Others may provide descriptions but to know you like or hate a type of food, music, car, birth pangs etc, experience is best. Research suggests that attitudes formed through direct experience are stronger than those derived from others through indirect experience.

• Attitudes from direct experience are also held more confidently and are more resistant to change than those deriving from indirect experience. An example may be a religious experience, say of healing or speaking in tongues. If you have a religious encounter, your attitude towards such an encounter becomes steadfast and no one can convince you otherwise.
Topic Three

FUNCTIONS OF ATTITUDES
Functions of Attitudes (1)

• **Knowledge Function**: Attitudes satisfy a knowledge function by providing the individual with a framework for organizing the world so that it makes sense. Thus, attitudes color your perceptions and responses or reactions to things or people.

• **Identity/Value expression Function**: Attitudes can help you give a positive expression to your central values, beliefs and core aspects of your self-concept. This is psychologically satisfying for the individual and even social groups.

• **Self Esteem Function**: Holding a particular attitude can help you maintain or enhance your feelings of self-esteem or self worth. This is especially for attitudes with a strong moral component, which could be derived from adherence to religious or political beliefs, it can be self-validating to hold and act on these attitudes. (Manstead, 2000).
Functions of Attitudes (2)

• **Ego-Defensive Function:** by helping you to protect yourself from unwanted information about yourself. Thus, attitudes serve as defense mechanisms, shielding the self or ego from inner conflict or unpleasant truths.

• **Impression Motivation Function:** You may wish to make good impressions by expressing the right views. You can do this by generating arguments that support such right attitudes. If the motivation to impress people is stronger, the more arguments you will tend to generate.

• **Utilitarian/Adjustment Function:** The functional theorists suggest that you develop positive attitudes towards those objects or people that are associated with rewards and negative attitudes towards those associated with punishment.
Topic Four

ATTITUDE MEASUREMENT
Measuring Attitudes (1)

- **Likert Scale**: this approach places items on a scale which are chosen to be either highly favorable or highly unfavorable toward the attitude object, be it an issue, group or any object of interest.

- **Bi-Polar Scale**: this scale measures a subject's attitude on a continuum. One pole of the continuum represents the highest degree of a particular attitude and the other represents the highest degree of the opposing attitude, i.e., the lowest degree of the attitude.

- **Attitude Accessibility**: This measures how readily an attitude comes to mind (Fazio, 1995). The time it takes for a person to respond to an attitude question (response latency) determines the person’s attitude towards that subject.
Measuring Attitudes (2)

- **Implicit Attitude Measures**: Attitudes can also be measured implicitly when it is suspected that people are unwilling or unable to report their true feelings or opinions. *Affective priming/implicit association tests* (IATs) are two examples of implicit attitude measures used to tap non conscious attitudes (peoples evaluative reactions they may not be aware of or which conflict with their consciously endorsed attitudes).

- **Non-Verbal Cues**: Physiological indicators (smiling, degree of physical closeness, increased heart rate, sweaty palms, brain activity) may reveal the relative strength of positive or negative attitudes.
Topic Five

WHEN ATTITUDES PREDICT BEHAVIOUR
Specific rather than General Attitudes: The link between attitudes and behavior is significant or often exists when the attitude object chosen is specific rather than general. Thus, specific attitudes are better predictors of behavior than general ones (e.g., examining voting behavior).

Competing Attitudes: When two attitudes compete, the stronger one is more predictive of behavior. In other words, the stronger one takes precedence in determining behavior.

For instance, if the affective component is positive or strong (e.g., you are in love with someone), but the cognitive component is negative or less favorable (e.g., you have doubts about the relationship), the stronger component is highly consistent or more predictive of behavior. In other words, the individual will still keep the relationship despite the doubts s/he may hold because s/he is in love.
When Attitudes Predict Behaviour (2)

• **Attitude Strength**: Strong attitudes predict behavior better than weak ones. Attitude strength derives from personal/direct experience.

• **Vested Interests**: when the individual has a vested interest in the attitude object, the attitudes he holds towards that object are strong. For instance, your interest in issues such as gay rights, rights to abortions etc, will depend on the effects of these on your life.
When Attitudes Predict Behaviour (3)

- **Attitude Accessibility:** When attitudes (direct experience) are highly accessible, i.e. frequently thought about and quickly come to mind, they can be used to predict behavior. Thus, the more readily information is activated in memory, the greater the impact it will have on subsequent behavior. If an attitude is accessible when selecting a behavioral response, the more likely that attitude is to determine behavior, compared with those that are not accessible.

- **Time Factors:** Time is one other variable that influences the success of attitudes in predicting behavior. The longer the time interval between when an attitude is measured and when behavior occurs, the greater the probability that the person's attitude will change. For example, people's opinions of political candidates are more likely to change within a month than within a week. However, if people have bad opinions of political candidates and there is a long time lag before they have to vote, we cannot exactly predict their voting behavior – because people forget.
Sample Question

- Discuss with illustrative examples, five functions of attitudes
Session Summary

• This session established the fact that human beings are not born with the attitudes they have - attitudes are acquired through the process of socialization.

• Attitudes perform very useful functions. These functions correspond with people's needs. Thus, as our needs change, our attitudes also change.

• Attitudes are not always predictive of behaviour. One can only predict a person's behaviour from his/her attitude when certain conditions exist; when the attitude is specific, readily accessible and strong amongst others.
References

