

Attitudes, Attributions and Social Cognition

17



CHAPTER OUTLINE

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- The three components of attitude
- How do attitudes influence behaviour?
- Forming and changing attitudes

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter you should appreciate that:

- attitudes summarize beliefs, feelings and past behaviour regarding attitude objects – they can also predict behaviour;
- attitude–behaviour relations are strongest when attitudes are measured at the same level of specificity as the target behaviour;
- attitudes predict behaviour in conjunction with other variables (e.g. social norms, perceived control);
- people tend to be more influenced by message arguments when they are motivated and able to process the arguments;
- attribution theory concerns itself with the processes by which we use causal explanations for everyday events and behaviour in an effort to understand and make sense of the social world;
- schemas help us to categorize, evaluate and process social information quickly and efficiently;
- the processing of social information can occur anywhere along a continuum ranging from category-based processing (which is fast, automatic and unconscious) to data-based processing (which is slow, strategic, conscious and requires cognitive effort).

INTRODUCTION

People often try to influence others. Salespeople urge customers to buy goods or services; politicians exhort people to vote for them; dating partners try to make a good impression on each other; managers attempt to maintain employees' dedication to work; and advertisers try to raise interest in consumer products. In all of these examples, people try to make others like or dislike particular objects, ideas, individuals, groups or tasks.

Attitudes are tendencies to like or dislike something – such as an idea, person or behaviour – and the object of these tendencies (the thing being

liked or disliked) is often called the *attitude object*. Attitudes indirectly or directly affect behaviour in virtually every social interaction. This is why the study of attitudes and attitude change is a fundamental area of social psychological research.

We will tackle each of these questions before turning to a related topic – *attribution* theory. In everyday

attitude object the thing (e.g. idea, person, behaviour) that is accorded a favourable or unfavourable attitude

attribution an individual's belief about causality

life, we try to make sense of events and the behaviour of other people. Why did I get so angry in the meeting yesterday? Why did Sally leave Harry? Why does Hannah's baby have leukemia? Why did Manchester United fail to make the cup final this year? Attribution theory is the process of deriving causal explanations for events and behaviour – an important field of investigation in social psychology. The Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider (1958) saw this process as part of a commonsense or naive psychology – a basic property of human thinking that fulfils a need to predict and control the environment.

The final topic of this chapter binds the first two topics together. Attitudes and attributions summarize vast amounts of information from our complex social world. How do we process this information? And how do we use it to make judgments and draw inferences? These questions are central to the study of social cognition. Many of the concepts and experimental methods central to this field have been borrowed from work in cognitive psychology. But, while cognitive psychology concerns itself with how we perceive physical stimuli and objects, social cognition focuses on the perception and processing of social objects, such as people, social groups and events.

ATTITUDES

HOW DO YOU MEASURE AN ATTITUDE?

An attitude cannot be recorded directly. We cannot view someone's tendency to like something in the way we can see physical attributes, such as eye colour or running speed. Another difficulty is that attitudes can be expressed through many behaviours. For example, a person who likes music might listen to it all the time, buy countless CDs, attend numerous music concerts, and buy several magazines about music. How does a researcher go from information about such a variety of behaviours to an estimate of the person's fundamental attitude towards music?

One general approach is to examine one or more specific behaviours that are seen as directly reflecting attitude. For example, a person who has a negative attitude towards a particular immigrant group is likely to seek more physical distance from members of that group, avoid eye contact with them, show unpleasant facial expressions, and so on. Another general approach employs self-report questionnaires, which ask participants to express their attitude towards the particular object. The most common

version simply asks respondents to indicate their attitudes towards a named object using *semantic-differential scales*. So people might be asked to rate their attitude towards immigrants using a scale from -3 (extremely bad) to

semantic-differential scales these measure attitudes by using a dimension that depicts a strongly negative attitude at one end to a strongly positive attitude at the other

$+3$ (extremely good). Typically, though, people rate their attitude using several different scales, each labelled by different adjective pairs (negative/positive, worthless/valuable, unfavourable/favourable). Responses to the scales are then averaged to form an attitude score for each participant (see figure 17.1).

Of course, self-report measures can be affected by people's desire to state socially desirable attitudes. So while our respondents

above may reveal negative attitudes towards immigrants in their behaviour, their self-reports may appear more positive because they are reluctant to seem prejudiced. Contemporary research therefore frequently uses non-self-report measures in cases like this – i.e. when people's ability to rate their attitudes accurately is questionable. Despite this weakness, self-report measures have predicted a variety of relevant behaviours in past research, which suggests that we are at least somewhat accurate in reporting our own attitudes.

Other measures elicit attitudes without relying on self-reports and without relying on overt behaviours towards the attitude object. For example, a common approach is to present the names of objects that people might like or dislike on a computer screen. Then the computer presents an adjective (e.g. terrible, pleasant) and respondents are asked to decide whether it means a good thing or bad thing. This question is easy to answer, and most people can answer correctly every time. Nonetheless, responses to adjectives with a positive meaning (e.g. delightful) tend to be faster after people have seen something they like than after seeing something they do not like, whereas responses to adjectives with a negative connotation (e.g. awful) tend to be slower after people have seen something they like than after seeing something they dislike. By contrasting the speed of responses to the positive and negative adjectives, researchers can obtain a measure of attitude that predicts behaviour towards an attitude object (Fazio et al., 1995).

THE THREE COMPONENTS OF ATTITUDE

An important feature of attitudes is their ability to sum up several types of psychological information. Consider an American who favours US membership in a global pact to reduce air pollution. Her positive attitude towards the pact may summarize relevant cognitions, emotions and behaviours. She may:

- *believe* that the pact will be good for the environment (cognition);
- *feel* excited when she hears plans for the pact (emotion); and
- *sign* a petition supporting the pact (behaviour).

Using the scales below, please indicate your attitude towards immigrants. Immigrants are:

<u>Bad or Good?</u>						
Extremely bad -3	Very bad -2	Slightly bad -1	Neither 0	Slightly good +1	Very good <u>+2</u>	Extremely good +3
<u>Harmful or Beneficial?</u>						
Extremely harmful -3	Very harmful -2	Slightly harmful -1	Neither 0	Slightly beneficial +1	Very beneficial +2	Extremely beneficial <u>+3</u>
<u>Dislikeable or Likeable?</u>						
Extremely dislikeable -3	Very dislikeable -2	Slightly dislikeable -1	Neither <u>0</u>	Slightly likeable +1	Very likeable +2	Extremely likeable +3
<u>Negative or Positive?</u>						
Extremely negative -3	Very negative -2	Slightly negative -1	Neither 0	Slightly positive <u>+1</u>	Very positive +2	Extremely positive +3

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Attitude} &= \text{Mean rating} \\ &= (2+3+0+1) / 4 \\ &= 1.50 \end{aligned}$$

Figure 17.1

Sample semantic-differential scale.

three-component model states that beliefs, feelings and behaviour towards an object can influence attitudes towards it, and that these attitudes can reciprocally influence the beliefs, feelings and behaviours

This example illustrates the *three-component model* of attitude structure, which states that beliefs, feelings and behaviours form three distinct types of psychological information that are closely tied to attitudes (figure 17.2). This model predicts that:

1. beliefs, feelings and behaviour towards an object can influence attitudes towards it; and reciprocally
2. attitudes towards an object can influence beliefs, feelings and behaviours towards it.

In other words, any particular attitude affects these three components and/or is affected by them.

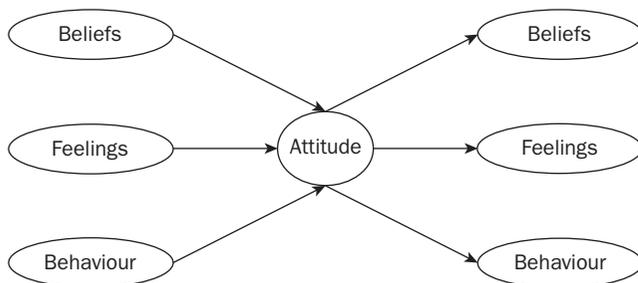


Figure 17.2

The three-component model of attitudes.

Effects of beliefs

It could be argued that persuasive messages such as advertisements often change attitudes by changing people’s beliefs about the object of the message. For example, anti-smoking ads attempt to change people’s beliefs about the consequences of smoking, and those beliefs should in turn influence their attitude towards smoking.

Consider a simple experiment in which Canadian participants received a booklet describing a study of a new immigrant group to Canada (Maio, Esses & Bell, 1994). The information in the booklet was manipulated to create positive and/or negative beliefs about the group. For example, some participants read that the immigrants scored above average on desirable personality traits (e.g. hardworking, honest), whereas other participants read that the group members scored below average on these traits. After reading the information, participants rated their attitudes towards the group. Not surprisingly, the results indicated that those who received positive information indicated more favourable attitudes towards the immigrant group than those who received negative information.

This simple demonstration is important from a practical perspective, because it demonstrates how even second-hand information about others can have a powerful effect on our attitudes towards them. When prejudice has arisen largely from indirect information, interventions encourage direct, positive interactions to change beliefs and reduce the prejudice.

Effects of feelings

If you look carefully at advertisements, you will find that many give very little information about the objects they are promoting. For example, an advertisement for a Citroen car shows



Figure 17.3

Anti-smoking advertisements aim to change people's beliefs about the consequences of smoking as a way of changing their attitudes.

supermodel Claudia Schiffer smiling and undressing on her way to the car, while upbeat music plays in the background. Rather than focusing on concrete information (e.g. performance, fuel economy), ads like this work by linking the product with positive feelings.

Research supports this technique. Many studies use a classical conditioning approach (see chapter 4), which exposes participants to the name of an attitude object together with an accompanying positive or negative stimulus (e.g. Cacioppo, Marshall-Goodell, Tassinari & Petty, 1992; Zanna, Kiesler & Pilkonis, 1970). Sometimes the stimulus is a direct, pleasant or unpleasant experience (e.g. presence or absence of a shock), and sometimes it is simply a word that has positive or negative association (e.g. 'happy' vs. 'sad'). The stimuli evoke positive or negative affective responses (figure 17.4), which in turn become linked in memory with the attitude object. So, whenever the attitude object is presented, the positive or negative affective response is recalled and experienced by association.

As you might expect, results typically indicate that people come to like objects that are paired with positive stimuli more

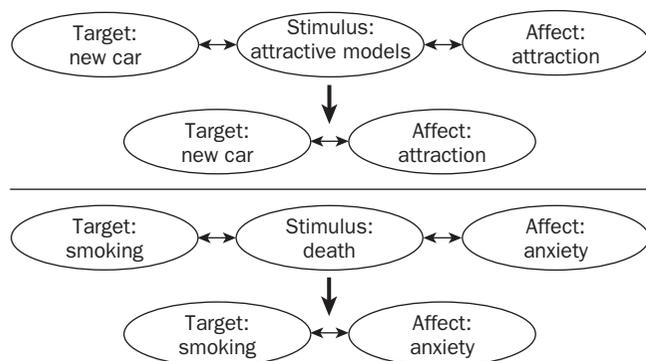


Figure 17.4

Classical conditioning approach to attitude formation.

than those that are paired with negative stimuli. This effect occurs even when the attitudes are measured in a different context. For example, one clever experiment exposed participants to a series of names, each followed by a positive or negative word. In this list, (a) positive words were linked with the name 'Ed' and negative words with the name 'George' or (b) positive words were linked with the name 'George' and negative words with the name 'Ed' (Berkowitz & Knurek, 1969). Participants then went to an ostensibly unrelated experiment, where they had a brief discussion with two confederates. The confederates' first names were George and Ed. Later, the confederates rated each participant's friendliness towards them as an indication of their attitudes. As expected, the participants were friendlier (i.e. they had a more positive attitude) towards the confederate whose name had been paired with the positive stimuli.

Effects of behaviour

Initiation rituals have often been prerequisites for acceptance into social groups, such as military squads and college fraternities and sororities. Would-be new members may be asked to perform embarrassing acts, such as streaking nude at a public event or dressing in a strange costume during classes. Why do new recruits not leave a group after enduring such ordeals? One possible explanation is that the behaviour of submission to group rules leads to more positive attitudes towards the group. In other words, the new recruit's behaviour affects his attitudes.

For many decades, the general effect of behaviour on attitudes has captured a great deal of interest. Researchers first began to notice an interesting effect arising from role-playing. For example, participants assigned to play the role of a person diagnosed with terminal lung cancer later reported more negative attitudes towards smoking than those who had listened to an audiotape of the role-play (Janis & Mann, 1965). Similarly, people assigned to debate a particular position on an issue such as legalized abortion subsequently express a more favourable attitude towards the position they have been required to advocate (e.g. Janis & King, 1954). People who merely listen to the participants' arguments do not show so much attitude change. Something about the role-playing behaviour drives the change.

What if the role-playing task explicitly requires *counter-attitudinal advocacy* – presenting an attitude or opinion that opposes the person's previous attitude? Suppose university students are asked to write an essay arguing for increased tuition fees – a position that obviously contradicts most students' feelings on this issue. Amazingly, they still tend to change their attitudes towards the position they have advocated (see

Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). Another interesting finding is that this attitude change is more likely when participants are given only a small incentive to argue the counter-attitudinal position than when they are given a large incentive.

counter-attitudinal advocacy presenting an attitude or opinion, within a role-play context, which opposes the person's initial attitude

Several theories help to explain this effect (e.g. Schlenker, 1982; Steele, 1988), but two are particularly prominent.

cognitive dissonance theory describes how people may feel an aversive tension when their behaviour is inconsistent with their attitude, and in order to reduce their discomfort, will change their behaviour to be consistent with their attitude

self-perception theory indicates that people may guess their own attitude from their behaviour towards the attitude object, particularly when they can see no external reasons for the behaviour

On the one hand, *cognitive dissonance theory* suggests that a small incentive makes people feel guilt or tension from having acted, behaviourally, against their original attitude without sufficient reason. To reduce their discomfort, they change their attitude (Festinger, 1957). This idea has also been used to explain the effects of initiation rituals. On the other hand, *self-perception theory* suggests that small incentives cause people to assume that their attitude must actually match the position they have advocated (Bem, 1972), because they can see no external reasons why they performed the behaviour.

Current evidence suggests that both theories have some validity. Apparently, cognitive dissonance processes may occur when people perform a behaviour that strongly contradicts their initial attitude (like the tuition fees example), whereas self-perception processes may occur when people perform a behaviour that is not so strongly contradictory (Fazio, Zanna & Cooper, 1977).

HOW DO ATTITUDES INFLUENCE BEHAVIOUR?

Ever since the beginning of attitude research, investigators have puzzled over the relation between attitudes and behaviour. Why do people sometimes say they like something and then act as if they do not? Are these instances much less frequent than instances where the attitude and behaviour match perfectly?

Measuring the attitude–behaviour link

Researchers were intrigued by the results of some early research that revealed very weak relations between attitudes and behaviour. In one study (LaPiere, 1934), a researcher and a young Chinese couple travelled around the Western portion of the US, visiting 250 restaurants, inns and hotels. Despite widespread American prejudice against Chinese people at that time, the researcher and his visitors were refused service at only one of the establishments. Yet, when he later wrote to these establishments requesting permission to visit with ‘a young Chinese gentleman and his wife’, 92 per cent refused permission! These refusals are often interpreted as indicators of negative attitudes towards Chinese people. Viewed this way, they provide some

of the earliest evidence that people’s behaviours (in this case, accepting the Chinese couple) can fail to match their attitudes towards the behaviour (i.e. their desire to refuse permission). This raised some doubts about the ability of attitudes to predict behaviours.

There were many methodological limitations to LaPiere’s study, however (Campbell, 1963). For example:

- the attitude and behaviour were measured at different times and locations;
- the attitude measure itself was, at best, indirect (LaPiere did not ask the restaurant owners to complete an attitude scale);
- the young couple may have looked more pleasant than the proprietors had imagined;
- the proprietors may have followed the norm of hospitality to guests once they entered the restaurant; and
- the situation in which behaviour was measured may simply have made it too difficult for most proprietors to refuse the Chinese couple, because of the embarrassing scene that might ensue.

Subsequent studies used more stringent procedures (see Wicker, 1969). Using a correlational technique, these studies tested whether people with positive attitudes towards a particular object exhibit more favourable behaviour towards the object than do people with negative attitudes towards the object. Even so, until 1962, researchers still found only weak relations between attitudes and behaviour.

The consistent failure to find strong attitude–behaviour correlations led researchers to search for explanations. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) pointed out that past research often failed to measure a behaviour that directly corresponded to the attitude being measured. For example, suppose we measure the relation between (a) attitudes towards protecting the environment and (b) using a recycling facility in a particular week. Even if someone is a strong environmentalist, there are many reasons why they might fail to recycle in a particular week (lack of a nearby facility, lack of time to sort recyclables, and so on). The problem is that the measured behaviour (recycling in a particular week) is very specific, whereas the attitude object (protecting the environment) is much more general.

To better measure ‘general’ behaviour, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) proposed the *multiple-act criterion*, which involves measuring a large number of behaviours that are relevant

multiple-act criterion assessment of many behaviours that are relevant to the attitude being measured

to the general attitude being studied. For example, to measure pro-environment behaviour, we could measure numerous pro-environment behaviours, including recycling across several weeks, willingness to sign pro-environment petitions and tendency to pick up litter. This would give us a more precise and reliable measure of behaviour. Weigel and Newman (1976) did just this and found much stronger attitude–behaviour relations by taking

Research close-up 1

The effects of behaviour on attitudes

The research issue

Before this experiment was conducted, most researchers were primarily interested in the effects of attitudes on behaviour. In contrast, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) set out to show that our behaviour can occasionally be awkwardly inconsistent with our true attitude and, to resolve this uncomfortable inconsistency, we may change our attitude to match the behaviour.

Design and procedure

The experiment consisted of three stages. In the first stage, the experimenter attempted to make participants dislike a series of boring tasks. Participants were falsely told that they were taking part in a study of 'measures of performance'. They were asked to put 12 spools on a tray, empty the tray, and refill it. Participants repeated this task for half an hour, using one hand, while the experimenter pretended to record their performance.

Next, participants were asked to use one hand to turn 48 square pegs on a board (a quarter turn one way, then the other way) for half an hour, while the experimenter continued to monitor their performance. Presumably, participants came to hate these dull tasks.

In the second stage, the experimenter asked the participants to tell a new participant that the tasks were interesting and enjoyable. The experimenter justified this request by stating that he was comparing the performance of participants who had been told nothing about the task with the performance of participants who had been given specific, positive expectations. The experimenter indicated that his colleague usually gave specific (positive) information to participants, but that this colleague had not arrived yet.

The experimenter then asked whether the participant could temporarily fill in and be 'on call' for future elements of the study. Virtually all of the participants agreed to this request. The participants then attempted to persuade the next participant (who was actually a confederate of the experimenter) that the tasks were interesting, fun, enjoyable, intriguing and exciting.

In the third stage, participants were asked to meet an interviewer to answer questions about the previous tasks (e.g. turning the pegs). One of the questions was about the extent to which participants enjoyed the tasks.

Festinger and Carlsmith expected that participants' intervening behaviour would cause them to like the tasks to a greater extent only when they believed they had been given little external incentive for engaging in the behaviour. If the behaviour was performed with little reward, participants should feel a need to justify the behaviour to themselves. To do this, they should change their attitude to support the behaviour. In other words, participants should come to believe that they actually liked the tasks that they had undertaken during the intervening period.

To test this reasoning, the experiment included a crucial manipulation: participants were offered either \$20 (a lot of money in the 1950s!) or \$1 to describe the dull tasks favourably to the other 'participant'.

Results and implications

As shown in figure 17.5, the results support this prediction. After the experimental manipulation, participants were more favourably disposed towards the tasks if they had been offered \$1 than if they had been offered \$20. In addition, participants who were offered \$1 were more favourably disposed than those who were not asked to say anything about the tasks (control condition).

Overall, these results support cognitive dissonance theory by showing that people can alter their attitudes to justify their past behaviour. Since this experiment, abundant research has shown that this attitude change helps to reduce an unpleasant arousal that people experience after performing the attitude-incongruent behaviour, while also finding some limitations to this effect (see Cooper & Fazio, 1984).

Festinger, L., & Carlsmith, J.M., 1959, 'Cognitive consequences of forced compliance', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 58, 203–10.

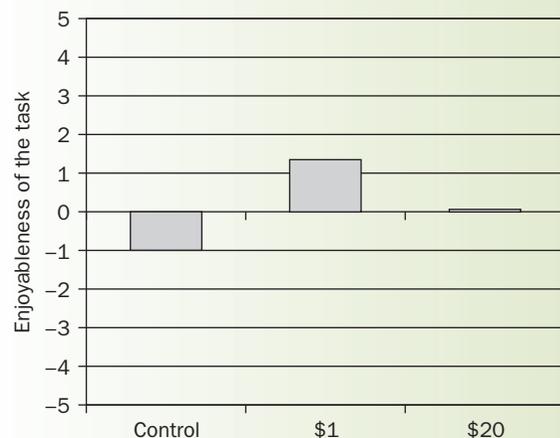


Figure 17.5

The effects of reward on participants' enjoyment of the dull tasks in Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) experiment.

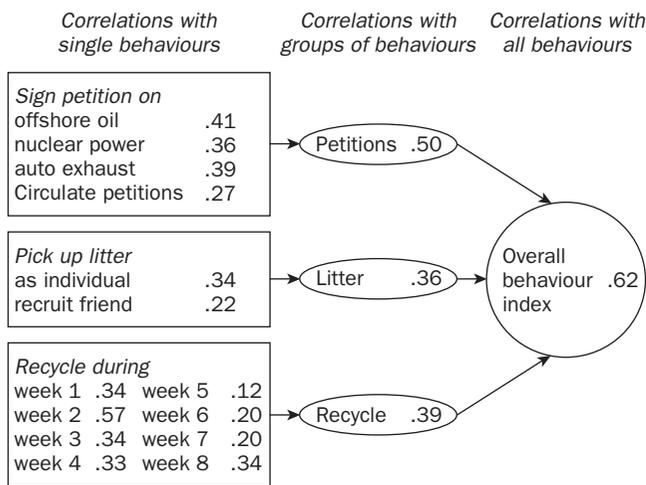


Figure 17.6

Correlations between attitudes towards environmental preservation and measure of environmental behaviour. Source: Weigel and Newman (1976).

Pioneers

Martin Fishbein (1936–) and **Icek Ajzen’s** (1942–) research has provided valuable insights into the relations between attitudes and behaviour, attitude theory and measurement, communication and persuasion, behavioural prediction and change, and behaviour change intervention. They conducted many influential studies of these topics in both field and laboratory settings, many of which applied and evaluated the theory of planned behaviour. Their theories of attitude–behaviour relations have laid the foundation for hundreds of studies attempting to predict important health-related behaviours (e.g. cessation of smoking, condom use). Their research has particularly focused on the relation between verbal attitudes and overt behaviour.

an average measure of all of the behaviours, rather than any single behaviour (figure 17.6).

Predicting behaviour

Behaviour is normally influenced by more than attitudes alone. For instance, as we discussed previously, the behaviour of people towards the Chinese couple in LaPiere’s study would also have been influenced by social norms – the socially prescribed ways of behaving in a situation (Campbell, 1963).

Ajzen (1991) developed a model of attitude–behaviour relations that recognized the impact of social norms. According to this theory of planned behaviour (figure 17.7), actual behaviour

is influenced by *behavioural intentions* – intentions to perform or not to perform the behaviour (see also chapter 19). These intentions, in turn, are influenced by:

behavioural intentions intentions to perform or not to perform a specific behaviour

- the attitude towards the behaviour – the individual’s evaluations of the positive and negative consequences of performing the behaviour;
- the subjective norms regarding the behaviour – the individual’s desire to behave in the same way as people who are important to him think he should behave; and
- perceived control over performance of the behaviour – the extent to which the individual believes he can control whether he performs the behaviour.

According to the theory, when attitudes and subjective norms support a target behaviour and perceived control over the performance of the behaviour is high, intentions to perform the behaviour should be stronger. People who form strong intentions should be more likely to perform the behaviour. Abundant research has supported these predictions (see Conner & Armitage, 1998), while also making it clear that the theory neglects several additional important predictors of behaviour – such as a sense of moral obligation to perform the target behaviour (Schwartz, 1977) and the pattern of the individual’s past behaviour in similar situations (Ouellette & Wood, 1998).

Accessible vs. inaccessible attitudes

According to Fazio (1990), attitudes often influence behaviour through a spontaneous process. Effects of attitudes can occur quickly, but only for people whose attitude is accessible (easy to retrieve). When attitudes are accessible, they come to mind instantly when we see the attitude object. The attitude then influences how we behave towards the object. If the attitude is less accessible, it doesn’t come to mind, and so it doesn’t influence our behaviour.

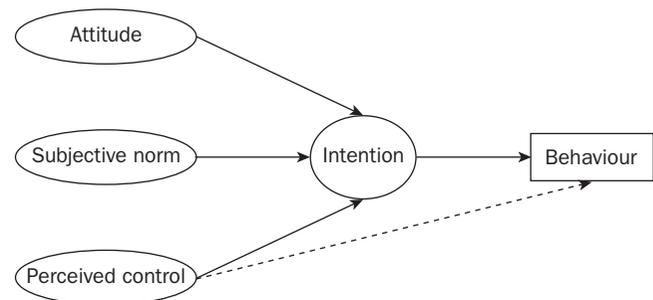


Figure 17.7

The theory of planned behaviour. The dashed line indicates that the effect of perceived control on behaviour occurs only when perceived control matches actual control.

For example, suppose you are walking by an ice cream seller. You may spontaneously recall your passion for ice cream, and this attitude may motivate a decision to buy some. But if you don't spontaneously recall your attitude (because it is inaccessible – perhaps you are distracted by a more pressing thought at the time you walk past the ice cream seller), it will lie dormant and not elicit the decision to buy. Indeed, there's a great deal of evidence that attitudes do exert a stronger influence on behaviour when they are accessible than when they are difficult to retrieve (Fazio, 2000).

FORMING AND CHANGING ATTITUDES

Incentive for change

attitude function the psychological needs that an attitude fulfils

To understand how attitudes can be changed, it is first important to understand *attitude functions* – the psychological needs that attitudes fulfil (Maio & Olson, 2000). Early theories proposed a number of important attitude functions (table 17.1). For example, people may have a positive attitude towards objects that help them become popular among people they like, but not objects that make them estranged from those people. This is the social adjustment function, which provides the basis for the entire fashion industry: people tend to like clothing that is popular among people they like.

In the earliest model of attitude change, Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) suggested that persuasive messages change people's attitudes when they highlight some incentive for this change. For example, an advertisement might describe the utilitarian benefits of buying a particular model of car (e.g. good fuel economy) or the social-adjustment benefits (e.g. a sporty look). The incentives must seem important if the message recipients are to change their attitude.

Hovland et al.'s theory also suggests that processing of any message must occur in stages if it is to be successful. The intended audience must:

1. pay attention to the message,
2. comprehend the message, and
3. accept the message's conclusions.

Table 17.1 Seminal theories of attitude function.

Function	Definition
Object appraisal/ utilitarian	Summarize the positive and negative attributes of objects in our environment.
Social adjustment	Help identify with people whom we like and dissociate from people whom we dislike.
Ego-defence/ externalization	Protect the self from internal conflict.
Value expression	Express self-concept and personal values.

Source: Selected functions from Katz (1960); Smith, Bruner and White (1956).

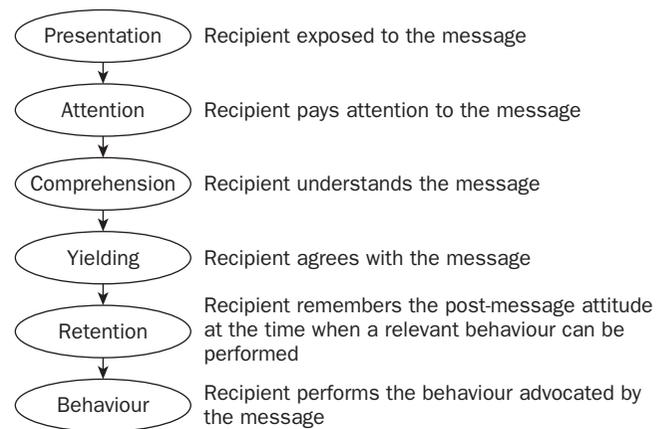


Figure 17.8

McGuire's (1969) information-processing approach to persuasion.

McGuire (1969) extended this theory further. According to his model, a message will elicit the desired behaviour only if it succeeds at six stages (figure 17.8). People must:

1. encounter the message (presentation stage);
2. attend to it (attention stage);
3. understand it (comprehension stage);
4. change their attitude (yielding stage);
5. remember their new attitude at a later time (retention stage); and
6. the new attitude must influence their behaviour (behaviour stage).

Interestingly, even if the odds of passing each stage are quite good, the chances of completing all the stages can be low. For example, we might optimistically assume that a Nike running shoe ad has an 80 per cent chance of success at each stage. If this were the case, the laws of probability indicate that the odds of successfully completing all of the stages would be only 0.26 ($0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8$). In other words, the ad would have a 26 per cent chance of getting someone to buy the running shoes.

In reality, the odds of completion of each stage (especially yielding and behaviour) may be far lower, creating even lower chances of success (possibly less than 1 per cent). For this reason, modern marketing initiatives take steps to compel completion of each stage, where this is possible. So advertisers will present the message many times, make it attention-grabbing and memorable, and make the message content as powerful as they can.

Motivation and ability

Two newer models of persuasion, the 'elaboration likelihood model' (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the 'heuristic-systematic model' (Chaiken, Liberman & Eagly, 1989), predict that the effects of persuasive messages depend on people's motivation and ability to think carefully about them. If someone is highly motivated and able to process a persuasive message, they should be heavily



Figure 17.9

Advertisements often use attractive or well-known people to endorse their products. Under what conditions is this strategy effective?

influenced by the strength of the arguments in the message. But if they are less motivated or able to process the message, then they should be strongly affected by simple cues within the message, such as the presenter’s attractiveness or expertise. Many variables influence motivation and ability. Motivation is high when the message is relevant to personal goals and there is a fear of being wrong. Ability is high when people are not distracted and when they possess high cognitive skills. Although all of these variables have been studied in connection with both models of persuasion, most of this research has focused on the personal relevance of the message.

For example, Petty et al. (1983) found that the attractiveness of the spokesperson presenting a message influences attitudes when the issue is not personally relevant, but has no effect when the issue is personally relevant. In contrast, the strength of the argument within the message influences attitudes when the issue is personally relevant, but not when the issue is not personally relevant. These findings support the predictions of the elaboration likelihood model and the heuristic–systematic model.

Although many experiments have revealed similar effects, the heuristic–systematic model suggests that high personal relevance

should not always lead to the lower use of cues such as the presenter’s attributes. For example, when a personally relevant message contains ambiguous arguments (i.e. it has strengths and weaknesses), people may be more persuaded by a message from an expert source than from an inexperienced source (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994). According to this model, high personal relevance causes people to use environmental cues when the message arguments themselves provide no clear conclusions. This prediction has received some experimental support (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994).

ATTRIBUTIONS

EARLY THEORIES OF ATTRIBUTION

We said earlier that attributions are explanations for events and behaviour. Heider differentiated between two types of causal attribution – personal and situational. Personal attributions refer to factors within the person, such as their personality characteristics, motivation, ability and effort. Situational attributions refer to factors within the environment that are external to the person. For example, if we were discussing why a particular student has failed an important university examination, we would consider personal factors (such as her academic ability and how much effort she invested in preparing for the exam). But we might also look at situational attributions (such as whether she had good tuition, access to library facilities and sufficient time to study).

Heider noted that we tend to overestimate internal or personal factors and underestimate situational factors when explaining behaviour. This tendency has become known as the fundamental attribution error, which we’ll return to in the next section.

In a similar vein, Jones and Davis (1965) found that we tend to make a correspondent inference about another person when we are looking for the cause of their behaviour. In other words, we tend to infer that the behaviour, and the intention that produced it, correspond to some underlying stable quality. For example, a correspondent inference would be to attribute someone’s aggressive behaviour to an internal and stable trait within the person – in this case, aggressiveness. Jones and Davis argued that this tendency is motivated by our need to view people’s behaviour as intentional and predictable, reflecting their underlying personality traits. But in reality, making correspondent inferences is not always a straightforward business. The information we need in order to make the inferences can be ambiguous, requiring us to draw on additional cues in the environment, such as the social desirability of the behaviour, how much choice the person had, or role requirements.

Like Heider, Kelley (1967) likened ordinary onlookers to naive scientists who weigh up several factors when attributing causality. Kelley’s covariation model of attribution states that, before two events can be accepted as causally linked, they must co-occur. The covariation of events and behaviour was assessed across three important dimensions:

Research close-up 2

Personal relevance and the processing of persuasive messages

The research issue

Petty, Cacioppo and Goldman (1981) were interested in exploring whether the personal relevance of a topic affects the way in which people process persuasive messages about that topic.

According to their elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), people should process a message carefully when it is highly relevant to them. This careful processing should lead to positive thoughts about strongly argued personally relevant messages and negative thoughts about weakly argued personally relevant messages, and these thoughts should influence attitudes towards the topic of the message.

In contrast, when the message is not personally relevant, people should process the message superficially. This superficial processing should lead to the use of easily discernible cues (such as the expertise or attractiveness of the speaker) when evaluating the message.

Design and procedure

Participants were undergraduate university students. They were told that their university was re-evaluating its academic policies, and that the chancellor had asked several groups to prepare policy recommendations to be broadcast on the campus radio station. Participants then heard a recording that advocated the implementation of new comprehensive examinations of students' knowledge in their area of specialization (e.g. psychology) prior to graduation. These exams would be added to the existing exams for each course.

Three variables were manipulated in this experiment:

1. the personal relevance of the issue – some participants were told that the new exams would be implemented in the following year (high relevance), whereas others were told that the exams would be implemented in ten years' time (low relevance);
2. the expertise of the source of the proposal – half the participants were told that the proposal had been formulated by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (high expertise), and the others were told that it had been formulated by a class at a local high school (inexpert source); and
3. the exam proposal, which contained either strong or weak arguments – the strong arguments provided substantial evidence to support the proposal, including evidence that the new exams led to better scores on standardized achievement tests at other universities, while the weak arguments relied on anecdotes and little evidence.

After reading the proposal, participants were asked to rate their attitudes towards the implementation of the comprehensive exams. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Petty et al. expected that attitudes would be influenced by the strength of the message when the issue was made to seem personally relevant, and by source expertise when the issue was made to seem personally irrelevant.

Results and implications

As shown in figure 17.10, the results support these predictions.

When the issue was personally relevant, participants who read the strong arguments formed more positive attitudes than those who read the weak arguments. When the issue was of low relevance, participants who read the strong arguments did not form significantly more positive attitudes.

When the issue was personally relevant, participants who received the proposal from an expert source did not form more positive attitudes than those who received the proposal from an inexpert source. When the issue was not personally relevant, participants who received the proposal from an expert source did form more positive attitudes.

It seems that high personal relevance of an issue can cause people to consider more thoroughly logically relevant arguments and to be less influenced by simple cues. Since this experiment, numerous other studies have replicated this pattern in a variety of settings (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990).

Petty, R.E., Cacioppo, J.T., & Goldman, R., 1981, 'Personal involvement as a determinant of argument-based persuasion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 41, 847–55.

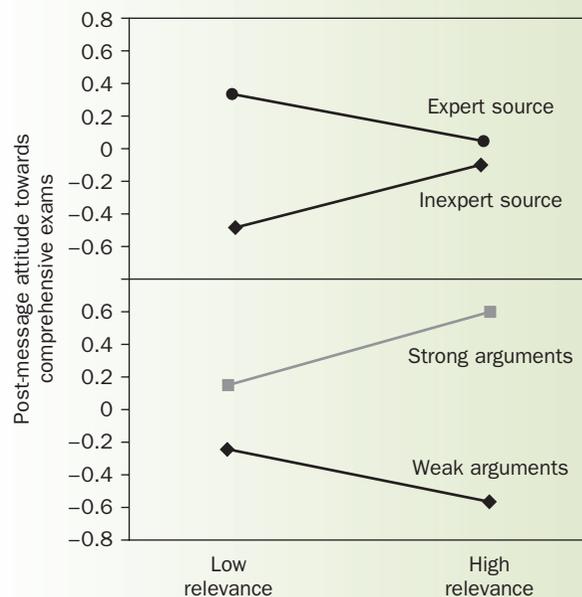


Figure 17.10

Results from Petty et al. (1981).

1. consistency – does the person respond in the same way to the same stimuli over time?
2. distinctiveness – do they behave in the same way to other different stimuli, or is the behaviour distinctively linked to specific stimuli?
3. consensus – do observers of the same stimuli respond in a similar way?

Kelley argued that we systematically analyse people- and environment-related information, and that different combinations of information lead to different causal attributions.

For example, while attributing causality for behaviour like ‘John laughed at the comedian’, we would run through the following considerations:

1. If John always laughs at this comedian, then his behaviour is highly consistent.
2. If John is easily amused by comedians, then his behaviour has low distinctiveness.
3. If practically no one else in the audience laughed at the comedian, then his behaviour has low consensus.

A combination of high consistency, low distinctiveness and low consensus would lead to a dispositional (internal) attribution for John’s laughter, such as ‘John has a peculiar tendency to laugh at all comedians; he must be very easily amused.’ In contrast, a combination of high consistency, high distinctiveness and high consensus would lead to an external attribution, such as ‘John likes this comedian, but he doesn’t like many other comedians, and other people like this comedian too; this comedian must be funny’ (McArthur, 1972).

THE EFFECTS OF BIAS

Both the Jones–Davis and the Kelley models of attribution view the social perceiver as a rational person who uses logical principles of thinking when attributing causality. But empirical research

Pioneer

Susan Fiske (1952–) has been at the forefront of research in the field of social cognition since the late 1970s. She has contributed important research on a number of topics, including the development of schemas, schema-triggered affect, categorical processing, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, and is co-author with Shelley Taylor of two editions of the leading source book in this field, *Social Cognition*. Beginning with the premise that people readily categorize other people (especially based on race, gender and age), Fiske’s research addresses how stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination are encouraged or discouraged by social relationships, such as cooperation, competition and power.

has discovered persistent biases in the attributional processes. According to Fiske and Taylor (1991), bias occurs if the social perceiver systematically distorts (over-uses or under-uses) what are thought to be correct and logical procedures. We will now look in more detail at four of the most pervasive biases: the fundamental attribution error, the actor–observer effect, the self-serving bias and the ultimate attribution error.

The fundamental attribution error

Ross (1977) defined the fundamental attribution error (FAE) as the tendency to underestimate the role of situational or external factors, and to overestimate the role of dispositional or internal factors, in assessing behaviour.

The earliest demonstration of the FAE was an experiment by Jones and Harris (1967), in which American college students were presented with another student’s written essay that was either for or against the Castro government in Cuba. Half the participants were told that the essay writer had freely chosen whether to write a ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ Castro essay (choice condition), and the other half were told that the essay writer was told which position to take (no-choice condition). After reading the essay, participants were asked what the essay writer’s ‘true’ attitude was towards Castro’s Cuba. The participants tended to view the writer’s attitude as consistent with the views expressed in the essay, regardless of the choice/no-choice condition. While they didn’t totally disregard that the no-choice writers had been told what position to take, they viewed this as less important than their attitudinal disposition. In other words, they underestimated the impact of the no-choice condition. In another classic study, Ross, Amabile and Steinmetz (1977) randomly assigned pairs of participants in a quiz game to act as contestant and questioner. Questioners were instructed to set ten difficult general knowledge questions of their own choosing. Despite the relative situational advantage of the questioners, both the contestants and observers of the quiz game rated the questioners as significantly more knowledgeable than the contestants.

Pioneer

Harold Kelley (1921–2003), Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), was a distinguished pioneer and contributor to social psychology. He provided two seminal models of the attribution process, which explained attributions across multiple and single events and stimulated abundant subsequent research in the field. In making attributions, Kelley regarded individuals as applied scientists who also use cognitive heuristics or ‘causal schemata’. His work described the kinds of attribution scenarios in which these schemata would be engaged. In addition to his seminal work in attribution theory, Kelley contributed to classic theories of attitude change and of interdependence in relationships.

Pioneer

Carl Hovland (1912–61) After researching the effects of propaganda for the US military, Carl Hovland founded the Yale communication and attitude change program. The program established a reinforcement perspective on attitude formation and change and conducted numerous seminal experiments on various aspects of the persuasion process including effects of audience, message, and source variables.

Heider put forward a largely cognitive explanation for the FAE. He suggested that behaviour has such salient properties that it tends to dominate our perceptions. In other words, what we notice most in (a) behaviour and (b) communication is (c) the person who is central to both. People are dynamic actors – they move, talk and interact, and these features come to dominate our perceptual field. Supporting this cognitive explanation, Fiske and Taylor (1991, p. 67) argued that situational factors such as social context, roles and situational pressures are ‘relatively pallid and dull’ in comparison with the charisma of the dynamic actor. While this is a commonsense and intuitive explanation, we discuss later in this chapter how this bias is only pervasive in Western individualistic cultures. So the FAE turns out to be not so fundamental after all!

The actor–observer effect

While we tend to attribute other people’s behaviour to dispositional factors, we tend to attribute our own behaviour to situational factors (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). This is called the actor–observer effect (AOE).

Consider how easily we explain our own socially undesirable behaviour (such as angry outbursts) to extenuating, stressful circumstances, and yet we are less sympathetic when others behave in this way. Instead, we often conclude that the person is intolerant, impatient, unreasonable, selfish, etc. This bias has been found in both laboratory experiments (Nisbett et al., 1973) and applied clinical settings. For example, psychologists and psychiatrists are more likely to attribute their clients’ problems to internal stable dispositions, whereas the clients are more likely to attribute their own problems to situational factors (Antonio & Innes, 1978). There are several competing explanations for the AOE, but we will outline just two of them here.

1 Perceptual salience As for the FAE, one explanation is perceptual and essentially argues that actors and observers quite literally have ‘different points of view’ (Storms, 1973). As actors, we can’t see ourselves acting. From an actor’s point of view, what is most salient and available are the situational influences on behaviour – the objects, the people, the role requirements and the social setting. But from an observer’s point of view, other people’s behaviour is more dynamic and salient than the situation or context. These different vantage points for actors and

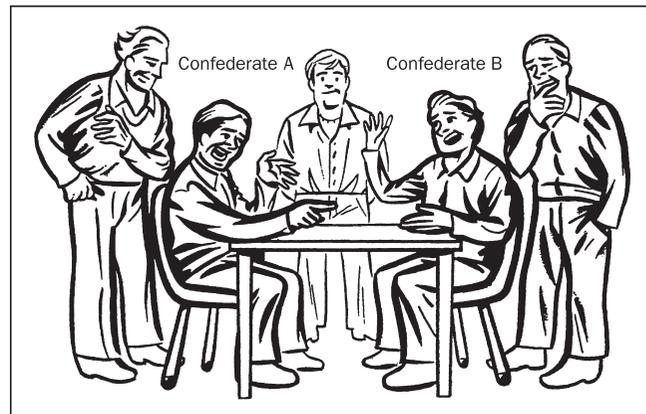


Figure 17.11

A schematic figure of a study that attempted to test the perceptual salience hypothesis. Two confederates sat facing each other and were engaged in conversation. They were observed from three different vantage points – from behind Confederate A, from behind Confederate B, and from midway between A and B. Consistent with the perceptual salience hypothesis, the results showed that observers sitting behind A, watching B, rated B as more causal, while those sitting behind B, watching A, saw A as more causal. The observers watching from midway between A and B perceived both as equally influential. Source: Based on Taylor and Fiske (1975).

observers appear to lead to different attributional tendencies, i.e. situational attributions for actors and dispositional attributions for observers.

Taylor and Fiske (1975) attempted to test the perceptual salience hypothesis by placing observers at three different vantage points around two male confederates who sat facing each other engaged in conversation. Observers sat either behind confederate A with confederate B in their direct visual field, or behind B, watching A, or to the side, between A and B with both in sight (figure 17.11). After A and B had interacted for five minutes, each observer was asked to rate each confederate on various trait dimensions, and the extent to which their behaviour was caused by dispositional and situational factors. They also rated how much each confederate (a) set the tone of the conversation, (b) determined the kind of information exchanged and (c) caused the other’s behaviour.

Consistent with the perceptual salience hypothesis, Taylor and Fiske found that the two observers sitting behind A, watching B, rated B as more causal, while those sitting behind B, watching A, saw A as more causal. The observers sitting in between A and B perceived both confederates as equally influential.

In a similar vein, McArthur and Post (1977) manipulated the salience of two people engaged in conversation through the use of lighting. When one participant was made more salient than the other by being illuminated by bright light, observers rated the behaviour of the illuminated person as more dispositionally and less situationally caused.

2 Situational information Another explanation for the AOE focuses on information. Actors have more information about the

situational and contextual influences on their behaviour, including its variability and flexibility across time and place. But observers are unlikely to have such detailed information about the actors unless they know them very well, and have observed their behaviour over time and in many different situations. It therefore seems that observers assume more consistency in other people's behaviour compared to their own, and so make dispositional attributions for others, while making situational attributions for their own behaviour (Nisbett et al., 1973).

The self-serving bias

It is well known that people tend to accept credit for success and deny responsibility for failure. More generally, we also tend to attribute our success to internal factors such as ability, but attribute failure to external factors such as bad luck or task difficulty. This is known as the self-serving bias.

How often have we heard governments taking credit when there is national economic growth and prosperity, attributing it to their economic policies and prudent financial management? And yet, in times of economic hardship, they are quick to blame external causes, such as the international money markets or worldwide recession. Although the strength of the self-serving bias varies across cultures, it has been found to occur cross-culturally (Fletcher & Ward, 1988; Kashima & Triandis, 1986).

The usual explanation is motivational factors: that is, the need for individuals to enhance their self-esteem when they succeed and protect their self-esteem when they fail. Attributing success to internal causes has been referred to as the self-enhancing bias, and attributing failure to external causes as the self-protection bias (Miller & Ross, 1975). But Miller and Ross argue that there is only clear support for the self-enhancing bias, and that people do often accept personal responsibility for failure. They also claim that the self-enhancing bias can be explained by cognitive factors without recourse to motivational explanations. For example, we are more likely to make self-attributions for expected than unexpected outcomes, and most of us expect to succeed rather than fail. Even so, it is difficult to argue against the motivational hypothesis, and the prevailing consensus is that both motivational and cognitive factors have a part in the self-serving bias (Ross & Fletcher, 1985).

The motivation for self-enhancement is also linked to achievement attributions. According to Weiner's (1985; 1986) attributional theory of motivation and emotion, the attributions people make for success and failure elicit different emotional consequences, and are characterized by three underlying dimensions – locus, stability and control (table 17.2).

- The locus dimension refers to whether we attribute success and failure internally or externally. Consistent with the self-enhancement bias, we are more likely to feel happier and better about ourselves if we attribute our success internally (to factors such as ability and effort) rather than externally (to good luck or an easy task). In contrast, attributing failure internally is less likely to make us feel good about ourselves than attributing it externally.

Table 17.2 Achievement attributions for success and failure, and their characteristics on the three underlying dimensions of locus, stability and control.

	<i>Locus</i>	<i>Stability</i>	<i>Control</i>
Ability	internal	stable	uncontrollable
Effort	internal	unstable	controllable
Luck	external	unstable	uncontrollable
Task difficulty	external	unstable	uncontrollable

Source: Adapted from Weiner (1985; 1986).

- The stability dimension refers to whether the cause is perceived as something fixed and stable (like personality or ability) or something changing and unstable (such as motivation or effort).
- The controllability dimension refers to whether we feel we have any control over the cause.

The tendency to attribute negative outcomes and failure to internal, stable and uncontrollable causes is strongly associated with clinical depression and has been referred to as a depressive attributional style (see chapters 14 and 15). The reformulated learned helplessness model of depression (Abramson et al., 1978) views this attributional style as directly causing depression. But others have argued that it is merely a symptom, reflecting the affective state of the depressed individual. Whether it is a cause or symptom, attributional retraining programmes (Försterling, 1985), in which people are taught to make more self-enhancing attributions, are widely accepted as an important therapeutic process for recovery from depression.

The ultimate attribution error

The self-serving bias also operates at the group level. So we tend to make attributions that protect the group to which we belong. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in what Pettigrew (1979) called the ultimate attribution error (UAE).

By extending the fundamental attribution error to the group context, Pettigrew demonstrated how the nature of intergroup relations shapes the attributions that group members make for the same behaviour by those who are in-group and out-group members. So prejudicial attitudes and *stereotypes* of disliked out-groups lead to derogating attributions, whereas the need for positive enhancement and protection of the in-group leads to group-serving attributions. People are therefore more likely to make internal attributions for their group's positive and socially desirable behaviour, and external attributions for the same positive behaviour displayed by out-groups. In contrast, negative or socially undesirable in-group behaviour is usually explained externally, whereas negative out-group behaviour is more frequently explained internally.

stereotype mental representations of social groups and their members that include behavioural and trait characteristics that are widely shared in society



Figure 17.12

In a study by Hunter et al., both Catholic and Protestant students attributed their own group's violence to external causes and the opposing group's violence to internal causes.

This intergroup bias has been found in a number of contexts (Hewstone, 1990). Taylor and Jaggi (1974) found it among Hindus in southern India, who gave different attributions for exactly the same behaviour performed by Hindu and Muslim actors. Duncan (1976) found that white American college students categorized the same pushing behaviour as 'violent' if perpetrated by a black actor but as 'just playing around' when perpetrated by a white actor. The most dramatic illustration of the UAE is an investigation by Hunter, Stringer and Watson (1991) of how real instances of violence are explained by Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Catholic students made predominantly external attributions for their own group's violence but internal, dispositional attributions for Protestant violence. Similarly, Protestant students attributed their own group's violence to external causes and Catholic violence to internal causes.

There is also substantial evidence of the tendency to make more favourable attributions for male success and failure. Studies have found that both men and women are more likely to attribute male success to ability and female success to effort and luck, especially in tasks that are perceived to be 'male' (Deaux & Major, 1987; Swim & Sanna, 1996). The same bias is found for failure attributions – male failure is explained by lack of effort, whereas female failure is attributed to lack of ability. Bear in mind though that most of these studies were conducted in the seventies and eighties, and relatively few have been published more recently (Swim & Sanna, 1996). Given the social and attitudinal changes associated with women's roles over this time, and the fact that the effects were relatively small, it is possible that these biases have now diminished in Western societies (Hill & Augoustinos, 1997).

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

There is now strong evidence that people in non-Western cultures do not make the same kinds of attributions as people in Western individualistic societies. The fundamental attribution error, which was originally thought to be a universal cognitive bias, is not

found in collectivist cultures. Instead, many non-Western people place less emphasis on internal dispositional explanations, and more emphasis on external and situational explanations (Shweder & Bourne, 1982).

Miller (1984) was among the first social psychologists to suggest that such differences arise from different cultural representations of the person that are learned during social development, rather than from cognitive and perceptual factors. Western notions of the person are predominantly individualistic, emphasizing the central importance and autonomy of the person, whereas non-Western notions tend to be holistic, stressing the interdependence between the person and their social relationships, role obligations and situational norms.

Miller (1994) conducted a cross-cultural study to compare the attributions made for prosocial and deviant behaviours by a sample of Americans and Indian Hindus of three different age groups (eight, eleven and fifteen years) and an adult group with a mean age of 40. Miller found that the older Americans made significantly more dispositional attributions than the older Hindus, and Hindus made significantly more situational attributions. There were few significant differences between the American and Hindu children aged eight and eleven. But Miller found a significant linear age increase in dispositional attributions among Americans, and a similar linear age increase in situational attributions for the Indian sample (figure 17.13). It therefore appears that the FAE is very culture specific, and the cognitive and perceptual explanations originally advanced for the FAE need to be reconsidered in light of Miller's findings.

Moscovici and Hewstone (1983) proposed that attributions are not only cognitive, but also social and cultural phenomena that are based on social representations – consensually shared knowledge, beliefs and meaning systems that are learned and socially communicated through language (Moscovici, 1984). Every society has its own stock of common sense and culturally agreed explanations for a wide range of phenomena, such as health and illness, success and failure, wealth and poverty, prosocial and deviant behaviour. People do not necessarily engage in an exhaustive cognitive analysis to explain events around them, as some of the early models of attribution suggest (Kelley, 1967). Instead, they draw on socially shared and readily culturally available explanations.

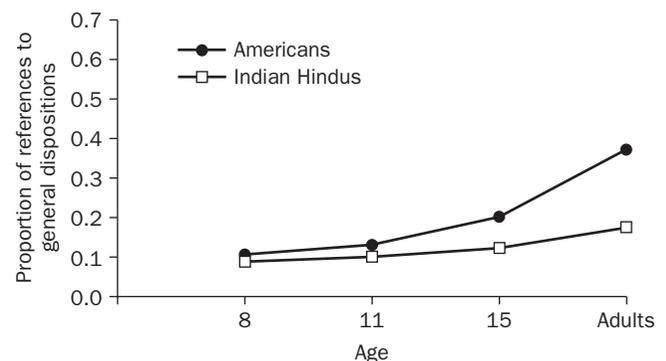


Figure 17.13

Cultural and developmental patterns of dispositional attribution. Source: Based on Miller (1984).

SOCIAL COGNITION

SOCIAL SCHEMAS

It would be very difficult to function if we went about our everyday lives without prior knowledge or expectations about the people, roles, norms and events in our community. Social cognition research suggests that our behaviour and interactions in the social world are facilitated by cognitive representations in our minds called schemas – mental or cognitive structures that contain general expectations and knowledge of the world (see chapters 11 and 12).

A schema contains both abstract knowledge and specific examples about a particular social object. It ‘provides hypotheses about incoming stimuli, which includes plans for interpreting and gathering schema-related information’ (Taylor & Crocker, 1981, p. 91). Schemas therefore give us some sense

cognitive miser someone who minimizes effort and energy when processing information, making ‘top of the head’ judgements, evaluations and inferences, with little thought or considered deliberation

person schemas a configuration of personality traits used to categorize people and to make inferences about their behaviour – also referred to as person prototypes

self schemas cognitive representations of the self that organize and process all information that is related to the self

role schemas knowledge structures of the behavioural norms and expected characteristics of specific role positions in society based on people’s age, gender, race, occupation, etc.

event schemas cognitive structures that describe behavioural and event sequences in everyday activities such as eating at a restaurant, attending a lecture or shopping at a supermarket

of prediction and control of the social world. They guide what we attend to, what we perceive, what we remember and what we infer. All schemas appear to serve similar functions – they all influence the encoding (taking in and interpretation) of new information, memory for old information and inferences about missing information.

Not only are schemas functional, but they are also essential to our well-being. A dominant theme in social cognition research is that we are *cognitive misers*, economizing as much as we can on the effort we need to expend when processing information. Many judgements, evaluations and inferences we make in the hustle and bustle of everyday life are said to be ‘top of the head’ phenomena (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), made with little thought and considered deliberation. So schemas are a kind of mental short-hand used to simplify reality and facilitate processing.

Schema research has been applied to four main areas: *person schemas*, *self schemas*, *role schemas* and *event schemas* (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Person schemas

Person schemas – often referred to as person prototypes – are configurations of personality traits that we use to categorize people and to make inferences about their behaviour. (The prototype is the ‘central tendency’, or average, of the category members.) In most Western cultures we tend to categorize individuals in terms of their dominant personality traits. We may infer from our observations and interactions with A that he is shy, or that B is opinionated. Most people would agree that Robin Williams is a prototypical extrovert and Woody Allen is a prototypical neurotic.

Trait or person schemas enable us to answer the question: ‘what kind of person is he or she?’ (Cantor & Mischel, 1979). In so doing, they help us to anticipate the nature of our social interactions with individuals, giving us a sense of control and predictability.

Self schemas

Just as we represent and store information about others, we do the same about ourselves, developing complex and varied schemas that define our self-concept based on past experiences.

Self schemas are cognitive representations about ourselves that organize and process all related information (Markus, 1977). They develop from self-descriptions and traits that are salient and important to our self-concept. Indeed, they can be described as components of self-concept that are central to our identity and self-definition. For example, people who value independence highly are said to be self-schematic along this dimension. People for whom dependence–independence is not centrally important are said to be aschematic on this dimension. Different self schemas become activated depending on the changing situations and contexts in which we find ourselves (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). For example, your self schema as fun-loving and frivolous when you are with your friends may be quite different from your self schema as serious and dutiful when you are with your family. You will have schemas for your real self and also for your ‘ideal’ and ‘ought’ selves (Higgins, 1987) (see chapter 15).

Role schemas

The norms and expected behaviours of specific roles in society are structured into role schemas. They will include both achieved roles – including occupational and professional roles, such as doctor or teacher – and ascribed roles, over which we have little control – such as age, gender and race.

The roles and expectations associated with these categories are commonly referred to as stereotypes – mental representations of social groups and their members that are widely shared (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Macrae, Stangor & Hewstone, 1996; Stangor & Lange, 1994). Prolific empirical research on stereotypes views the process of categorizing individuals into their respective social groups as highly functional in that it simplifies the inherent complexity of social information.

Social categories such as male/female, black/white, old/young are viewed as highly salient and prior to any other kind of person categorization. Fiske (1998) refers to age, gender and race as the



Figure 17.14

According to Fiske (1998) race is one of the top three physical cues used to help us to categorize people. With increased familiarity, these physical cues become less important.

'top three' because they are the most central and visually accessible categories. So when we meet someone for the first time, we attend to obvious and salient physical cues in guiding our interactions with them. With increased familiarity, the notion is that stereotypes based on physical cues become less important, and we may subsequently employ trait-based or person schemas.

Event schemas

Commonly referred to as cognitive scripts (see chapter 12), event schemas describe behavioural and event sequences in everyday activities (Schank & Abelson, 1977). They provide the basis for anticipating the future, setting goals and making plans. We know, for example, that the appropriate behavioural sequence for eating at a restaurant is to enter, wait to be seated, order a drink, look at the menu, order the meal, eat, pay the bill and leave. The key idea here is that our commonsense understanding of what constitutes appropriate behaviour in specific situations is stored in long-term memory, and it is activated unconsciously whenever we need it.

CATEGORIZATION AND STEREOTYPING

Before we can apply a schema to a social object, we have to categorize (or label) it as something – a book, a tree, an animal, or whatever. In other words, we identify objects, people and events as members of a category, similar to others in that category and

different from members of other categories. Mostly we employ categories automatically and with little conscious effort. Categories help to impose order on the stimulus world, and are fundamental to perception, thought, language and action (Lakoff, 1987; see chapter 12). Research on categorization stems from the pioneering work of cognitive scientist Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues (Rosch, 1975; 1978).

Models for social categorization

The categorization of social objects, people and events is assumed to be a more complex process than categorization of inanimate objects because social objects are variable, dynamic and interactive. Nevertheless, members of a social category share common features. Some instances contained in the category are considered to be more typical than others – the most typical, or prototypical, representing the category as a whole.

The more features an instance shares with other category members, the more quickly and confidently it is identified as a member. For example, you may quickly decide that Sue is a prototypical politician because she is publicity seeking, charming, cunning and ambitious, whereas Paul, who is shy, indecisive, and avoids publicity would be considered atypical of the category 'politician'.

In contrast to the prototype model, an exemplar-based model suggests that categories are represented by specific and concrete instances (exemplars) of the category (Smith & Zarate 1992). For example, arriving at an abstracted average of two very different politicians, such as Bill Clinton and Margaret Thatcher, may be too cognitively demanding. These extreme instances may be better represented as concrete exemplars within an overall general category of 'politician'.

People may rely on a combination of prototype and exemplar-based models, depending on the social objects in question and the conditions under which the information is processed (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994).

Hierarchical structure of categories

Categories are hierarchically structured, with more abstract and general categories of information at the top of a pyramid structure and more specific categories at the bottom. Information can be processed at different levels of abstraction, moving from a concrete specific instance to a more general level of inference.

Like natural object categories, social stereotypes can be differentiated into lower-order sub-categories, or sub-types (Fiske, 1998). For example, a super-ordinate category (such as 'woman') may comprise a number of sub-types (such as career woman, housewife and feminist). Listing the prototypical features of these category sub-types is considerably easier, as they contain more detailed information than broader and more abstract super-ordinate categories (Andersen & Klatzky, 1987). Brewer, Dull and Lui (1981) found this to be the case with young people's representations of the elderly. The 'elderly' category was differentiated further into three elderly sub-types – the senior citizen, the elderly statesman and the grandmotherly type. In turn, each of these sub-types was associated with distinctive characteristics and traits (figure 17.15).

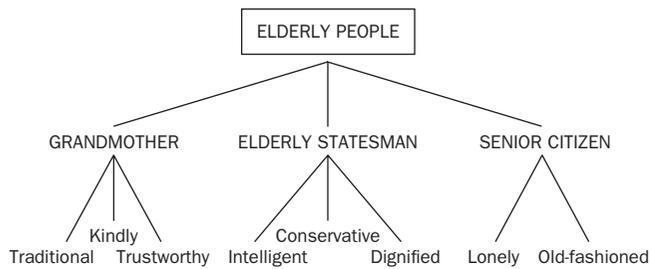


Figure 17.15

The social category 'elderly people' differentiated hierarchically into lower-order subtypes that are associated with distinctive personality traits. Source: Adapted from Brewer, Dull and Lui (1981).

HOW DO SCHEMAS WORK?

What do schemas do in information-processing terms? How do they function as organizing structures that influence the encoding, storing and recall of complex social information?

Schemas are theory-driven

Because schemas are based on our prior expectations and social knowledge, they have been described as 'theory-driven' structures that lend organization to experience. We use these background theories to make sense of new situations and encounters, which suggests that schematic processing is driven by background

Everyday Psychology

Is there any harm in national stereotypes?

It's not necessarily that the Irish drink more than the rest – it's just they get more uproariously drunk.

The British believe it's all about arriving at an answer, which they can then claim credit for, while the French are great believers in the debate. Arriving at a conclusion is not a priority.

The Italians are a mixture of Hollywood and Mafia, but get there in real style . . .

(Ann Cahill, *EU Stereotypes Too Close for Comfort*, *Irish Examiner*, 19 June 2002)

Stereotypes can be defined in a number of ways:

1. A simplified and relatively fixed image of all members of a culture or group; the group is typically based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender or national origins.
2. Generalizations about people that are based on limited, sometimes inaccurate, but often easily available information (see discussion of the availability heuristic in chapter 12), and are characterized by no or minimal contact with members of the stereotyped group and on second-hand information rather than first-hand experience.
3. A single statement or attitude about a group of people that does not recognize the complex, multidimensional nature of individual human beings irrespective of race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender or nationality.

Stereotypes can be positive, negative or mixed, but they are usually unfair and misleading. In general, they reduce individuals to a rigid, inflexible image. They do not account for the fact that human beings are individually complex, each person possessing a unique constellation of personal attributes. Instead, stereotypes suggest that everyone within a group is the same.

An especially worrying aspect of stereotypes in a geopolitical context is that they tend to dehumanize people, placing all members of a group into one, homogeneous category (e.g. 'The Jews', 'The Arabs'; 'The Protestants', 'The Catholics').

From reading this chapter, you will know that the basis for stereotyping lies in the nature of human cognition. When we stereotype people, we pre-judge them; we assume that all people in a group have the same traits. This form of blanket categorization leads to false assumptions about people and can lead to misunderstandings, hostile and abusive behaviours, conflicts, discrimination, and prejudice.

These generalizations may have their roots in experiences we have had ourselves, read about in books and magazines, seen in films or television, or have had related to us by friends and family. In some cases, they may seem reasonably accurate. Yet, in virtually every case, we are resorting to prejudice by inferring characteristics of an individual person based on a group stereotype, without knowledge of all the facts.

The difficulty is that stereotypes are sometimes hard to recognize because they are fixed beliefs. As children and teenagers, all of us face peer pressure when confronted with a joke that puts down a certain minority group. But after identifying stereotypes, we can work towards tackling them. When stereotypical judgements are reduced, it is easier to acknowledge and appreciate individual differences and cultural diversity.

Macrae, C.N., Stangor, C., & Hewstone, M. (eds), 1996, *Stereotypes and Stereotyping*, New York: Guilford Press.

theories and suppositions rather than actual environmental data (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). This isn't always the case, however, as we will see later.

Schemas facilitate memory

Schemas help us process information quickly and economically and facilitate memory recall. This means we are more likely to remember details that are consistent with our schema than those that are inconsistent (Hastie & Park, 1986; Stangor & McMillan, 1992).

For example, Cohen (1981) presented participants with a video of a woman having dinner with her husband. Those who were told that she was a librarian were more likely to remember that she wore glasses, whereas those who were told she was a waitress were more likely to remember her drinking beer. It seems that these occupational categories were used as organizing frameworks to attend to and/or encode and/or subsequently recall information that was consistent with stereotypical expectations of librarians and waitresses (see chapter 11 for some suggestions of ways in which we may try to tease apart which of these three memory components were affected in this study).

Schemas are energy-saving devices

Simplifying information and reducing the cognitive effort that goes into a task preserves cognitive resources for more important tasks. Schemas, such as stereotypes, therefore function as energy-saving devices (Macrae, Milne & Bodenhausen, 1994).

In ambiguous situations, schemas help us to 'fill in' missing information with 'best guesses' and 'default options' based on our expectations and previous experience. They can also provide short cuts by utilizing heuristics such as representativeness (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972, 1973a). With limited information, we can use the *representativeness heuristic* to determine the degree to which a stimulus is representative of a more general category. Is John, who is shy and mild-mannered, more likely to be an accountant or a business executive? See chapter 12 for a discussion of situations in which these heuristics may be useful or misleading.

Schemas are evaluative and affective

Schemas also serve to evaluate social stimuli as good or bad, normal or abnormal, positive or negative, and some contain a strong affective component, so that when they are activated the associated emotion is cued.

For example, the prototypic used-car salesman may automatically evoke suspicion, or a prototypic politician may trigger cynicism and distrust (Fiske, 1982; Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986). This is probably an important feature of some people's race stereotypes, eliciting strong negative emotions and evaluations.



Figure 17.16

Through schemas that serve to evaluate social stimuli, we automatically become suspicious of the prototypic used-car salesman.

Schemas are unified, stable structures that resist change

Once developed and strengthened through use, schemas become integrated structures. Even when only one of its components is accessed, strong associative links between the components activate the schema as a unitary whole (Fiske & Dyer, 1985).

Well-developed schemas that are activated frequently resist change and persist, even in the face of disconfirming evidence. So a male chauvinist with a highly accessible and frequently activated stereotype that women are less capable than men is rarely convinced otherwise, even when presented with evidence to the contrary. Consistent with the ultimate attribution error described above, instances that disconfirm the stereotype are treated as 'exceptions to the rule'. This notion is consistent with the *subtyping model* of stereotype change, which predicts that disconfirming instances of the stereotype are relegated to 'exceptional' sub-categories or subtypes that accommodate exceptions while leaving the overall stereotype largely intact (Weber & Crocker, 1983).

For example, Hewstone, Hopkins and Routh (1992) found that, despite a one-year school liaison programme that facilitated positive interactions between a police officer and secondary school students, this experience did not change the students' overall negative representations of the police. Instead, these particular officers were judged by the school students to be atypical of the police in general.

There is considerable empirical support for the subtyping model (Hewstone, 1994; Johnston & Hewstone, 1992). Other

subtyping model predicts that disconfirming instances of a stereotype are relegated to subcategories or subtypes, which accommodate exceptions to the stereotype but by and large leave the overall stereotype intact

book-keeping model suggests that stereotypes and schemas are constantly fine-tuned with each new piece of information

conversion model predicts dramatic and sudden change in schema and stereotypes in the face of salient contradictions

models have received less empirical support. These include the *book-keeping model*, which proposes that there is constant fine-tuning of a schema with each new piece of information (Rumelhart & Norman, 1978), and the *conversion model*, which proposes that there is dramatic and sudden change in the schema in response to salient contradictions (Rothbart, 1981).

RECENT RESEARCH INTO SOCIAL PROCESSING

The continuum model of processing

We have seen how our preconceptions and prejudices can lead to biases and distortions. But we don't always behave like *cognitive misers*. By contrast, in certain situations we engage in a careful

category-based processing information processing that is fast, non-strategic, efficient, can be automatic and beyond conscious awareness, and is more likely to occur when the data are unambiguous and relatively unimportant

data-based processing information processing that is slow, deliberate, and requires conscious effort and attention, used where the need for accuracy is high

and piecemeal analysis of the 'data'. Fiske and Neuberg (1990) proposed that the processing of social information is a kind of continuum, as we move from schema or *category-based processing* to more piecemeal *data-based processing* (figure 17.17). These authors propose that we use category-based processing when the data are unambiguous and relatively unimportant to us and piecemeal processing when the data are ambiguous, relatively important, and the need for accuracy is high.

For example, the time and effort we spend forming impressions of others depends on their relative importance to us and on our motivations for getting to know them. Everyday superficial encounters are usually based on people's salient social group memberships, such as gender, race, age and occupation. These social categories access for us an associated range of expectations that are usually stereotypical. If we are motivated to move beyond this category-based processing, we take a more piecemeal and data-driven approach.

Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) continuum model of processing has led to a significant revision of the cognitive miser model that characterized the approach to social cognition in the 1980s. More recent research has demonstrated that perceivers are

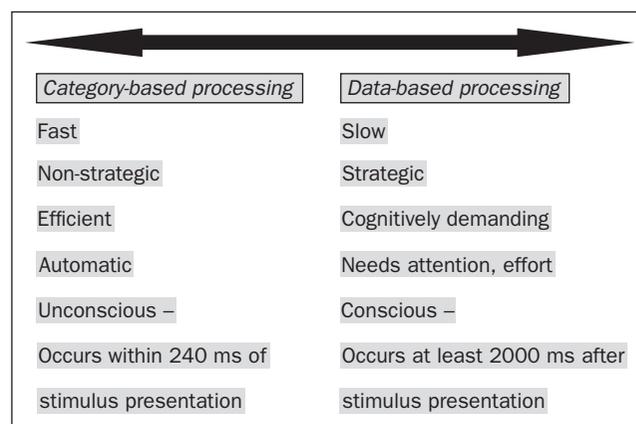


Figure 17.17

Continuum model of processing. Source: Based on Fiske and Neuberg (1990).

more like *motivated tacticians* (Fiske, 1992; 1998), using processing strategies that are consistent with their motivations, goals and situational requirements.

motivated tactician someone who deploys flexible information-processing strategies that are consistent with their motivations, goals and situational requirements

Automatic vs. controlled processing

While processing can take place anywhere along the continuum just described, most person impressions seem to be first and foremost category-based (this kind of schematic processing apparently being the 'default option'). This is why so much recent attention has focused on the primacy and importance of stereotypes in perception.

In-depth processing requires controlled attention, intention and effort, whereas it appears that category-based perception can occur automatically and beyond conscious awareness (Bargh, 1994; Wegner & Bargh, 1998). This distinction between *automatic* and *controlled processing* was applied by Devine (1989) to the activation of stereotypes. Devine argues that most people, through socialization, acquire knowledge of social stereotypes early in childhood and that, through repeated exposure, stereotypes of salient social groups become well-learned knowledge structures that are automatically activated without deliberate thinking.

automatic processing the processing of information that is beyond conscious awareness and extremely fast – in experimental studies, within 240 ms of stimulus presentation

controlled processing the processing of information that is deliberate, conscious, and strategic; in experimental studies, this occurs after 2000 ms of the presentation of a stimulus

This model suggests that this unintentional activation of the stereotype is equally strong for high and low prejudiced people.

For example, Devine (1989) found that the activation of a negative stereotype associated with African Americans ('hostile') occurred for both high and low prejudiced participants when stereotypic primes were presented subliminally (beyond conscious awareness). So when people do not have the opportunity to consciously monitor and appraise information, the ability to suppress the stereotype becomes difficult, even for unprejudiced people.

This, of course, suggests that stereotyping may be inevitable, and in some situations difficult to control. Given that stereotyping is usually linked to prejudice and discrimination, it paints a rather bleak picture for intergroup relations. But Devine argues that, while stereotypes can be automatically activated, what distinguishes low prejudiced from high prejudiced people is the conscious development of personal beliefs that challenge the stereotype. These egalitarian beliefs are deployed during conscious processing, and are able to override the automatically activated stereotype. In contrast, people high in prejudice have personal beliefs that are congruent with negative stereotypes, so during conscious processing they need not control or inhibit the automatically activated stereotype.

While several studies now support Devine's claim that stereotypes of salient social groups are widely known and shared, there is less support for the claim that stereotypes are automatically activated equally for everyone, regardless of their prejudice levels (Augoustinos, Ahrens & Innes, 1994; Lepore & Brown, 1997; Locke, MacLeod & Walker, 1994). For example, Locke et al. (1994) found that the predominantly negative stereotype of Australian Aboriginal people was only activated in people high in prejudice. Similarly, Lepore and Brown (1997) found that only highly prejudiced respondents activated the negative stereotype of African-Caribbean people in Britain. So, according to these studies, it seems that stereotypes are not activated to the same extent for all people, and are therefore not necessarily inevitable. Rather, people's attitudes and values – in this case, low levels of prejudice – inhibit and constrain the activation of stereotypes, not only consciously, but also unconsciously.

THE POWER OF STEREOTYPES

In our discussion of attribution theory, we argued that attributions are not only internal cognitive phenomena but also social and cultural explanations shaped by widely shared representations within a society, community or group.

The same can be said for schemas, categories and stereotypes. While these have been largely discussed as cognitive constructs, it is important to recognize that they are also essentially cultural and social in nature, i.e. cultural knowledge that is determined by dominant and consensual representations learned by members of a society.

Because they are acquired early in life, widely shared and pervasive, stereotypes of groups are more than just 'pictures in our heads'. They are socially and discursively reproduced in the course of everyday communication (Augoustinos & Walker, 1998). They are also ideological in nature, because they are often used to rationalize and justify why some groups are more powerful and more dominant than others (Jost & Banaji, 1994). So social stereotypes can be used as political weapons to justify existing group inequalities, gender stereotypes have been used to justify gender inequalities, and race stereotypes have been used to justify racism and prejudice.

Other approaches in social psychology, such as social representations theory (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994), regard social categories and stereotypes very differently from the predominantly cognitive and information-processing account we have outlined above. Rather than energy-saving devices that facilitate cognition by simplifying reality, stereotypes (and the social categories on which they are based) are viewed within these contrasting frameworks as rich in symbolic meaning, and as being used to make sense of the power and status relations between different social groups (Oakes et al., 1994; Leyens, Yzerbyt & Schadrin, 1994). See chapter 18 for more on intergroup relations.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Attitudes are among the most important constructs in social psychology because they encompass powerful tendencies to feel, believe *and* act in a positive or negative way. Attributions are also among our most important constructs because they are part of what makes us human – our tendency to attempt to explain the events around us. The study of social cognition helps to integrate these two important constructs, by examining the impact of these basic cognitive processes across social contexts, and how these cognitive processes influence attitudes and attributions.

In fact, most of the chapters in this text refer to social cognition in some way, because virtually all of them consider processes of judgment that may be influenced by social contexts. A challenge for future research is to provide theoretical models that explain these diverse social psychological topics with the same basic principles.

Summary

- Attitudes are tendencies to evaluate an object favourably or unfavourably. They can be measured using both non-self-report and self-report techniques.
- Useful features of attitudes are that (a) they summarize beliefs, feelings and past behaviour regarding the attitude objects, and (b) they can predict behaviour.
- Attitude–behaviour relations are strongest when attitudes are measured at the same level of specificity as the target behaviour.
- Contemporary models of attitude–behaviour relations describe how attitudes predict behaviour in conjunction with other variables (e.g. social norms, perceived control) that influence behaviour. These models also specify how accessible attitudes automatically influence behaviour.
- Classic theories suggest that attitudes change when a persuasive message provides motivational incentive to change the attitude.
- People tend to be more influenced by message arguments when they are motivated and able to process the arguments. When motivation and ability are low, people may rely heavily on heuristic cues (e.g. source expertise) to determine their new attitude.
- Attribution theory concerns itself with the processes by which we use causal explanations for everyday events and behaviour in an effort to understand and make sense of the social world.
- A number of biases have been found to characterize causal attributions, including the fundamental attribution error, actor–observer effect, self-serving bias and ultimate attribution error.
- The process of attributing causality is influenced by internal cognitive factors, group membership and identity and socio-cultural values.
- We also come to understand the social world through the activation and use of mental cognitive representations called schemas. These contain both abstract and specific knowledge about people, roles, social groups and events.
- Schemas help categorize, evaluate and process social information quickly and efficiently. They are energy-saving devices that facilitate memory and resist change even in the face of disconfirming evidence.

REVISION QUESTIONS

1. Why are attitudes important constructs in social psychology?
2. If you were interested in predicting whether people’s attitudes towards low-fat foods predict their consumption of low-fat foods, which model of attitude-behaviour relations would you use to examine this issue, and why?
3. Imagine that you are designing a new ad campaign against careless driving. Using your knowledge of models of attitude change, how would your ads look and where would you place them?
4. Why are attributions important constructs in social psychology?
5. It could be suggested that the ‘fundamental attribution error’ is not really an error, because it helps us form useful judgements in a complex social world. Discuss the pros and cons of this argument.
6. Given the effects of culture on the occurrence of the fundamental attribution error, how would you set up an intervention to make people less likely to commit this ‘error’?
7. Why are schemas important constructs in social psychology?

FURTHER READING

Augoustinos, M., & Walker, I. (1995). *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction*. London: Sage.
Describes research studies in social cognition.

Bohner, G., & Wänke, M. (2002). *Attitudes and Attitude Change*. London: Psychology Press.
This book reviews basic aspects of attitudes and attitude change.

Forsterling, F. (2001). *Attribution: An Introduction to Theories, Research and Applications*. London: Psychology Press.
Provides a thorough and up-to-date introduction to the field of attribution.

Kunda, Z. (1996). *Social Cognition*. London: MIT Press.
Describes research on many aspects of social cognition.

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