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Part IV

Representations of social reality

18. Attitudes in a social context

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There have been times in the history of social psychology when the pre-eminence of attitude theory and research has seemed almost unchallengeable. In the 1930s, the development by Thurstone and others of a methodology of attitude measurement helped social psychology to claim the status of a quantitative science. The 1950s and 1960s saw the Yale studies on communication and persuasion, followed by the flourishing of cognitive consistency and cognitive dissonance theories.

These are not such times. In fact, attitude research might be said, relatively speaking, to have been in decline since the beginning of the 1970s. Some of the reasons for this disenchantment are not hard to identify. The excitement of early assaults in the dissonance vs. self-perception contest gave way to the kind of inconclusive arguing which seemed to fail to retain the interest even of the principal champions of the respective theories. The weak or non-existent correlations in a number of empirical studies which had attempted to predict overt behaviour from measures of general social attitudes (e.g. Wicker 1969) left many researchers with the impression that, whatever attitudes were, there was not much point in studying them if one's main interest was in social behaviour. Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) – of whom more will be said later – have contributed significantly towards correcting this impression, but the predictability of behaviour from attitudes is now very much something that needs to be established in any given context rather than assumed.

Although these reasons are among the more obvious, they are not, in our opinion, the most fundamental. We shall argue that the concept of attitude is just as indispensable to social psychology now as it ever has been, but that a major shift is required in the emphasis of attitude theory. Intuition suggests that attitudes are clearly related to our social behaviour. Much research suggests otherwise. Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) point out that researchers may have sometimes tried to relate the wrong kind of attitudes to the wrong kind of behaviour. No doubt this is so, but a less considered possibility is that researchers have been looking for the *wrong kind of relationship*.

Theories of attitudes have traditionally been theories of individual cognitive processes, and the end-point of much attitude research has been the prediction of *individual* behaviour. Yet if *all* we were interested in were individual behaviour, we would not need the concept of attitude at all – our colleagues in general experimental psychology get by very well without it. Conversely, if all we were interested in were the behaviour of groups as aggregates, we would tend to look for explanations of such aggregate behaviour to broader cultural, historical, economic and material factors. Yet such broader factors will influence different individuals in different ways, and will shape their feelings and decisions as well as their behaviour. Likewise, although we can study the behaviour or cognitions of individuals in isolation, the interest of social psychology is in individuals as members of groups and as parties to interpersonal relationships. So much is easy to accept. What is more difficult is to find and define explanatory concepts that can operate in this middle ground between the individual and the aggregate. Since the concept of attitude is superfluous at either a purely individual or purely aggregate level, any meaning or explanatory value it has must derive from its use within this middle ground.

What then are the facts for an explanation of which the concept of attitude is necessary? There are fundamentally two:

- (1) *Individuals form preferences* and make choices between alternative objects, options and actions. A theory of attitude must be, at least partly, a theory of preferential choice. In a social context where individuals had no possibility of choice, one would not need a concept of attitude to explain their behaviour.
- (2) *Individuals differ in their evaluations* of the same objects, options and actions. A theory of attitude must therefore be able to account for attitudinal disagreement as a basic fact of life. In a social context where there was no possibility of disagreement, one would not need a concept of attitude to explain different people's behaviour.

1. Preference and choice

There has been considerable research on how overall evaluations of a *single* attitude object may be predicted from molecular beliefs about that object. When the attitude object is another (usually hypothetical) person, much of the literature is found under the chapter heading of 'impression formation' rather than 'attitude formation', but the rationale is essentially the same.

Within mainstream attitude research, the Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) theory is a good example of this approach. A person's attitude towards an act is

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predictable from the sum of his or her 'salient evaluative beliefs' about that act. Intention to perform the act is then predictable jointly from the attitude towards the act and 'subjective norms' concerning such behaviour. This theory therefore falls squarely into the tradition of expectancy-value or subjective expected utility theories – the more likely an act is seen to possess good rather than bad attributes and lead to good rather than bad consequences, the more positively it will be evaluated. But the point is that *one is only dealing with a single act*. Choice and preference entail comparison, and the theory does not present an *explicit* model of any comparison process.

There is, of course, an implicit model of comparison, which is this. Suppose a person is choosing between option X and option Y. The formulae of the theory can be first applied to predict the person's evaluation of X, and then applied again to predict the person's evaluation of Y. The more positively evaluated option will then be the one that will be chosen, and certainty of choice will presumably be related (possibly even linearly) to the difference in evaluation. By implication, this could be extended to any number of separate options, so that one ends up essentially mapping a universe of attitude objects in a common preference space, analogous or equivalent to the evaluative factor of the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum 1957). Thus, the implicit model of choice is that all options are evaluated completely separately, and then all are compared simultaneously. Pressing this argument to its conclusion, the implications seem to be: first, that the evaluation of any object or option is independent of any other object or objects also being evaluated, in other words, that the position of any object in the preference space is unaffected by any others with which it is compared; and, second, that the specific attributes regarded as salient for the evaluation of any object remain the same regardless of any other objects with which it is compared, in other words, that the dimensionality of the preference space is unaffected by the comparisons made.

Both of these inferences strike us as implausible, and the first, in particular, runs counter not only to much research on cognitive dissonance theory but to the whole literature on context effects in judgment (Eiser & Stroebe 1972). If a weight is judged heavier or lighter depending on whether it is presented with a light or heavy comparison stimulus, it is surely a strange sort of psychological theory that would suggest that, say, a person's evaluation of a job offer (let alone the criteria on which such an evaluation is based) is unaffected by whether (among many other things) the alternative is no job at all or a more enjoyable job at twice the salary. Not for one minute would we wish to imply that Fishbein & Ajzen, or the proponents of any similar approach, intend to make such a ridiculous suggestion. But then it is

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incumbent on them to show how such a suggestion is to be avoided in terms of their theory.

Whilst researchers in the Fishbein tradition have succeeded in breathing some sort of new validity into the concept of attitude by investigating the relationships between attitudinal variables and particular behaviours or categories of behaviour in isolation, they have not provided us with a concept of attitudes capable of explaining choice between alternative behaviours. If we are to explain choice, it is pointless to start with the evaluation of any object or option in isolation. Instead, we must start from an attempt to specify the frame of reference or context in terms of which each object or option is evaluated and any choice is made. Unless we do so, any 'absolute' judgment we obtain of the desirability of a given option will only be the roughest guide to how likely it is to be chosen in preference to other options that may become available.

Defining context or frame of reference can be more easily said than done, however. There has been considerable debate over the way an individual will select appropriate standards or subjective anchors for comparison (Eiser & Stroebe 1972; Helson 1964). Research on the notion of comparison level (Thibaut & Kelley 1959) is also relevant here. There is the additional issue of conceiving of how choices are made between larger numbers of options. According to Coombs (1964, 1975), it is a matter of finding the option closest to one's 'ideal point'. According to Kahneman & Tversky (1979), it is a matter of sequentially discarding less desirable options or sets of options, so that the structure of preferences may be represented graphically in the form of branches of a tree. Such issues will not be dealt with here. However, we shall draw one inference to which we shall return later – that the criteria on the basis of which an object or option is evaluated will depend on the context, i.e. on the other objects and options with which it is compared. Not all evaluable attributes of an object will be relevant to all comparisons or salient in all contexts.

2. Attitudinal differences

Probably the most important aspect of attitudes is the fact that different people can hold radically different attitudes about apparently the same object or choice of policy, in ways that are often not easily attributable to differences in knowledge or personal interest. This simple fact poses a serious challenge to attitude theories, and in the main it is a challenge that has not been met. We have theories about why single individuals approve or disapprove of single attitude objects, but little basis in attitude research even for an understanding

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of how one attitude object may be preferred to any other. Still less is it generally possible to predict from theory the scope and focus of attitudinal conflict between different individuals. Our intuitions tell us attitudes are important in social relationships, but there seems something rather bizarre about the idea that people might fall in love, burn the homes of religious minorities, care for their children, demonstrate, vote, sacrifice their lives for some cause or ideal, or threaten other nations with annihilation, all so as to preserve the integrity of a P-O-X triangle.

It may be that consistency is a fundamental principle of attitude organization, as Heider, and others since, have suggested. However, the incorporation of this principle into the kind of attitude theory which can account for patterns of friendship, or the animosities of political disagreements, cannot be achieved if all one looks for is internal consistency among the beliefs of a single individual. Once again, the frame of reference or context within which individuals agree and disagree is also the frame of reference within which individual attitudes are expressed and are to be understood.

The point here is not simply that individual attitudes can be influenced by interpersonal relationships. Greater attitudinal agreement among friends may be found within actual relationships, and not simply within each individual's subjective impressions (Newcomb 1981). Interpersonal balance is also predictable from a combination of the 'subjective norms' and 'motivation to comply' components of the Fishbein & Ajzen model, if individuals are assumed to be more motivated to comply with the normative expectations of others whom they like. If we recall Heider's (1946) notion of a 'unit relation', it is also possible to predict that individuals will tend to share the attitudes of members of their own social group, and from here it is a short step to regarding shared attitudes as part of a person's social identity (e.g. Chapters 28 and 32).

We are arguing that for any attitudinal issue to be seen *as* an issue (or for any choice between options to be seen as a problem), the recognition of potential disagreement is indispensable. We are proposing that the starting-point for a conceptualization of attitude should not be the words or deeds of individuals in isolation, but the *disagreement* between individuals in what is said and what is done. Were it not for such disagreement, the concept of attitude would be irrelevant to an understanding of social relationships.

3. Selectivity and salience

In the remainder of this chapter we shall briefly describe a number of areas of empirical research where these general considerations have specific

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implications for theory. The common underlying issue which this research addresses is that of how individuals can achieve adequate consistency, commitment and feelings of correctness in a world of dispute and uncertainty. At its simplest, how is it that even reasonable well-informed people, acting in good faith, can disagree? The answer we are proposing is that it depends fundamentally on the *selectivity* of our attentive and cognitive processes, and on the different ways in which experiences may be represented symbolically and, in particular, linguistically.

It has long been recognized that any attitudinal issue is a complex affair, and that even something as relatively simple as an item on a questionnaire potentially contains a large number of attributes and associations by which a person's responses may be influenced. Yet the responses themselves may often be expressed as simple unidimensional statements of like or dislike. We are dealing here with a problem analogous to that in much perceptual psychology, where the perceiver has to distinguish signal from noise, clear outlines of solid objects from blurred retinal images, the words of a particular speaker above the background of chatter. Processing of perceptual information is hypothesis-driven rather than naive, and much detectable detail and variation is ignored. Under special circumstances, such processes can lead to error and illusion, but without such processes interaction with the perceptual world would be effectively impossible. Where the analogy fails is that, with regard to attitudes, we do not claim a distinction between illusion and reality: the question of which attributes of an issue 'should' be attended to, and which 'should' be disregarded, is essentially arbitrary, or at any rate far more so than for perceptual judgments.

As mentioned earlier, Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) predict people's attitudes towards an object from their *salient* evaluative beliefs about that object. This involves, ideally, eliciting from each subject his or her view about which are the most important or relevant aspects of the object in question. In practice, what tends to happen is that researchers in the Fishbein tradition discover the 'modal' salient beliefs for a given object – i.e. those beliefs which *on average* are most frequently mentioned as important – and then present items concerned with these beliefs to *all* their subjects. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the basic formulation of the theory, which stresses the importance of belief salience, and its practical application. The reliance on modal salient beliefs does not allow for the possibility that different individuals may regard different aspects of an issue as salient.

But how real is this possibility? In our view, it is very real indeed. The selection of aspects of an object as salient is also not a random affair. On the contrary *differential salience* (that is, the perception by different people of

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different aspects of an object as relevant to its evaluation) may be so closely related to attitudinal differences that it is tempting to regard the relationship as causal, and as operating in both directions.

An illustration of differential salience comes from the data of a study we conducted shortly after publication of the report of a public inquiry into the development of a plant for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel at Windscale in north-west England (Eiser & van der Pligt 1979). Our subjects were attending a week-end 'teach-in' on nuclear energy, and were split more or less evenly between relatively committed supporters and opponents of nuclear energy. They completed a questionnaire which asked, among other things, for their views concerning the likely consequences of the Windscale development, and as one would expect, the pro-nuclears anticipated more benefits and the anti-nuclears more harmful consequences. More instructive for our present argument were the differences which we found when we asked subjects to select the possible consequences which they felt were most important. Top of the list for the pro-nuclears (in terms of frequency of mention) came the United Kingdom's ability to meet future energy demands, followed by the strength of the UK economy. For the anti-nuclears, restrictions on individual civil liberties in the UK came first, followed by the risk of nuclear terrorism. The aspects of the issue which one side regarded as important were dismissed as almost irrelevant by the other side, and *vice versa*.

This kind of phenomenon, which we believe to be quite general, is of paramount importance in the understanding of attitudinal differences. A striking feature of many such controversies is the seeming inability of committed supporters of one side to understand how any 'reasonable' person could hold views opposed to their own. Probably a large part of why this is so is that their own views appear quite consistent and logical, and what this implies is that they will see people who disagree with them as being inconsistent and illogical.

Our point is that the mechanisms producing or maintaining cognitive consistency depend on *selective* processes to establish what needs to be related consistently to what. As Osgood & Tannenbaum (1955: 43) stated their basic principle of congruity theory, 'changes in evaluation are always in the direction of increased congruity with the existing frame of reference'. What constitutes the 'existing frame of reference' depends on which aspects of an object or issue are selected as relevant or salient. However, unless individuals have insight into the relativity of their own selective processes and hence their own frame of reference (and we suspect they typically have not), then one is going to find many instances where people on one side of a controversy find their opponents' viewpoint simply incomprehensible.

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This kind of ‘attitudinal egocentrism’ – the inability to take the perspective of the other side – can have far-reaching social and political consequences. If one feels that no reasonable person could take the opposite point of view to one’s own, then it follows that one’s opponents are *not* reasonable people and hence cannot be reasoned with, and therefore, *in extremis*, can only be combated or controlled by other means.

4. Evaluative and descriptive language

We have argued that attitude objects and issues may contain many different attributes or criteria for evaluation, and that people with different attitudes may base their evaluations on different criteria. However, it is not always easy to determine where one criterion ends and another starts. Again, the analogy with selective processes in physical perception works only so far, in that what constitutes a ‘distinct attribute’ of an attitude object depends on *how* that object is encoded and symbolically represented. Thus, even if one could identify a specific attribute of an attitude object as being the common reference of statements made by different people, it would still be very possible that this attribute was differently encoded by different individuals. In other words, people with different attitudes may still be responding to the same ‘objective’ attribute, but have different subjective representations of it. In such circumstances, one may learn more about attitudes by studying such subjective representations – individual and collective – than by attempting any single ‘objective’ definition of any common attribute which may underlie such representations.

When one uses terms such as ‘representation’ and ‘encoding’ in social psychology, language assumes a very great importance. The literature on personality impression formation, for instance, is primarily concerned with the perceived applicability of personality trait *descriptions*. The question of how different trait descriptions covary with each other (e.g. whether people described as ‘honest’ tend also to be described as ‘kind’) has become a field of study in its own right. The covariation of any trait description with overt behavioural indices is a separate, and often more vexed, question (Mischel 1968).

Linguistic and moral philosophers (e.g. Nowell-Smith 1956; Stevenson 1967) have pointed out that the language of interpersonal description can fulfil a number of functions simultaneously. A simple and basic distinction is that between its evaluative and descriptive functions. Thus, to describe someone as ‘honest’ may typically be taken to mean *both* that, for example, the person’s word may be relied upon, *and* that one approves of the person. Language provides us with an extremely flexible vocabulary for describing

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the same events and actions so as to imply alternately approval or disapproval. Thus, if we are to look for what it is that discriminates between the use of labels such as 'traditionalist' rather than 'reactionary', or 'radical' rather than 'subversive', *part* of the answer is more likely to be found in the attitudes of the labeller rather than in the specific attributes of the labelled.

Our study on attitudes to nuclear energy (Eiser & van der Pligt 1979) provides a clear illustration of how attitudes can affect the way individuals apply labels to themselves and others. Our subjects were asked to pick from a list those adjectives which they felt best described first the pro-nuclear, and then the anti-nuclear lobby. The pro-nuclears most frequently described the pro-nuclear lobby as realistic, rational and responsible, and the anti-nuclear lobby as emotional, alarmist and ill-informed. Conversely, the anti-nuclears most frequently described the pro-nuclear lobby as materialistic, complacent and elitist, whilst they described the anti-nuclear lobby as far-sighted, humanitarian and responsible.

When one considers the positive and negative value connotations of such terms, what emerges is a clear tendency for people to represent issues linguistically in such a way that they can apply 'good' labels to their own side and 'bad' labels to the other. The differential salience of alternative linguistic representations of attitudinal issues thus reflects the same selective and self-justificatory processes to which we have already referred: individuals rely selectively on representations of issues in terms of which they can achieve and maintain consistently positive evaluations of their own positions, and hence negative evaluation of their opponents. Thus the very representation of an issue itself incorporates the social context of potential attitudinal conflict.

5. Polarization of judgments of attitude statements

One field of attitude research which demonstrates the importance of the distinction between descriptive and evaluative uses of language is that concerned with judgments of attitude statements. Originally, this field arose from problems in the field of attitude measurement and, specifically, in the construction of Thurstone scales of equal-appearing intervals. A crucial step in the construction of such scales is obtaining ratings from independent judges of the favourability or unfavourability towards the issue in question of the positions expressed by the statements considered for inclusion in the scale. Contrary to Thurstone's original assumption, Hovland & Sherif (1952) demonstrated that such ratings of favourability were systematically related to judges' own attitudes towards the issue.

One important aspect of this relationship of attitude to judgment has been