



ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOR CONSISTENCY: AN OUTLINE SUMMARY

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1. Central question: *When* are attitudes consistent with behavior?

- A. Both research *and* life experience demonstrate that there is no perfect concordance between people's attitudes toward some 'X' and their behavior with respect to that same 'X.' So the question is not *whether* attitudes predict behavior, but rather, *under what circumstances* do people *act* in line with their stated emotions, beliefs, and values?
1. Average correlation between newly-formed *explicit* (consciously-held) attitudes and behaviors = .52⁹
 2. Average correlation between existing *explicit* (consciously-held) attitudes and behaviors/judgment/ physiology = .36¹⁰
 3. Average correlation between existing *implicit* attitudes (i.e., attitudes about which people have less awareness and control) and behaviors/judgment/physiology = .27¹⁰

2. Sources of attitude-behavior discrepancy: ⁷

- A. *Measurement*: Attitudes are more likely to predict (be consistent with) behaviors when both are assessed at the same level of specificity.
1. For example, if wanting to predict whether people choose paper or plastic bags, asking them to report their relative attitudes toward paper and plastic bags; *not* their attitude toward 'green behaviors'.
 2. Specificity can be defined with respect to: (a) the *action* or behavior (e.g., recycling); (b) *target* of the action (e.g., paper waste); (c) *context* or location of the action (e.g., household); (d) the time/timing/frequency (e.g., weekly).
 3. General attitudes *can* predict behavior across a *domain* of behaviors (an aggregated set of related behaviors): e.g., if you measure a person's general 'environmental' attitudes, that general attitude will predict their *average* behavior *across* recycling, driving a hybrid car, taking shorter showers, eating locally grown food, etc.
- B. *Self-efficacy* (behavioral control) *beliefs*: If a person perceives they have personal control over the particular behavior, their attitude is more likely to be consistent with their behavior.
1. For example, a person may want to lose weight, but feel totally powerless to enact the relevant behavior.

2. Persuasive messages can, thus, be targeted at increasing perceived self-efficacy/control.
- C. *Attitude formation*: Attitudes formed through *direct experience* with the attitude object will be more consistent with subsequent behavior than will attitudes formed through *indirect* experience (i.e., second-hand experience).^{7,9}
1. For example, a person whose attitude toward vegan cheese was developed via experience with it will have greater attitude-behavior correspondence than someone whose attitude toward vegan cheese was formed by reading about it.
 2. Thus, behaviors can *cause* attitudes (just like some attitudes can *cause* behaviors)
 - a. This is why some companies give away free samples: to formulate a positive attitude about their product and, thus, change future behavior.
 - b. This is how sometimes *laws* come to change attitudes (if attitudes can't be changed first), e.g., de-segregation laws, or compelling the use of seatbelts in cars.
 - c. As noted in our *Attitude Change Outline Summary* (4.C.7), the reason for engaging in the behavior in the first place matters: If the person perceives they have engaged in the behavior for a reason other than personal choice, then direct experience with the behavior is less likely to change the attitude.
- D. *Cognitive processing factors*: Certain aspects of the way the human brain processes information can enhance or impede the attitude-behavior relationship.
1. *Attitude accessibility*: Infrequently-practiced attitudes are less likely to predict behavior than frequently-practiced attitudes, because the former are less likely to be at the 'front' of the mind at any given moment in time than are the latter.
 - a. Sometimes making an attitude accessible at a particular point (e.g., immediately prior to potential enactment of the target behavior) is more effective than changing an attitude.
 - b. Attitudes formed via direct experience are likely to be more accessible than those formed indirectly.
 2. *Attitude stability*: Attitudes that are stable across time (rather than those that are more susceptible to context effects) are more likely to predict behavior.
 3. *Attitude relevance*: The attitude must be perceived as relevant to the behavior in order to shape it (e.g., if a person believes that their attitude toward animal cruelty isn't relevant to the dairy industry, s/he may continue to consume cheese)
 4. *Intra-attitude valence consistency*: Attitudes are better predictors of behavior when the attitude is *not* ambivalent (i.e., when the person doesn't believe in conflicting pieces of information about the attitude object; e.g., that there are both reasonable pros and cons to wind power).⁹
 - a. Although, in some cases, ambivalence can lead to greater scrutiny and elaboration of the persuasive message which – if sound – could lead to inconsistency-resolution and a stronger-resulting attitude.¹²
 5. *Vested interest*: If the person has something to win or lose by the 'outcome' of some issue, then there will be greater consistency between their attitude and behavior (e.g., with regards to *attitude toward raising the voting age from 18 to 21*,

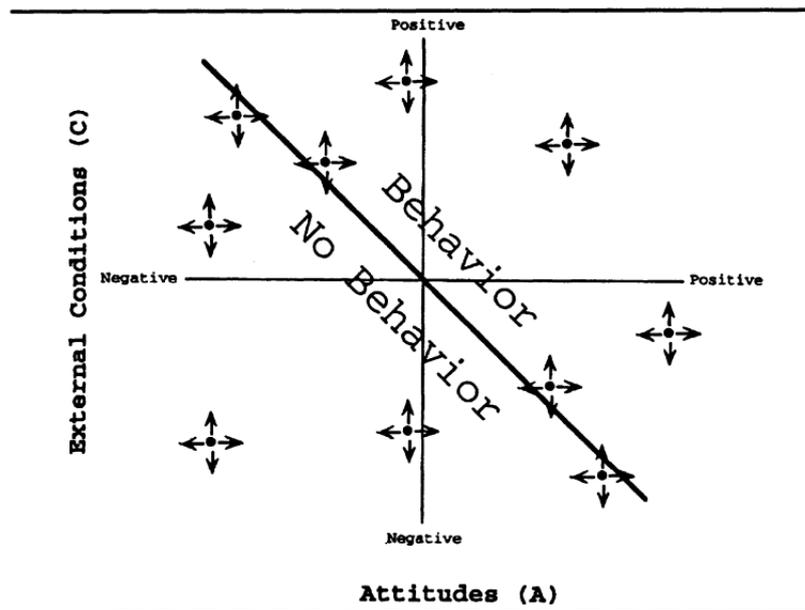
the attitudes of those who are currently < 21 will better predict their political actions with respect to this issue than will the attitudes of those 21+)¹³

- a. Vested interest may extend to significant others if those significant others are integrated in the person's identity (i.e., the person includes the 'other' in their 'self').
6. *Values underlying the attitude*: Attitudes are more likely to predict behavior if they are based on a person's *extrinsic values* (e.g., achieving monetary success, acquiring fame, being good-looking), whereas the attitude-behavior gap is larger when the attitude is based on *intrinsic values* (e.g., personal growth, serving one's community, having fulfilling relationships).¹⁹
- a. *Why?* Some combination of lack of time, lack of resources, hypocrisy, aspirational over-reach, etc.
7. *Situational factors* (i.e., the context in which the person would perform the particular behavior)
- a. *Individuated situations* (i.e., situations that foster personal responsibility, increase identification [non-anonymity], and/or facilitate the person focusing on their own, internal states, including their attitudes, beliefs, values, etc.): Attitude-behavior consistency will be strongest in these situations.
 - b. *Deindividuated situations* (i.e., situations that offer more anonymity, reduce individual responsibility, and make it difficult for the person to focus on their own, internal states, including their attitudes, beliefs, values, etc.): The 'group' attitude (rather than the individual's) is more likely to predict behavior in these situations.
 - c. *Scripted situations* (i.e., situations that have strong expectations regarding behavior and how it will unfold; in these situations, people often do not need to think about their behavior, they just follow the 'script'): The script, rather than a person's personal attitude, is more likely to predict behavior in these situations.

3. As ever, whether you observe attitude-behavior consistency is complex: There are likely to be ordered sequences and interactions between the above factors (A-E). To illustrate, next we outline two popular models of the attitude-behavior relationship:

- A. *Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) Model*:^{5, 11, 20} Behavior stems from the interaction between personal-sphere attitudinal variables 'A' (e.g., beliefs, personal norms, attitudes, goals, values, pre-dispositions, personality, etc.) and the individual's *perceived* environment/context 'C' (e.g., \$\$ costs vs. incentives, time costs, capabilities vs. constraints, institutional or legal factors, social norms, public policy, etc.).

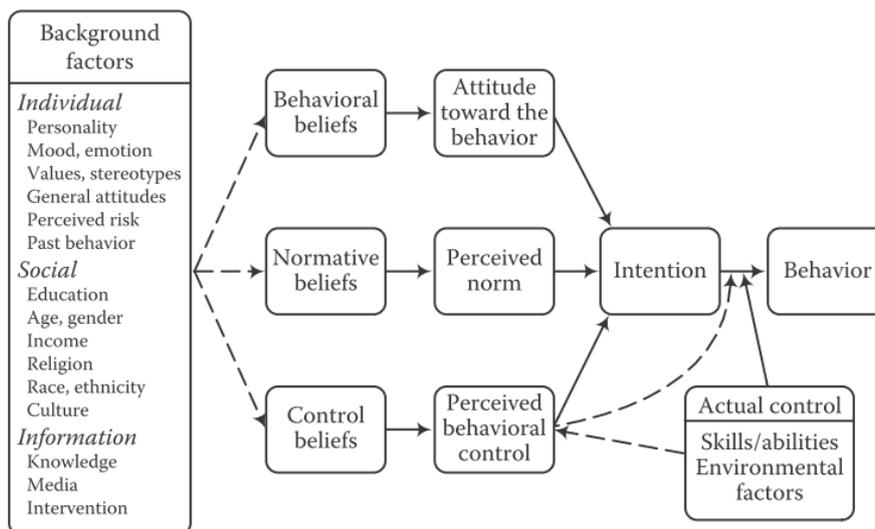
Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) Model



- B. Attitudes 'A' are most likely to predict behavior when 'C' is non-existent or weak, whereas attitudes 'A' are least likely to predict behavior when 'C' is either strongly positive (i.e., demands enactment of the behavior) or strongly negative (i.e., demands inhibition of the behavior).
1. For example, if the ability to recycle is made *very* difficult or *very* easy, attitudes won't predict behavior; and people will not recycle in the former condition and will recycle in the latter condition. If, however, it is possible – but not necessarily extremely easy – to recycle, then attitudes toward recycling will be more predictive of recycling behavior.
 2. Thus, behavior has more to do with the relative relation of 'A' to 'C' rather than the absolute value of 'A'.
- C. This interaction may be further moderated by whether the behavior is a *private* one (i.e., expression of personal choice; e.g., purchasing behavior) or a *public* one (i.e., social- or policy-related activities; e.g., participating in a demonstration): It may be that people's attitudes predict public, but not private, behavior when they feel helpless (less capable).
- D. *Reasoned Action Model*:^{6, 12} In this model, the primary predictor of behavior is the *intention* (i.e., readiness, expectation, plan, willingness) to perform that behavior; *attitude* is just one of many factors that feed into a person's intention.
1. Like *attitudes*, *intentions* can vary with respect to their accessibility, stability, the confidence with which they are held, and their personal relevance or importance to the individual. The more accessible, stable, confident, and relevant/important, the more likely that the intention and behavior will correspond.
 2. Intention need not be explicit/conscious. That is, the intention-behavior association can become automatic: Thus, intentions remain relevant even for habitual behavior

(e.g., a cue/stimulus may activate the intention/goal automatically, and the behavior will follow from there, assuming no impeding external factors; see also ¹⁴). Other research suggests, however, that frequent experience with the behavior is associated with a weaker intention-behavior relationship.¹⁷

Schematic Presentation of the Reasoned Action Model



3. In this model, the second-most critical predictor of behavior is *perceived behavioral control*. This *perception* has a direct effect on behavior as well as an indirect, moderating effect through its impact on *intention*: With higher perceived behavioral control, the intention to enact the behavior (*or not*) will more strongly predict that behavior. If, however, the individual has lower perceived behavior control, then intentions will be less likely to predict the behavior.
4. In this model, *context* or 'C' from the ABC model (4.A) mainly plays a role in the effects of *actual control* on both *perceived behavioral control* and the *behavior* itself. Likewise, if the individual has the intention *and* ability to perform the behavior, and there are no external factors to prevent the behavior, they are likely to act on their intentions.
5. *Normative beliefs* are the expectations of important people/groups, such as relatives, friends, co-workers. Motivation to comply with these beliefs determine the *perceived* (or subjective) *norm*.
6. *Control beliefs* are the perceived presence/absence of factors that can facilitate or impede enactment of the behavior. *Perceived behavioral control* is the person's subjective perceptions regarding the factors' *probability* of being present.
7. A recent meta-analytic review of relevant experimental research supports the theorized relations between attitude's, norms', and perceived behavioral control's ('self-efficacy') effects on intentions (each effect of medium magnitude), which – in turn – (partly) explained behavior.¹⁸

4. Additional considerations

- A. Sometimes our *attitudes are ambivalent* (i.e., we hold *both* positive and negative attitudes about 'X'), and these conflicting evaluations may also operate at different levels of consciousness (implicit versus explicit).
 1. Whichever attitude (positive vs. negative) is more relevant and accessible in the given situation will drive behavior.
 2. Implicit (positive or negative) attitudes are more likely to drive behavior when we don't have the ability (skills, resources, time) or motivation (desire, need) to consider our actions, whereas explicit attitudes are more likely to drive behavior when we *do* have the ability and motivation to consider our actions.¹⁰
- B. For socially sensitive topics (e.g., attitudes about racial or ethnic groups versus about yoghurt), the power of *explicit* attitudes to predict behavior is reduced; social sensitivity does not, however, practically reduce the power of *implicit* attitudes to predict behavior. Thus, the existence of impression-management concerns reduces the potential for explicit measures to account for behavior in socially sensitive domains.¹⁰
 1. Thus, *implicit* and *explicit* attitudes together explain behavior better than either type of attitude alone, and each type accounts for *different* aspects of behavior.¹⁰

5. Advocacy as an Attitude-Consistent Behavior

- A. Advocacy (or 'proselytism,' etc.) can be considered a type of attitude-relevant behavior, and it is largely linked to one's attitude confidence (certainty).
 1. People with more certain attitudes are generally more willing to try to persuade others.
 2. Typically, people will present the strongest possible case when trying to elicit support for some cause; however, when advocating to those who already agree with the cause but are uncertain, it can be useful for advocates to instead present weaker arguments, which can foster advocacy intentions in listeners (due to increased argumentation efficacy, or the extent one believes he/she can valuably contribute).²
 3. When people are induced to feel doubt about an issue important to their self-identity (e.g., for moral vegans: questions about a 100% ban on the use of animal testing in safety evaluations of ALL consumer products, including pharmaceuticals) the likelihood of their subsequently advocating to a 'friendly' (receptive) audience increases, because doing so is helpful in reducing doubt and restoring certainty.⁸
 4. Expression of a minority opinion ('minority' with respect to numbers, e.g., 20% want X vs. 80% want Y) is most likely when:¹⁶
 - a. The attitude is both strong and directionally consistent with the majority (e.g., a minority opinion of extreme liberalism in a group of moderate liberalism).
 - b. Minority group members for whom group membership is central to their self-identities believe that expression will promote their group's welfare.
 - c. Social group membership (e.g., female gender identity) grants entitlement to take a stand on a particular issue (e.g., women's rights).

- d. In Western culture, general self-uncertainty can lead one to voice minority (i.e., less popular) beliefs – both those already held and those adopted strategically – in order to restore confidence in oneself as an individual.
5. Even those who strongly identify with being a member of a given group are likely to challenge their group's norms when those norms are in conflict with important external standards for behavior (e.g., personal values), especially when the group norms are perceived as harmful to the group itself (normative conflict model).¹⁵
6. One's lay theory of attitudes (whether attitudes are seen as *either* relatively unchanging versus relatively malleable), along with one's attitudinal focus (own attitude vs. target's attitude), together affect the willingness to advocate.³
7. Perceptions that one's attitude is affectively-based (i.e., emotionally driven) are more predictive of proactive (i.e., spontaneous) advocacy, whereas perceptions that one's attitude is cognitively-based (i.e., thought driven) are more predictive of reactive (i.e., externally prompted) advocacy.²¹ Further, advocacy content that induces physiological arousal (e.g., via emotions such as anxiety, disgust, etc.) is more likely to be shared, which has implications for why some information is shared more broadly and, thus, captures public attention.⁴

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