



ATTITUDE CHANGE: AN OUTLINE SUMMARY

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November 2017

1. What is meant by *attitude*?

- A. The longest-standing view posits that an attitude is a *stored evaluation* of nearly anything a person can hold in mind, from the concrete to the abstract. Thus, an attitude toward some 'X' is largely fixed and can be consciously retrieved from memory upon demand.^{2, 14}
- B. In contrast, some models posit that attitudes are *not* 'things' stored in long-term memory but, rather, are constructed in-the-moment from information that is currently available in the person's environment (internal and external). That information *may* include a stored evaluation, but it is not necessarily always retrieved NOR is the evaluation, if retrieved, accorded more weight than other available information (e.g., mood, social norms, etc.). This view thus implies that attitudes are inherently dependent on context, they are far more flexible and, moreover, they are both more and less susceptible to influence attempts (more because context plays a larger role, but at the same time less because there are so many more factors that could compete with the stored evaluation at any given moment).²
- C. Other models define *attitude* as having a key stable component plus unstable components.¹

2. What is the function (i.e., purpose) of an *attitude*?¹

- A. As a means by which to organize knowledge/information about the world
- B. To facilitate adaptive approach-avoidance behavior (reward-maximization and punishment-minimization)
- C. For social connection with important reference groups
- D. For self-expression of values and identity
- E. For self-esteem maintenance (e.g., via their use in defense mechanisms and social comparison)

3. *Attitudes* vary with respect to:

- A. Valence: Whether an attitude object is perceived positively or negatively. Attitudes can be relatively positive, relatively negative, relatively neutral (i.e., indifferent), and some attitudes can have both positive and negative components at the same time (i.e.,

ambivalent) Typical attitude measures cannot differentiate extreme ambivalence from indifference.^{10, 11}

- B. Extremity: the *extent* to which an attitude object is perceived positively or negatively.¹⁰
- C. Their bases: Grounded in affect/emotion, cognition/beliefs/thoughts, and/or past/current behavior.¹³
- D. Strength: i.e., their durability (resistance to change), persistence (consistency over time), and impact (influence on the person's own thoughts and behavior).¹⁰ Indicators of attitude strength include:
 - 1. Extremity: The extent to which the attitude departs from neutral. Relatively extreme attitudes tend to be stronger than less extreme attitudes.
 - 2. Ambivalence: The extent to which an attitude is comprised of both positive and negative reactions. Ambivalence can be experienced as both objective/potential ambivalence (i.e., the number of positive and negative reactions) and subjective/felt ambivalence (i.e., the experience of conflict when considering the attitude object). Ambivalent attitudes tend to be weaker than unambivalent attitudes.^{6, 11}
 - 3. Importance: How meaningful and self-relevant the issue is to the person. Important attitudes tend to be stronger than less important attitudes.
 - 4. Certainty: The person's confidence (clarity and/or correctness) in their attitude position. Attitudes held with certainty tend to be stronger than attitudes held with doubt.
 - 5. Accessibility: How quickly the stored evaluation can be brought to mind. More accessible attitudes tend to be stronger than less accessible attitudes. Greater accessibility also relates to greater extremity.
 - 6. Knowledge: How much relevant information one has about the issue. More knowledgeable attitudes (particularly knowledge stemming from high elaboration) tend to be stronger than less knowledgeable attitudes.
- E. Explicitness/controllability (conscious and accessible to introspection) versus implicitness/automaticity (unconscious and inaccessible):^{1, 8}
 - 1. Very distinct methods are required to assess explicit/controlled versus implicit/automatic attitudes. Implicit methods are, ostensibly, free from motivated response biases.
 - 2. Explicit and implicit attitudes often diverge, especially for culturally-potent issues.
 - a. Some researchers conceive of the implicit attitude as holding more 'truth' because it is less susceptible to conscious control.
 - b. On the other hand, some researchers think that implicit attitudes are not necessarily more 'true' than are explicit attitudes: Implicit attitudes may simply reflect cultural learning. From this perspective, the corresponding explicit attitudes are those that would be personally endorsed by the individual (e.g., consider cultural learning about gender, for example: many women hold negative views of their own

gender through social learning – and these negative evaluations may evince themselves on implicit attitude measures -- but many women wouldn't explicitly endorse this negative attitude).

4. Factors that can change (strengthen/weaken or potentially reverse) *attitudes*:

A. Features of the Attitude:

1. Valence: When strength is held constant, negative attitudes are more difficult to change than are positive attitudes (because negative information is perceived as less ambiguous and more diagnostic; also because people tend to have fewer experiences with negative attitude objects and, thus, have less opportunity to amend their point of view).¹
2. Bases: Generally, messages are more effective when they match rather than mismatch the base; and not just the *type* of base, but its particular qualities (e.g., an emotional appeal will be more persuasive than a cognitive appeal to someone with an emotionally-based attitude; and a message targeting *fear in particular* will be more effective when the attitude is based on fear rather than, say, anger).¹³ Further, attitudes perceived to have a moral basis are stronger/harder to change than non-moral attitudes.⁵
3. Strength: Strong attitudes are more difficult to change.¹⁰
4. Explicitness vs. Implicitness: The working assumption is that relatively implicit attitudes are less susceptible – but not impervious to – change attempts (not to mention respond differently to different influence strategies).²

B. Features of the Source of Persuasion:^{9, 14}

1. Credibility: Persuasion is more effective when the source is seen to be credible (i.e., to have expertise and be trustworthy).
2. Likeable (or attractive) sources are more persuasive.
3. The more *similar* the source appears to the target of persuasion, the more the target will be persuaded by him/her.
4. If the source is seen as part of the *majority* rather than minority, s/he will be more persuasive (where 'majority/minority' is defined with respect to numbers, e.g., "80% of people agree...").
5. High-power/status of the source changes a target's *apparent* attitudes; but these attitudes often return to their original state if/when the source is no longer present (i.e., no 'true' attitude change, just simple obedience/compliance).

C. Features of the Target of Persuasion:^{9, 14}

1. Intelligent people, on average, are more difficult to persuade using weak arguments.
2. Happy (mood) people are more easily persuaded, but only when thinking about the persuasive attempt is perceived as likely to preserve the positive mood. Negative moods can lead to more thinking about a persuasive message because

negative mood leads one to be more attentive to the environment and motivated to correct the negative mood state.

3. People in an 'approach' mindset are more likely to accept a persuasive message than are people in an 'avoidance' mindset.
4. If the target is certain/confident about their attitude, they are less susceptible to influence; thus, one can change an attitude by changing the certainty with which it is held.
5. If changing the attitude would cause the target to think less of him/herself, then s/he is less likely to change that attitude (self-esteem maintenance).
6. Attitude toward persuasion/influence attempts: The more negative the target's attitude toward 'persuasion' attempts or sources (e.g., distrust of media motivations, etc.), the more closely s/he will scrutinize the message (thus, the message should be sound and strong).³
7. Engagement in the counter-attitudinal behavior changes attitudes (so behavior change → attitude change; but only when engagement in the behavior cannot be externally justified, e.g., "someone paid me to do it").

D. Features of the Persuasive Message:^{9, 14}

1. Pro-attitudinal messages are more persuasive than counter-attitudinal messages (confirmation bias; i.e., it is easier to *strengthen* an existing attitude than it is to *reverse* an attitude). However, people process counter-attitudinal information more carefully (because it is threatening to the person's attitude or sense of self, thus more counterarguments are generated, greater recall for the message occurs, more time is spent reading the message, etc.).
2. Two-sided messages (messages that address *both* sides of an issue) are generally more persuasive than one-sided, 'biased' messages, because the former are perceived to be more trustworthy.
3. Message quality: The higher the quality (i.e., it is convincing with respect to the perceived valence, likelihood, and importance of the outcome), the more persuasive the message when elaboration is high. Also, when elaboration is low, esoteric/technical arguments difficult for laypeople to understand are persuasive (because the jargon is a peripheral cue that the source is more expert), but the opposite is true when elaboration is high.
4. More arguments are more persuasive, but mainly when the target is inattentive (see 5.A).
5. Message repetition increases the propensity of attitude change *up to a point*, after which, it can attenuate or even have the opposite effect.
6. Fluency: Messages *experienced* as being easier to understand or explain are more persuasive.

5. Complexities: The route to attitude change is not necessarily as straightforward as '4' may imply.

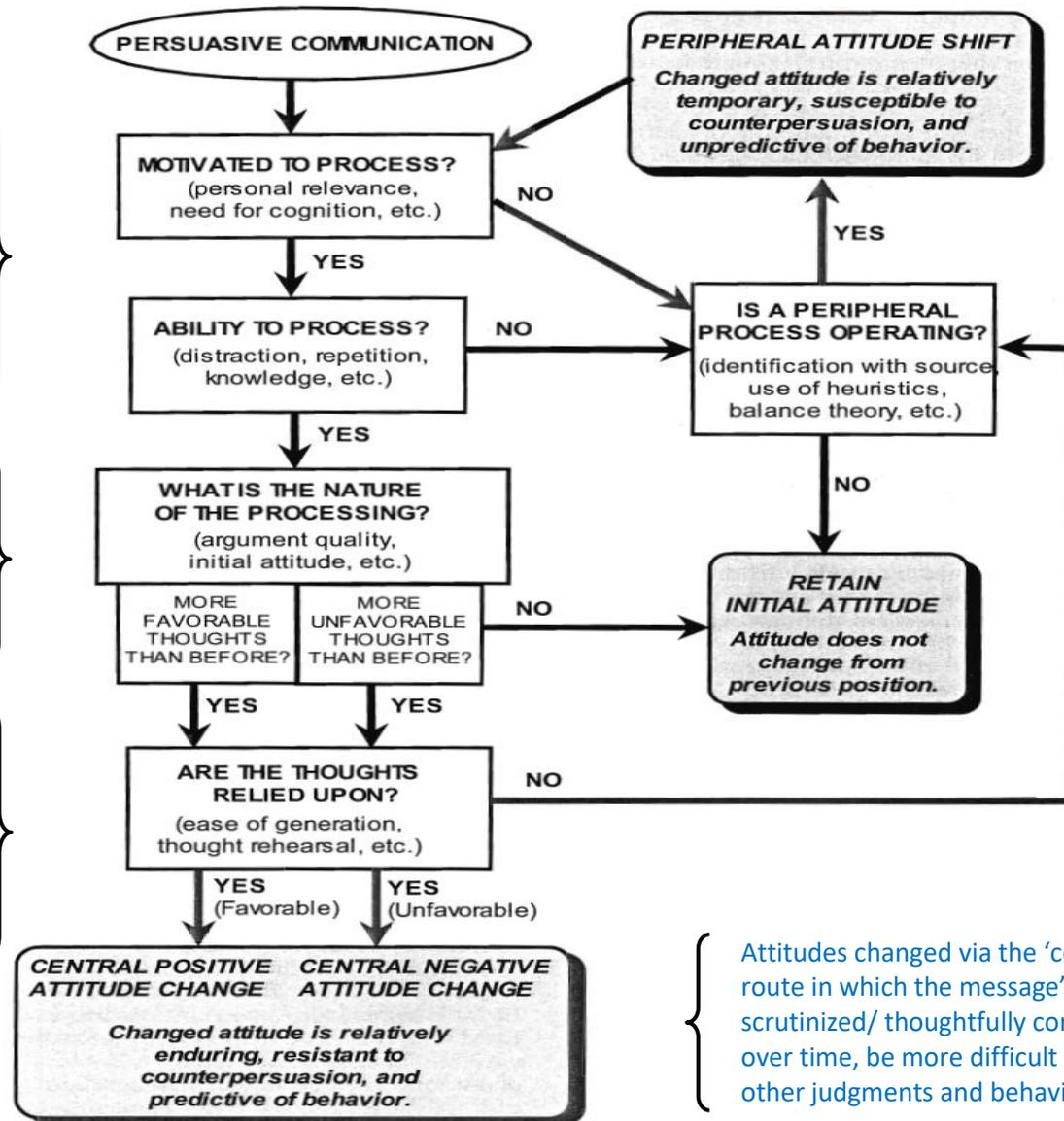
- A. There may be interactive effects between some of the above-described factors as well as context effects. To illustrate the complexity of the issue, the image in the Appendix depicts one prominent social-psychological model of attitude change (with additional explanatory notes shown in blue type):^{7, 8}
- B. Side effects: Attempts to change a person's attitude toward some 'X' can sometimes *generalize* to other, related objects/issues or even change related (implicit) attitudes instead of the targeted attitude (*displacement*).⁴
 - 1. Individuals highly resistant to attitude change will be more likely to show displacement than generalization effects.
- C. Cross-cultural considerations: Most attitude-change research has been done in a Western, English-speaking context, wherein the primacy of the person/individual over the group is held sacrosanct. That is, attitudes are very *personal* in these cultures and, accordingly, individuals are more concerned with within-person attitudinal *consistency* across contexts. In more interdependent or collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, group and social-context norms will inform attitudes to a larger extent than will personal attitudes; and it is, in fact, seen as optimal that one's attitudes will change according to the different social expectations in each context.¹²

References

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The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Briñol, 2014)



The target's (1) desire to think about the topic AND (2) their ability (long-standing and current) will affect whether the message's content will receive appropriate scrutiny; many different variables are inputs to 'motivation' and 'ability.'

This is where the message and source receive scrutiny: Is the source using high- or low-quality arguments? How do the arguments relate to the initial attitude? Etc.

Metacognition or "thoughts about the thoughts": Do the 'new' thoughts seem coherent, do they feel easy to understand and explain, and are they practiced and elaborated?

Attitudes can change even if the message isn't properly scrutinized: In this case, heuristic or superficial cues (e.g., # of arguments, attractiveness of source) may impact a person's attitude. Attitudes changed via peripheral route processing are less fixed and less deeply held (i.e., this is not a route to long-term attitude change.

Attitudes will not change at all (even temporarily) if the person can't and won't pay ANY attention (deep OR superficial) to the source, content, or context of the message.

Attitudes changed via the 'central' processing route -- i.e., the route in which the message's content and source have been scrutinized/ thoughtfully considered -- are more likely to persist over time, be more difficult to change, and have implications for other judgments and behaviours.