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ATTITUDES, BELIEFS AND SOCIAL COGNITION

Have you noticed that when ever we meet someone we tend to evaluate him or her? You may think of your friend as trustworthy, caring and helpful and hence have a positive and favourable feeling towards him/her. On the other hand you may consider your neighbour to be loud who tend to interfere in your family's activities. You are likely to have a negative or unfavourable feeling toward such a person. Similarly our family, grandparents, neighbours, friends, political leaders and others communicate their attitudes and beliefs towards us. We need to understand ourselves and others and evaluate the social world we live in. Our attitudes and beliefs help to understand ourselves and the people who live around us. In this lesson we will examine the nature of attitude. We will also examine how the attitudes are formed, how can they be changed and, the relationship between attitude and behaviour. Finally, we will learn how do we make sense of our world by trying to find the causes of various events in the world and the errors we may make while assessing the happenings in the social world we live in.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- describe the main components of attitude;
- explain the relationship between attitude and behaviour;
- indicate the ways by which attitude change can be facilitated; and
- explain the concept of social cognition and its biases.

15.1 NATURE OF ATTITUDES

You meet your parents, family members, friends, teachers and many other people over and over again. Gradually you start '**thinking**' about their behaviour towards



you. You experience certain kind of **'feeling'** towards them, and start **'behaving'** toward them in a particular manner. In other words by **'thinking'**, **'feeling'** and **'behaving'** you come to form an attitude towards the people, events, objects and everything that exists in the social world.

Attitudes are defined as our **favourable** or **unfavourable evaluations** of people, objects, and situations. We communicate our attitudes in the form of statements such as: "I like mangoes", "I enjoy classical music", or "I do not enjoy rock music". When we use words such as 'like', 'dislike', 'love', 'hate', 'good' and 'bad' we are describing our attitude towards objects, people or issues. Attitude consists of three aspects i.e. cognitive, affective and behavioural:

- 1. Cognitive part** – It refers to the **thinking** that brings about the development of a belief about the attitude object.
- 2. Affective part** – It refers to the direction (positive or negative feeling), intensity of a person's evaluation or the **emotion experienced** towards the attitude object.
- 3. Behavioural part** – It is the likelihood of **acting** in a certain manner towards the attitude object.

These three components, thinking, feeling and behaving, come together and we form an attitude towards a person or an object. At times these components may be inconsistent. Thus you may hold a positive attitude towards a neighbour – he is intelligent and hardworking (positive qualities) – but you may not like his/her manners. Or you may not like your neighbour but you may still help him/her when the situation demands. Both the possibilities are likely to occur. Normally if you hold a strong attitude, all the three components of attitude remain consistent and do not contradict each other. For example, if a well known cricketer, like Sachin Tendulkar, is visiting your neighbourhood and you are extremely fond (feeling) of playing and watching cricket, then you will actively plan (thinking process), and visit the venue (behaviour). Or, you may find Sachin Tendulkar to be an excellent cricket player (thinking part), yet are not a keen player yourself nor do you watch the game of cricket regularly (low liking emotional experience) and hence may decide not to put in the effort to meet him (low probability of behaviour).

Activity 1

Components of Attitude

- Make a list of the various aspects that you think, feel and act towards your best friend. Identify the cognitive, affective and behavioural components of attitudes.
- Make a list of various issues. A list is provided below you can also use, now rate the following - school education, smoking, teachers, drinking, myself, dieting, meeting new people, family, friends, eating vegetables, chocolates on a 7- point scale of liking, ranging from "least liked" (1) to "most liked" (7).



A 15 year old boy and girl student gave the following responses. You can also make a similar representation of the ratings on various issues.

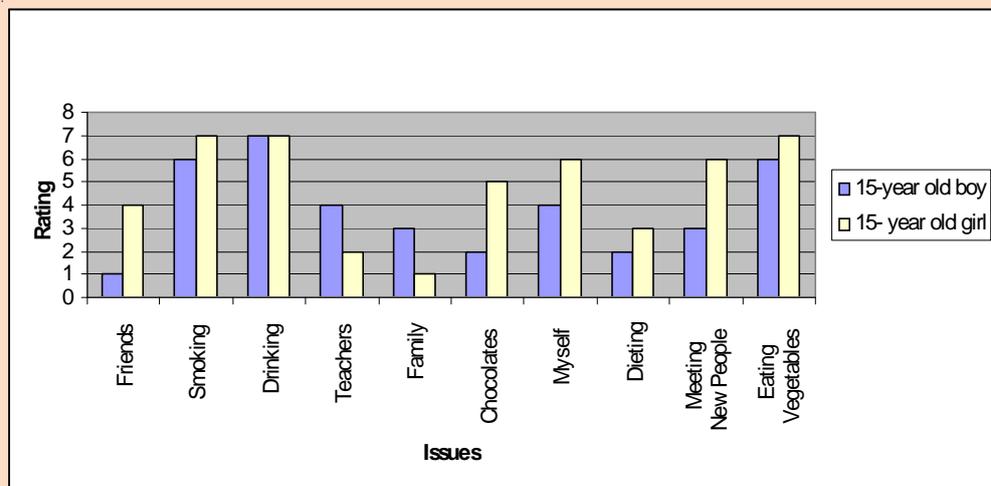


Fig. 15.1: Ratings of 2 individuals on various issues

- C) Ask a friend to rate the same list. Compare the two lists and identify the similarities and differences between the two sets of ratings. You can prepare your own list also.
- D) Can you assess a person's attitude by asking about only any one attitude component?

It has been found that attitudes are held for a **long period of time**. **Attitudes change** especially when you undergo new experiences. Also they are characteristics of a person, and differ in type and strength from person to person depending upon the socialization and interaction with the social world.

Functions of Attitude

Why do we form attitudes? It allows us to simplify social life which is complicated and full of various types of information. Attitudes serve four important functions in our lives:

1. Attitudes allow us to **understand the world** around us. Positive attitudes help to come closer to some people and make you agree to their requests. You may identify with role models (e.g. Sachin Tendulkar, Mother Teresa) and try to develop their way of thinking and behaving. The negative attitudes make us stay away from such people or situations.
2. Attitudes help **describe the social groups** that each one of us belongs to. As members of a family, group of friends, or, religious, political group we share similar attitudes and this helps to bind us together. Thus we may favour the religious and political groups we belong to and show unfavourable attitude towards the other groups.

3. Attitudes also help us to understand ‘**who we are**’ or our identity. Attitudes express an individual’s values and self-concept. For example, some people value equality while others may value freedom or compassion. Mahatama Gandhi’s attitude towards honesty and Mother Teresa’s concern for the poor and needy is well known.
4. Attitudes help us to **get support, praise and acceptance** from others. People who hold similar attitudes are attracted toward each other. For example, your friend and you share common interests and attitudes, both of you like each other and hence it makes easier to carry on the friendship. Thus attitudes help us to adjust in our social interaction.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.1

State whether statements are true or false:

1. Attitudes are positive evaluations of a person or an object.
2. Emotions expressed about an attitude object refers to the affective component of an attitude.
3. Attitudes are held for a short period of time.
4. Attitudes provide us with a sense of self.
5. Holding specific attitudes helps us to gain approval from others.

15.2 FORMATION AND CHANGE OF ATTITUDES

By now you have understood that attitudes are basically learnt through interaction with others and personal experiences. Usually children acquire the attitudes of their parents. Has your mother warned you not to talk to strangers? Are you as religious as your grand parents and parents? Attitudes are the result of many different influences yet the common aspect is that it is acquired through different types of learning.

Direct contact: In an earlier lesson you have learnt about how a neutral object gets associated with an established stimulus-response. Repeated association with the stimuli evokes positive or negative feelings. The attitude object now comes to have the same feelings. This involves **classical conditioning** (see Lesson 5). Strong smells, tastes and sensory information can bring about strong emotional responses. For example, if a child eats sprouts and dislikes it, there are chances that this dislike will be generalized to other food items similar in colour and taste.

Direct instruction: Instructions given by parents, teachers, or leaders, lead to formation of specific attitudes. Parents tell their children not to smoke and drink





because it is unhealthy. Teachers may also reinforce this attitude. The child may develop a negative attitude towards smoking and drinking.

Interaction with others: We are usually in the company of others and adopt attitudes similar to the group we belong to. For example, if your group of friends think it is 'cool' to wear black jeans and shirts decorated with chains, you may think it cool to be dressed in such clothes. Also, if your friends think it 'cool' to smoke and drink then you may not listen to your parents and teachers but agree with the peer group. You choose such a way of behaving, as this behaviour is reinforced by the reward you get from your friends, that is, praise, approval and acceptance as a group member. Further, such actions make you 'feel good', increase your self-esteem and make your attitude even stronger. The use of rewards involves **instrumental learning** (see Lesson 5). By controlling rewards and punishments children are taught specific attitudes.

Observational learning: Attitudes are often learnt through observation of other people's actions. As a child do you remember how your grand parents sang *bhajans* everyday during prayer time? As a young adult you may also now enjoy such songs. Or, how did your mother react when she saw a stray dog? If she showed fear and an attempt to run away from the dog, it is likely that you may also have developed the same attitude.

In addition, the educational system, media particularly television, movies, magazines and newspapers all influence attitude formation. Belonging to an impressionable age children believe in what they watch on the TV. Advertisers take advantage of this and try to get children to form specific attitudes towards what they want to sell. As you have noticed almost all companies and organizations spend a lot of money on advertisement aimed at persuading people for change in their attitude.

Attitude Change

We have learnt about the nature of attitude and how attitudes are formed. No doubt, attitudes once formed are difficult to change. Yet, because attitudes are learnt they can also change with new learning. Attitude change depends upon the following factors.

- **Source:** The person who delivers the message is called the **communicator**. The probability, that you will change your attitude is higher if the message is conveyed by experts, who are considered to be trustworthy, attractive and similar to the person receiving the message. Thus, if the cricketer Sachin Tendulkar says that a particular drink gives him energy, the target audience is likely to be young children who consider him as a role model in the field of sports. They are likely to buy the drink because they assume that they would be able to 'play like him'.
- **Message:** The nature of message is important because it provides the information for attitude change. The message should be clear and well organized. Messages that produce anxiety and fear are more effective. Thus an advertisement on soap may explain that perspiration from the body results in bad odour and your friends



will turn away from you. Or, if you have a bath with a particular soap then you are likely to be flooded with friends!

- **Person:** The characteristics of the person whose attitude is to be changed plays an important role in attitude change. Attitudes that are strong, personally important, complex and interconnected are difficult to change. Thus your attitude towards family would be difficult to change rather than preference of a soap or drink.

Thus 'who' (communicator) says 'what' (message) to 'whom' (person for whom the communication is meant for) will determine whether attitude change will take place or not. What other people *say* and *do* has an effect on us. The advertising industry's aim is to change attitudes towards a particular product or services. They use these three aspects of attitude change in their advertisements.

Activity 2

Attitude Change

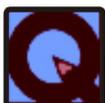
Attitude change is possible when a message plays on the emotions of others. Select advertisements (from television, newspaper or magazines) about body image and target adolescents in the age group of 15-16 years. Analyze on the basis of the three components of attitude. Which attitude component is most dominant in the advertisement message?

Activity 3

Attitude Change

Select a magazine which has a high readership in your own city. Mark all the advertisements in the magazine.

- a) Note the words and images used in the advertisements. Now identify the three sources of attitude change in each advertisement: the source person, the message communicated and the person to whom the message is addressed to. Prepare a table and find the frequency of occurrence of each source.
- b) Advertisers often use a wide range of human motives/needs to sell their products. In lesson 5 (Motivation and Emotions) you read about the different types of motives: physiological needs, self-esteem needs, social and prestige needs, and self-actualization amongst others. Take each advertisement and identify the need which is being called upon. Prepare a table of the frequency of occurrence of each need that you have identified. This project will help you understand how advertisers use primary and secondary needs to change the attitudes of people.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.2

State whether the statements are 'True' or 'False':

1. Learning plays an important role in the acquisition of attitudes.



2. We tend to adopt similar attitudes of the groups we belong to.
3. Messages that produce anxiety and fear are ineffective.
4. Change in attitude is higher if the message is conveyed by an expert.
5. Attitudes that are strong and personally important are difficult to change.

15.3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

The relationship between attitude and behaviour is complex and it is often difficult to predict one's attitude from his or her behaviour. How many times have you heard people state that they want to be fit but they do not exercise, or that they are worried about global warming but drive a big car which consumes petrol by the gallons! People say one thing but do not necessarily follow it up with appropriate behaviours. Studies have shown that there are certain special conditions under which attitudes can predict behaviour:

- When attitudes are **strong and consistent**, that is when the three components of attitude are clear and stable they better predict behaviour. Weak, unimportant and ambiguous attitudes are less likely to predict behaviour.
- When one holds a strong attitude or when one is **conscious of one's attitude**, thereby it is also **easily recalled** and possible to predict behaviour.
- When attitudes have been formed through **direct experience** prediction of behaviour is more accurate.
- When one acts under social pressure attitude may be expressed in diverse ways. An adolescent may not want to smoke or drink because it affects health. But peer group pressure may force him to drink. Thus his way of thinking is different from his behaviour. When **external influences are minimal** then attitude-behaviour relationship is becomes strong.

It is important to note whether behaviour is spontaneous or well planned. When behaviour is deliberated upon and planned, particularly which college to join, or when and whom to marry, these issues become important hence hasty decisions will not be taken. Thus when we have time to think and it is personally relevant then the attitude-behaviour relationship will be strong.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.3

Read the list of attitudes carefully and state which type of learning was used for attitude formation: direct contact, direct instruction, interaction with others and observational learning.

1. Asha's mother listens to Hindi classical music at home and while driving. Asha has grown up hearing this music and now she too likes to hear this type of music.
2. Amit's father sits down with his son and explains why it is important to stop smoking and lead a healthy life. Amit stops smoking.
3. Shekar notes that his parents, elder brother, an uncle and close friends value hard work and commitment to work. He also starts to hold this attitude towards his studies.
4. Five year old Rekha watches her grand mother praying everyday in the morning now she also joins her grand mother while praying.
5. Five year old Mehak has recently joined a primary school. Her class room is coloured brightly, with lots of toys and a teacher who is warm and pleasant. She goes to school everyday happily.



15.4 BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOUR

Like attitudes we also have beliefs about ourselves, people and things around us. **Beliefs** refer to the acceptance of something as truth. In fact when one has a strong belief it often becomes unshakable. For instance, belief that a supernatural power controls human destiny or a God is very strong, or, may have a belief in afterlife. Once a belief is formed you are confident about the occurrence of certain events and how you or people are likely to behave. It helps us understand why people behave in a particular way or why an event has taken place. Beliefs help us to organize our experiences in the social world and predict our own behaviour as well as the occurrence of events.

15.5 SOCIAL COGNITION

Our minds try to make sense of the world around, and make necessary adjustments to function in it in adaptable ways. When a friend invites you for her birthday party you know many things about it - what type of dress to wear, you will carry a gift, that there will be many other friends, a birthday cake and good eatables, and the like. How do you know about it? Past experience and information about birthday parties and associated activities help form an image about 'birthday party' as different from other kinds of celebrations.

Social cognition refers to information received from the social world which is interpreted, analysed and remembered, such that we come to think, feel and understand about the people who live around us. But the information coming in is too much so we have to learn to organize it in the form of schemas. **Schemas** are a set of interconnected beliefs, information and examples about social objects, events and people. Once formed the schemas guide our thinking and behaviour. They simplify information so that we can interpret new information rapidly. There are various types of schemas dealing with persons, events and social roles.

**Activity 4****Schemas – Young Vs Older Generation**

Request an elderly person (a male and a female) to prepare a list that describes themselves and another list that describes the younger generation. Also, ask the youth (a male and female) to describe themselves and the older generation. Now compare the two lists how each group has a particular schema about themselves, as well as the other social group.

We also look for other ways to reduce information overload. We tend to use **heuristics** which are simple rules for making complex decisions quickly. If you are asked to identify a person who is abstract-minded, is committed to her/his work, works long hours, has students surrounding her/him – name the person – yes you are likely to say ‘professor’. This is because these are typical attributes of a professor. Similarly, there are typical characteristics of a dancer, doctor or politician.

Attribution: Understand the Causes of Behaviour

We also look for the causes of one’s own and other people’s behaviour. This is termed as **attribution**. If your friend does not invite you for her birthday party you are going to question why she did not do so. So we are like naïve scientists trying to establish cause and effect relationships. If you fair poorly what reasons are you likely to put forward and when you do well in the examination what reasons will you give? There are two categories either you will attribute your success or failure to **internal causes** pertaining to personal reasons, (e.g. “I fared poorly because I did not put in effort”, or “I did well in the examination because I put in a great deal of effort”). The **external causes** include anything outside the person. For instance, “I fared poorly in the examination because the question paper was tough”.

Sources of Errors or Biases in Social Cognition

The internal or external causes lead us to commit the **fundamental attribution error**. For example, when we see another person come late for a meeting and drop her notes on the floor, we are likely to reach a conclusion that the person is ‘disorganized and clumsy’. We tend to explain the cause of ‘coming late’ and ‘dropping notes’ to internal causes. When we are in the same position then we are likely to attribute the reasons of the same happening to external causes, such as, there was a traffic jam and the floor was slippery. Thus when we perceive others we perceive their behaviour to be caused by internal causes and say she is ‘that kind of a person’. When we try to explain our own behaviour we do it in terms of situational or external causes.

In our effort to understand the social world we try to reason out yet we often make serious errors. Let us learn about some of the biases. The **optimistic bias** is the



tendency to believe that we are more likely than others to experience positive events. For example we believe that we will do well in our studies, get a good job and lead a happier life as opposed to not getting a job or falling ill.

We also have a strong **negativity bias**, the tendency to be sensitive to negative information. We give more attention and assign greater importance to such types of information. When you are informed about a person who is friendly, intelligent, good looking and arrogant, which bit of information is likely to stand out and be remembered? Yes, negative information will have a stronger influence than the positive one.

We often we think in terms of “what might have been” or **counterfactual thinking**. For example when we desire a good result in examination and do not get it we show strong regret over the missed opportunity. You are likely to say “I should have studied more and then I could have come first and be awarded the scholarship” either you will study more next time or it could lead you to be depressed about such thinking.

Sometimes we have a tendency to notice and search for information that support one’s beliefs and ignore information that do not conform it. This is called **confirmatory bias**. People also tend to ignore basic information and get influenced by the distinctive features of the object.

It can be said that we make errors particularly when we use heuristics as shortcuts and when we do not put in efforts to think in detail. Also, for unimportant events we use heuristics and automatic processing, whereas, for important events we use conscious processing and thus make better decisions. Although we make these errors they help us to adapt to the situation. It helps us to focus on certain information that is of importance to us and reduces the effort for understanding the world.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 15.4

Fill in the blanks:

1. _____ help simplify information so that we can interpret new information quickly. (schemas, social cognition)
2. _____ are learnt through personal experiences and social communication. (personal schemata, role schemata, event schemata)
3. The tendency to be sensitive to negative information is called _____. (counterfactual thinking, negativity bias)
4. When we prevent ourselves about thinking of certain topics we engage in _____. (counterfactual thinking, thought suppression)

**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

- Attitudes are favourable or unfavourable evaluations of people, objects, ideas and situations. Attitude consists of three different yet interrelated components: cognitive, affective and behavioural components. They combine to create an attitude about an attitude object.
- Attitudes serve important functions of understanding the world, help define social groups and our identity and help gain acceptance from others.
- Attitudes are formed through different types of learning: direct contact, direct instruction, interaction with others and observational learning.
- Attitudes once formed are difficult to change, yet change is possible because attitudes can be learnt under new conditions
- Two types of attitude change – incongruent and congruent change. Congruent attitude change is easier.
- Attitude depends upon the source, message and the target person.
- Conditions under which attitudes predict behaviour – when attitudes are strong and consistent, awareness of the attitude held, direct experience of attitude formation and external influence is minimal.
- Social cognition involves our effort to understand the social world. Schemas and heuristics help us to organize the incoming information from the social world. Causal attribution helps to look for internal or external causes of behaviour.
- Social cognition is subject to many errors, such as, negativity, positivity bias, counterfactual thinking and thought suppression.

**TERMINAL EXERCISE**

1. Define attitudes. Describe the three components of attitude.
2. Briefly describe the functions of attitudes. Illustrate your answer with examples.
3. How are attitudes formed? Illustrate your answer with examples.
4. Can attitudes be changed? Explain the three important factors that help to bring about attitude change.
5. Explain the relationship between attitudes and behaviour. Specify the conditions under which the attitude-behaviour relationship will be strong.



6. Define social cognition. Explain the role of schemas in organizing our thinking and behaviour.



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

15.1

1. F 2. T 3. F 4. T 5. T

15.2

1. T 2. T 3. F 4. F 5. T

15.3

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Observational learning | 2. Direct instruction |
| 3. Interaction with others | 4. Observational learning |
| 5. Direct contact | |

15.4

1. Schemas
2. Event schemata
3. Negativity bias
4. Thought suppression

Hints for Terminal Questions

1. Refer to Section 15.1
2. Refer to Section 15.1
3. Refer to Section 15.2
4. Refer to Section 15.2
5. Refer to Section 15.3
6. Refer to Section 15.5