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**EXPLORING ATTITUDES AS COMPLEX PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONSTRUCTS: ATTITUDE CHANGE THROUGH THE PROCESS
OF PERSUASION**

Abstract

As being vital, the present paper attempts to explore and give answer to the most substantial questions related to a complex construct of attitudes. By tracing their origins, we try to explain what they are, and what their function is. What are they made of? Are they emotional or cognitive constructs? Are they stable or they can be changed? The study focusses on the process of persuasion as one of mechanisms responsible for attitude change.

Key words: attitudes, functions, attitude change, persuasion, psychological construct.

Defining attitudes

The use of the term attitude in theoretical, scientific explanations, as well as in everyday speech, is quite broad. Given that we live in a complex social world, encircled by different phenomena and exposed to a multitude of influences, we logically form our attitudes whenever facing a certain object or phenomenon. In that sense, for one of the pioneers Allport (1935), attitudes are “a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (p. 810). However, as the world around us changes, all of us (in our own way), are sensitive to these changes. If attitudes are “likes and dislikes” (Bem, 1967), we certainly form them trying to keep up with the world and overcome changes we face with. Attitudes, thus, represent the acquired disposition of positive or negative relation (cognitive, emotional, and action) toward people and events. Similarly, Hogg and Vaughan (2005) observe attitudes as “a relatively permanent organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies related to the socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” (p.150). Finally, and perhaps the most comprising is the attitude conceptualization of Eagly and Cheikan (2007) who identify attitudes as “a mental tendency, expressed by assessing a particular object with some extent of favor or disfavor” (p. 2). In summary, as we can see from the above definitions, the common points of attitudes are that:

- 1) Attitudes are acquired and relatively permanent and stable psychological constructs;
- 2) Attitudes have great importance for human interaction;
- 3) Attitudes cannot be observed directly;
- 4) Attitudes are complex;
- 5) Attitudes are related to physical objects, abstract concepts, individuals, social groups and social phenomena. For that reason, attitudes usually involve general evaluation of people, objects and events, which can be based on the emotions, beliefs and previous experiences and behaviors.

Thus, attitudes, as we shall see have many important functions for individuals. The cognitive function of attitude is reflected in the fact that attitudes manage, organize and simplify information elaboration; utilitarian function is referring to that positive or negative attitude shows if we can expect from certain object award or punishment, which makes us possible to plan our behavior in order to maximize awards and minimize punishments;

through the function of social identity, attitudes make possible expressing individual values and identification with certain groups; finally attitudes serve in conserving self-respect with making possible to individual to apart from negative objects and connect to positive objects (Bohner, 2008).

Nature and structure of attitudes

According to various authors (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Hogg & Vaughan 2005; Schau, et al., 1995), attitudes consist of three components:

- a) *Cognitive component* relates to the objective knowledge or subjective beliefs about the attitude's object and includes processes such as perception, knowledge and evaluation of the attitude's object;
- b) *Affective (emotional) component* includes all the feelings that are related to the object of attitude - positive or negative emotional relationship, followed by appropriate physiological processes. Emotional saturation gives emphasized strength and stability to the attitude;
- c) *Behavioral component* refers to the intention and ability to act according to the object of the attitude, to support, help and protect, or to avoid, disable or attack the object of attitude.

In addition, Pennington and Hastie (1986) observe that cognitive and affective components are structured in such a way that the beliefs and values (cognitive and affective) combine forming an attitude, which is a negative or positive evaluation of something about which we hold certain beliefs. Finally, behavioral component as a result of cognitive and affective components can be highly visible in situations when, for example we have extreme negative attitudes toward one particular person, social group or nation. These two components gain strength and willingness to undertake the hostile action against objects of our negative attitude (Secord & Backman, 1964).

Theoretical approaches to attitudes

European and especially American social and cognitive psychology are more than 50 years treating the question of changing the attitudes in different terminological variations: persuasive processes, techniques of persuasion, elaboration of persuasive messages. This chapter is an attempt of a synthesis of the principal theoretical approaches, and even more the review of research findings accumulated in the last fifty years,

with particular reference to the most recent influential theories. Over the years, the conception of attitude has been investigated in a number of ways throughout numerous perspectives. Attitude studies have been materialized as a major component of the social sciences during the first part of the twentieth century, paying attention primarily on pertaining components such as instruments enabling measurement of attitudes (Bogardus, 1925, 1947; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Likert, 1932; Thurstone, 1928).

Attitudes are being as vital and prevailing subject of interest in modern social psychology, given that in the period from 2000 up to present days, it has been noted an evident interest for the attitude structure and attitude change (Crano & Prislin, 2006; Fazio & Olson, 2003). Specifically, in the recent period, the attitude structuring conception was a subject of interest for various researchers (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Eagly & Chaiken, 2007; Gawronski, 2007). For that reason, other researchers focus on attitudes and their influence on behavior by trying to find a link between them and the reception of audiovisual fiction (Crano & Prislin, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000; Igartua, 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Soto-Sanfiel, Ibiti & Palencia, 2014). Since the attitudes are not innate, but acquired behavioral dispositions, not only do they find as a subject a wide range of applications, but even more the research of attitudes has become the great industry. In that regard, guided by the knowledge on the attitudes towards certain objects and phenomena, we may (although uncertainly and incompletely) predict human behavior. The attitudes are particularly suitable for explaining and forecasting behaviors related to the important social issues and phenomena. In addition, if we take into consideration morality and self-interest as a part of forming attitudes, Prnjat (2012) reminds that the critique of self-interest as moral motivation of believers appears within the very traditions of the major world religions. Finally, Prnjat (2012) argues that some contemporary forms of secular ethics, even at the highest levels, still refer to a certain form of self-interest.

Measuring of explicit attitudes

Taking into account that social distance is co-native component of attitude toward homosexuals (Bogardus, 1925), and given the fact that the central subject of the present study is attitude change, perhaps the most appropriate way to explain measurement of attitudes should be through the concept of Social distance. Measuring of attitudes through social distance is based on the idea that different social relations involve different levels of emotional closeness or distance, and consequently, the acceptance of certain relationship with an abstract person, or a member of certain groups.

Measuring of attitudes is the reflection of general attitude of an individual towards certain social groups.

First attempts of practical implementation and measurement of this concept have been made by the American sociologist E. Bogardus in the 20-ies of the last century, the study of racial and ethnic attitudes. Bogardus (1925), therefore, searching for relevant indicators about the state of relations and mutual evaluation of social groups, started from the assumption that real life situations were in certain hierarchical relation in terms of closeness and meaning of social contact which members of different social groups could meet with. The items in the Bogardus social distance scale are "adequate interpretations and gradations" of that feeling of intimacy (Bogardus, 1925, p.5). The items in the scale are hierarchically arranged from the smallest degree of social distance (acceptance of other members of the group as a spouse) up to a maximum distance (the inability of common living in the same country).

The original version of the scale comprises the following relations:

Table 1. *Bogardus Scale of Social Distance*

Items
1. Close relationship by marriage,
2. Membership in the same club as a sign of close friendship,
3. Neighborhood, living in the same street,
4. Co-workers in the same occupation,
5. Citizenship (resident of a state),
6. Only visitor in one's country, and
7. Exclusion from the country.

Source: Bogardus, 1925.

The items are formulated in the form of questions to be answered with "yes" or "no". The measure of social distance is maximum degree of closeness acceptable to the respondent in relation to a member of that group (thereby, greater closeness implies smaller distance). On the other hand, Likert (1932) created a standard of evaluating attitudes by asking respondents to answer to a certain number of sentences about a specific subject. Likert Scale is a five-point scale designed to allow the respondent express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement.

Table 2. Likert Scale

Items	Scale				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The hotel I wanted was easy to find					
2. The hotel was cheap					
3. The hotel satisfied my needs					
4. I was happy with my hotel					

Source: Likert, 1932.

According to McLeod (2008), Likert scale suggests that the strength or, intensity of experience is linear. Using a continuum from strongly agree to strongly disagree, Likert (1932) holds a view that attitudes can be measured by offering to respondents a choice of five to seven or even nine pre-coded responses with one neutral point suggesting that respondent neither agrees nor disagrees. As we analyzed some principal definitional and theoretical questions related to the attitude as a cognitive and emotional construct, in the following chapters we will consequently address a question of attitude change process. First of all, we should define what attitude change is.

Attitude change

If we take into account approach of Petty and Wegener (1998), the attitude change simply indicates that the value which is attributed to the attitude object is changed. The change is estimated relatively referring to the initial attitude, and can happen in two ways: *polarization* defined as growth of the intensity of the attitude to the one of two extreme: (positive or negative) and *depolarization* as a reduction of the attitude's intensity to zero, neutral point (p.2). Although it sounds as a paradox, explanation of the attitude change emphasizes that the process of change is basically the same as the process of attitude's formation. Attitude's continuum is, in fact, determined by zero point (no-attitude or the absence of attitude), and every movement on that continuum (either from zero to a certain position of the intensity or change of intensity and/or direction) is qualitatively the same process (Fazio, 1986).

Generally, attitude change methods and procedures are considered effective to the degree that they modify either a person's self-report of

attitudes or the attitude evaluated with a more indirect or implicit measures. Finally, Wood (2000) establishes typologies explaining that attitude change can be motivated by normative concerns with different aims: " (a) ensuring the coherence and favourable evaluation of the self, and (b) ensuring satisfactory relations with others given the rewards/punishments they can provide, along with an informational concern for (c) understanding the entity or issue featured in influence appeals" (p. 541).

Attitude change as a result of persuasion

In order to explain attitudinal change through persuasion, there should be taken into consideration the fact that there are a variety of correlated conceptions that partly cover the notion of persuasion in certain ways and differ from it in other ways. So as to fully comprehend what persuasion is, we will approach this question within its principal variations and subjects of interest.

Particularly for that reason, it is convenient to define and explain the persuasion as well as factors influencing persuasion. According to Anderson (1971) persuasion is "a communication process in which the communicator seeks to elicit a desired response from his receivers" (p. 7). Bettinghaus and Cody (1987) see persuasion as "a conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, beliefs or behaviour of another individual or group of individuals through the transmission of some message" (p. 4). On the other hand, Smith (1982) considers persuasion as "a symbolic activity whose purpose is to effect the internalization or voluntary acceptance of new cognitive states or patterns of overt behaviour through the exchange of messages" (p. 8). What's more, O'Keefe (2002) explains persuasion as a successful intended attempt at influencing another's psychological condition throughout communication in a circumstance in which the recipient has some measure of freedom. Persuasion according to Gass and Seiter (1999) is a positive and potent social force. It is applied in various circumstances in order to accomplish many different results. As it will be presented in the following chapters, a number of researchers find evidence that narratives can persuade, suggesting that narratives can impact both attitudes and behaviors (Bussele & Bilandzic, 2009; Cacioppo & Petty 1981; Gass & Seiter 1999; Green & Brock 2000; Igartua & Paez, 1998; Laswell, 1948). Given that experiences obtained through narrative fiction are processed much like real-life personal experiences, persuasion has the potential power to shape and change real-world beliefs and attitudes (Mar et al., 2006), narrative fiction can significantly encourage a form of creative reasoning and feeling that others, even different, are important part of a

global social development (Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2005). In a political context, persuasion helps create peace agreements between two countries and helps open up closed societies towards immigrants (Igartua et al., 2011). Similarly, in political advertising, the focus of persuasion is not to lose the loyal voters, but to reinforce the support of citizens with a favorable attitude toward a certain politician. The role of persuasion in political campaigns, according to Ramos (2012), is also to influence the attitudes of those who are willing to vote for another candidate. As a result, a political campaign based on persuasion tends to capture the attention of undecided citizens, emphasizing the personal qualities of the political candidate.

Researches on narrative persuasion also found evidences on its key role in reducing stigmatization of various vulnerable groups (Eisenberg, 2005; Keen, 2006). Persuasion through micro videos is also frequently used in AIDS prevention campaigns as an alternative to traditional ways of health promotion messages (Backer, Rogers & Sopory 1992). Persuasion convinces drivers to fasten up their seat belts when driving or to avoid driving when they have had too much to drink. Furthermore, Moyer-Guse and Nabi (2010) confirm that narratives reduce resistance, thus increasing persuasion of narratives. Similarly, using written text with persuasive messages Kim et al., (2012) find that smokers reading articles with strong anti-tobacco persuasive arguments, implying personal experiences of smokers, experienced greater levels of persuasion than those who read news articles without persuasive messages. Persuasion helps students to remain in school and complete their education. Persuasion is commonly used in the healthy living campaigns to convince an alcoholic or drug addict family member to try to find professional help (Igartua, 2011). Persuasion creates mechanisms for warning pregnant women concerning the dangers of drinking or taking drugs during pregnancy. Persuasion helps encourage elderly persons to seek preventative medical care, such as regular breast screenings, or lung x-ray-examinations. Persuasion is one of the strategies used by managers to promote tolerance and respect among employees in the workplace. Persuasion is how the trainer of a badly playing team motivates the players to do their best in order to win.

Conclusion

One fundamental quality of persuasion is that it is always a conscious activity (Reardon, 1991). In theory, one may not unintentionally convince another human being in something, since the act of persuasion engage conscious intention. However, it is argued that in delicate situations where persuasion takes place, it is possible for influence attempts to happen

without any conscious awareness of the persuader. This could be the case when the parents try to model behaviour of their children. They may not recognize how much of what they say and do is adopted by their kids. In order to summarise the concept of persuasion we will notice that according to Gass and Seiter (1999) very little of what we see in this world can be achieved without persuasion, given the fact that “persuasion involves one or more persons who are involved in the activity of creating, reinforcing, modifying or extinguishing beliefs, attitudes or behaviors within the constraints of a given communication context” (p. 39). Finally, as a result, it seems to be evident, that the conclusions on what factor makes persuasion effective are mostly inconsistent. The answer should be probably found in an interaction between all the described factors inherent to persuasion.

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ISTRAŽIVANJE STAVOVA KAO KOMPLEKSNIH PSIHOLOŠKIH KONSTRUKATA: PROMENA STAVA U PROCESU UBEDIVANJA

Apstrakt

Smatrajući temu stavova vitalnom, ovaj rad pokušava da istraži i odgovori na najsuštinskija pitanja vezana za složeni konstrukt stavova. Polazeći od samog izvorišta ovog psihološkog konstrukta pokušaćemo da objasnimo šta oni jesu i koja je njihova funkcija. Iz čega se sastoje? Da li su emotivni ili kognitivni konstrukti? Da li su stabilni ili se mogu menjati? Studija se fokusira na proces persuazije kao jednog od mehanizama odgovornih za promenu stavova.

Ključne reči: stavovi, funkcije, promene stavova, ubeđivanje, psihološki konstrukt.