

Attitude And Social Cognition

Social Psychology is a branch of Psychology which investigates how the behaviour of individuals is affected by others and the social environment.

We form attitudes or develop ways of thinking about specific topics and people. We form impressions about people we meet. We are also interested in why people behave in the ways they do-attribution.

The combination of social processes like attitude, impression formation, attribution and pro social behaviour is called social cognition.

Social cognition refers to the mental activities related to the gathering and interpretation of information about the social world.

Social cognition of all the individuals is affected by the social environment (Societal conditions in the society peace, harmony, trust or aggression, frustration, disharmony and distrust towards individuals, groups, peoples, relationships and social issues.)

Because of social influences, people form attitudes or ways of thinking about specific topics and people. Impression formation is when we make inferences about personal qualities of people we meet. Attribution is when we assign causes to the behaviour shown in specific social situations.

Attitude:

- Attitude is a state of the mind, a set of views or thoughts, regarding some topic (called the 'attitude object'), which have an evaluative feature (positive, negative or neutral quality).
- The thought component is referred to as the cognitive aspect, the emotional component is known as the effective aspect, and the tendency to act is called the behavioural (or conative) aspect. A-B-C components (Affective-Behavioural-Cognitive components) of attitude.

Beliefs refer to the cognitive component of attitudes and form the ground on which attitudes stand, such as belief in God, or belief in democracy as a political ideology.

Values are attitudes or beliefs that contain a 'should' or 'ought' aspect, such as moral or ethical values. One example of a value is hard work or honesty. Values are formed when a particular belief or attitude becomes an inseparable part of the person's outlook on life.

Features of Attitude:

- (i) Valence (positivity or negativity).
- (ii) Extremeness indicates how positive or negative an attitude is.
- (iii) Simplicity or Complexity (multiplexity) refers to how many attitudes there are within a broader attitude. An attitude system is said to be 'simple' if it contains only one or a few attitudes and 'complex' if it is made up of many attitudes.

(iv) Centrality: This refers to the role of a particular attitude in the system much more than non-central (or peripheral) attitudes would.

Attitude Formation:

In general, attitudes are learned through one's own experiences, and through interaction With others.

Process of Attitude Formation:

- Association, e.g., a positive attitude towards a subject is learned through the positive association between a teacher and a student.
- Reward or punishment increases/decreases the further development of that attitude.
- Modelling observing others being rewarded or punished for expressing thoughts, or showing behaviour of a particular kind towards the attitude object.
- Group or Cultural norms through the norms of our group or culture which may become part of our social cognition, in the form of attitude.
- Exposure to information, e.g., positive and negative attitudes are formed through the media.

Factors that Influence Attitude Formation:

- (i) Family and School Environment particularly in the early years of life.
- (ii) Reference Groups indicate the norms regarding acceptable behaviour/ways of thinking, reflect learning of attitudes through cultural norms, noticeable during beginning of adolescence.
- (iii) Personal Experiences (direct).
- (iv) Media-related Influences. Technological advances have made audio-visual media, school level textbook and the Internet very powerful sources of information

Attitude Change:

Attitudes that are still in the formative stage, and are more like opinions, are much more likely to change compared to attitude that have become firmly established and have become a part of the individual's values.

1. Balance or P-O-X triangle (Fritz Heider) represents the relationships between three aspects or components of attitude.

- P is the person whose attitude is being studied,
- O is another person
- X is the topic towards which the attitude is being studied (attitude object). It is also possible that all three are persons. The basic idea is that an attitude changes if there is a state of imbalance between the P-O attitude, O-X attitude, and P-X attitude. This is because imbalance is logically uncomfortable.

Imbalance is found when all three sides are negative, or two sides are positive, and one side is negative. Balance is found when all three sides are positive or two sides are negative, and one side is positive.

2. Cognitive Dissonance (Leon Festinger) emphasises on the cognitive component. Cognitive components of an attitude must be 'constant' (opposite of dissonant'), i.e., they should be logically in line with each other. If an individual finds that two cognitions in an attitude dissonant, then one of them will be changed in the direction of consonance.

Both balance and cognitive dissonance are examples of cognitive consistency which means that two components or elements of the attitude, or attitude system, must be in the same direction. If this does not happen, then the person experiences a kind of mental discomfort, i.e. the sense that 'something is not quite right' in the attitude system.

3. The Two-Step Concept (S.M. Mohsin): According to him, attitude change takes place in the form of two steps:

(i) The target of change (person whose attitude is to be changed) identifies with the source (person through whose influence the attitude is to be changed). Identification means that the target and the source have a mutual regard and attraction.

(ii) The source himself/herself shows an attitude change, by actually changing him/her behaviour towards the attitude object. Observing the source's changed attitude and behaviour, the target also shows an attitude change through behaviour. This is a kind of imitation or observational learning.

Factors that Influence Attitude Change:

- **Characteristics of the Existing Attitude:** All four properties of attitudes mentioned earlier, namely, valence (positively or negatively), extremeness, simplicity or complexity (multiplexity), and centrality or significance of the attitude, determine attitude change. Positive, less extreme, peripheral (less significant) and simpler attitudes are easier to change.

In addition, one must also consider the direction and extent of attitude change. Congruent (same direction of the existing attitude) or incongruent (direction opposite). Moreover, an attitude may change in the direction of the information that is presented, or in a direction opposite to that of the information presented.

- **Source Characteristics:** Source credibility and attractiveness. Attitudes are more likely to change when the message comes from a highly credible source rather than from a low-credible source.

- **Message Characteristics:** Attitudes will change when the amount of information that is

given about the topic is just enough, neither too much nor too little. Whether the message contains a rational or an emotional appeal, also makes a difference. The motives activated by the message and the mode of spreading the message (face-to-face transmission is more effective than indirect transmission).

- **Target Characteristics:** Qualities of the target, such as persuasibility (open and flexible personality), strong prejudices, self-esteem, more willing because they base their attitude on more information and thinking.

Attitude-Behaviour Relationship:

Psychologists have found that there would be consistency between attitudes and behaviour when—

- (i) the attitude is strong and occupies a central place in the attitude system.
- (ii) the person is aware of his/her attitude.
- (iii) there is very little or no external pressure for the person to behave in a particular way.

Prejudice and Discrimination:

Prejudices are usually negative attitudes against a particular group, and in many cases, may be based on stereotypes (the cognitive component) about the specific group. A stereotype is a cluster of ideas regarding the characteristics of a specific group. The cognitive component of prejudice is frequently accompanied by dislike or hatred, the affective components of prejudice are more difficult to change.

Sources of Prejudice:

- **Learning:** Prejudice can also be learned through association, reward and punishment, observing others, group or cultural norms and exposure to information that encourages prejudice. The family, reference groups, personal experiences and the media may play a role in the learning of prejudices. People who learn prejudiced attitudes may develop a 'prejudiced personality'.
- **A strong Social Identity and in Group Bias:** Individual who have a strong sense of social identity and have a very positive attitude towards their own group boost this attitude by holding negative attitudes towards other groups.
- **Scapegoating:** This is a phenomenon by which the majority group places the blame on minority group for its own social, economic or political problems. The minority is too weak or too small in number to defend itself against such accusation.
- **Kernel of Truth Concept:** Sometimes people may continue to hold stereotypes because they think that there must be some truth, or 'Kernel of truth' in which everyone says about the other group.
- **Self-fulfilling Prophecy:** The group that is the target of prejudice is itself responsible for continuing the prejudice by behaving in ways that justify the prejudice or confirm the negative expectation.

Strategies for Handling Prejudice

The strategies for handling prejudice would be effective if they aim at:

- (a) minimising opportunities for learning prejudices,
- (b) changing such attitudes,
- (c) de-emphasising a narrow social identity based on the in-group, and

(d) discouraging the tendency towards self-fulfilling prophecy among the victims of prejudice.

These goals can be accomplished through:

- Education and information dissemination, for correcting stereotypes related to specific target groups, and tackling the problem of a strong in-group bias.
- Increasing intergroup contact that allows for direct communication, removal of mistrust between the groups, and discovery context, there is close interaction and they are not different in power or status.
- Highlighting individual identity rather than group identity, thus weakening the importance of group (both in-group and out-group) as a basis of evaluating the other person.

Social Cognition refers to all those psychological processes that deal with the gathering and processing of information related to social objects (processes that help in understanding, explaining and interpreting social behaviour). Social cognition is guided by mental units called schemata.

SCHEMAS and Stereotypes

A schema is defined as a mental structure that provides a framework, set of rules or guidelines for processing information about any object. Schemata (or 'schemas') are the basic units stored in our memory, and function as shorthand ways of processing information, thus reducing the time and mental effort required in cognition.

Schemata that function in the form of categories are called prototypes, which are the entire set of schemata or qualities that help us to define an object completely. In social cognition, category-based schemata, that are related to groups of people, are called stereotypes (over generalized, are not directly verified). The inferences you have drawn are not the result of your logical thinking or direct experience, but are based on preconceived ideas about a particular group.

Impression Formation and Attribution:

The process of coming to know a person can be broadly divided into two parts— (a) Impression formation and (b) Attribution. The person who forms the impression is called perceiver. (Response to information about the qualities of the target, organises this information, and draws inferences about the target). The individual about whom the impression is formed is called the target.

Impression Formation and attribution are influenced by:

- the nature of information available to the perceiver,
- social schemas in the perceiver (including stereotypes),
- personality characteristics of the perceiver, and
- situational factors.

Impression Formation

The process of impression formation consists of the following three sub-processes:

(a) Selection: we take into account only some bits of information about the target person

(b) Organisation: the selected information is combined in a systematic way

(c) Inference: we draw a conclusion about what kind of person the target is

- The order or sequence in which information is presented affects the kind of impression formed.
- Primacy effect, the information presented first has a stronger effect than the information presented at the end. In Recency effect, the perceiver may be asked to pay attention to all the information whatever information comes at the end may have a stronger influence. ,
- Halo effect, a tendency to think that a target person who has one set of positive qualities must also be having other specific positive qualities that are associated with the first set.

Attribution of Causality:

- Bernard Weiner: When we assign a cause to a person's behaviour, we can broadly classify the cause as being internal (something within the person) or external (something outside the person). Stable factors are those causes that do not change with time, while unstable factors are those that do.
- Fundamental Attribution Error: There is an overall tendency for people to give greater weight age to internal or dispositional factors, than to external or situational factors. Indians tend to make more external (situational) attributions than Americans do.
- There is a difference between the attribution made for success, and the attribution made for failure. In general, people attribute success to internal factors, such as their ability or hard work. They attribute failure to external factors, such as bad luck, the difficulty of the task, and so on.
- Actor-Observer Effect-A distinction is also found between the attribution that a person makes for his/her own positive and negative experiences (actor-role), and the attribution made for another person's positive and negative experiences (observer-role, external).

Behaviour in the Presence of Others:

In 1897, Norman Triplett observed that individuals saw better performance in the presence of others than when they are performing the same task alone because of the eagerness to get praise or reward is stronger.

Social Facilitation:

- (i) Zajonc performance on specific tasks is influenced by the mere presence of others because the person experiences arousal, which makes the person react in a more intense manner.
- (ii) Evaluation apprehension (Cottrell): The person will be praised if the performance is good (reward), or criticised if it is bad (punishment). We wish to get praise and avoid criticism, therefore we try to perform well and avoid mistakes.

(iii) Nature of the task in the case a simple or familiar task, the person is sure of performing well and the eagerness to get praise or reward is stronger. In case of complex or new tasks, the person may be afraid of making mistakes. The fear of criticism or punishment is stronger. So the individual performs worse in the presence of others than he/she does when alone.

(iv) If the others are also performing the same task, this is called a situation of co-action. In this situation, there is social comparison and competition.

Social Loafing: The larger the group, the less effort each member puts in. This phenomenon is based on diffusion of responsibility.

Pro-social Behaviour: Pro-social behaviour is very similar to 'altruism', which means doing something for or thinking about the welfare of others without any self-interest.

Characteristics:

- Aim to benefit or do good to another person or another person,
- Be done without expecting anything in return,
- Be done willingly by the person, and not because of any kind of pressure, and
- Involve some difficulty or 'cost' to the person giving help.

Factors influencing Prosocial Behaviour:

- Based on an inborn, natural tendency in human beings to help other members of their own species. "
- Influenced by Learning: Individual who are brought up in a family environment that sets examples of helping others praises helpfulness.
- **Cultural Factors:** Some cultures actively encourage people to help the needy and distressed. In cultures that encourage independence, individual will show less prosocial behaviour, because people are expected to take care of themselves.
- When the situation activates certain social norms that require helping others.

(a) Social responsibility: We should help anyone who needs help, without considering other factors.-

(b) Reciprocity: We should help those who have helped us in the past.

(c) Equity: We should help others whenever we find that it is fair to do so.

- Expected reactions of the person who is being helped. For example, people might be unwilling to give money to a needy person because they feel that the person might feel insulted.
- Individuals who have a high level of empathy, that is, the capacity to feel the distress of the person who is to be helped, such as Baba Saheb Amte and Mother Teresa. Pro-social behaviour is also more likely in situations that arouse empathy, such as the picture of starving children in a famine.

- Factors such as a bad mood, being busy with one's own problems or feeling that the person to be helped is responsible for his/her own situation (that is when an internal attribution is made for the need state of the other person).
- When the number of bystanders is more than one. This phenomenon is called diffusion of responsibility. On the other hand, if there is only a bystander, this person is more likely to take the responsibility and actually help the victim.