

What Is an Attitude?

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As adult educators, we are interested in changing or reinforcing attitudes. But what do we really mean when we use the word "attitude"? And why do people sometimes appear to have a certain attitude, then behave in a different way? In this article, the supposedly simple notion of "attitude" is explored. The author discusses the reasons attitudes alone do not determine behavior, and what conditions must exist before attitude is a good predictor of behavior. He suggests that Extension educators might profitably look at some of these dimensions of attitude as they work with people in planning and carrying out programs.

THE NEXT TIME you pull your county or state plan of work off the shelf, read through your objectives for next year and see how many times mention is made of changing people's attitudes or preferences. Then ask yourself just what you mean by the word "attitude." If you feel so inclined, write out a definition. Looks simple at first, but you will probably soon do some head scratching.

Most people (including social psychologists) seem to agree that an attitude involves at least three things:

1. *An attitude object*, which may range all the way from wheat exports to high-school dropouts. Extension workers must deal with a variety of attitude objects. Such an object is often not a physical object. It may be an abstraction, such as communism. The object is always something as *defined by the attitude holder*. It is not a physical thing independent of the holder.
2. *A set of beliefs* that the object is either good or bad.
3. *A tendency to behave* toward the object so as to keep or get rid of it (psychologically, at least). Presumably, people with favorable attitudes toward President Johnson will behave (vote) to keep him in office.

Looks pretty simple. At first glance, it seems that attitudes shouldn't be too hard to measure—if people have positive attitudes, they should be able to tell you.

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Social scientists proceeded pretty much on this assumption for a long time. Then, quite recently, they noted that attitude as usually measured doesn't always square with actual behavior. A person may say he likes a proposed school tax only to vote it down on election day when he really faces possible loss of some hard-earned cash.

As an adult educator or an Extension agent, you don't go around changing attitudes just for the fun of it. If you promote a new farm enterprise, you probably want your audience to adopt the innovation (or at least do some genuine thinking and investigating before rejecting it). You aren't satisfied if farmers simply think pleasant thoughts about the enterprise and let it go at that.

All of this seems to suggest that the attitude notion is rather useless. But, maybe we need to dig deeper—to find out more than just whether our client accepts or rejects the attitude object.

OTHER ATTITUDE DIMENSIONS

Tucked away in the sociopsychological literature are a number of ideas which go beyond this overly simple notion of attitudes.

For one thing, we need to know how *intensely* a person feels about the attitude object—how deeply committed he is to the adoption of a new farm practice or the passage of a school bond issue. Analyzed closely, the notion of attitude intensity seems to depend on several things.

First, does the attitude play a significant part as a person enacts *social roles* that are important to him personally? Consider an active member of the National Farm Organization who has become so involved in NFO that his very self-respect depends largely on his continued success and status within the organization. This man is almost certain to feel strongly positive toward holding actions. To do otherwise would bring painful results.

Second, does one's commitment seem *irreversible*, with no way out? Social pressures make it difficult for a committed NFO member to "turn back" from his support of holding actions. Also, the very nature of an innovation sometimes makes it impossible to turn back from a decision to accept it.¹ One cannot tear down his new silo as easily as he can take back a new television set borrowed on a trial basis. And a person who has somehow committed himself with no way out is likely to feel especially strongly about his commitment.

Third, does one feel that he had a genuine choice in the first place

¹ See Everett Rogers, *The Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), p. 131.

in his decision to accept or reject the attitude object? If not, he has a psychological way out—he can reason that the attitude was forced on him and wasn't really his. Perhaps this is one reason so much talk about supporting government programs and tax levies turns out to be just talk. The whole thing seems to have “come down from above”—the typical citizen doesn't feel he had much say in the first place. As a result, he doesn't feel deeply committed to vote “yes” in a referendum.

Scientists have suggested at least two fairly simple ways of measuring attitude intensity. Guttman and Suchman² directly ask a respondent how strongly he feels about his avowed attitudes, and how certain he is that his view is right. The Sherifs³ have proposed what they call the “own categories” technique—an indirect intensity measure based on the assumption that people with intense attitudes tend to think in stereotypes, to lump all views unlike their own as “radical” or “way out.”

Knowledge Level

A second underlying dimension of attitude is knowledge level. This is a complex idea with many facets, such as:

1. How many specific skills and needed facts does the audience or client have? We cannot succeed in agronomy without being able to make and interpret soil tests any more than we can succeed in trigonometry without the ability to add. Specific facts and skills are still crucial, though many modern educators tend to downgrade fact and skill learning.
2. How many fine distinctions does one make in thinking about the topic, and are these distinctions helpful in understanding? Zinc and iron seem like rather similar metals to the layman, yet the structural engineer knows that they are worlds apart in strength, melting point, and other important properties.⁴ Genuine knowledge involves understanding fine differences, especially in a technical area such as modern agriculture. It is often especially important to make fine distinctions about matters opposed to one's own view.⁵ The really well-informed supporter of democracy is apt to be the person who

² Louis Guttman and Edward Suchman, “Intensity and a Zero Point for Attitude Analysis,” *American Sociological Review*, XII (February, 1947), 57-67.

³ Carolyn Sherif, Muzafer Sherif, and Robert Nebergall, *Attitude and Attitude Change* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Co., 1965), pp. 109-21.

⁴ David Krech, Richard Crutchfield, and Egerton Ballachey, *Individual in Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1962), p. 142.

⁵ See Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1960), pp. 37-39.

clearly perceives the true difference between socialism and communism.

3. Does one view the problem from several perspectives rather than just one narrow viewpoint? The farm management specialist often helps farmers consider the total farm operation—not just one enterprise—in deciding whether to build a silo or expand a poultry flock. And in family living, a counselor may save a marriage by convincing a wife that her husband's great persistence on a difficult job involves good aspects (ambition and pride) as well as bad aspects (stubbornness and perhaps a tendency to be unrealistic).

Kessel⁶ suggests several other knowledge-level dimensions:

1. *Logical consistency*: Is a person able to see and use relationships between particular arguments and facts? Is his discussion of a topic organized and integrated (high consistency)? Or is it disconnected and piecemeal (low consistency)?
2. *Time span*: Does the person think mostly of the present? Or does he seem able to take a more complete view and look well ahead in considering implications of an attitude object and his behavior toward it?
3. *Space perspective*: Does he restrict his attention to problems and arguments applying to his own home town, family, and friends? Or is he inclined to look also at conditions in other areas and other lands? Here, as with time span, the person who can take the broad view is usually best informed.

How can you measure knowledge level? There are no ready-made techniques here as there are with intensity. You can tell much, of course, by talking with a person to find out whether he "knows his stuff." However, systematic knowledge testing is not easy. Many Extension workers would be well advised to seek specialized help before putting too much effort into test development.

Resistance to Change

A third key dimension of attitude is *strength* or resistance to change. Strong attitudes are like blocks of granite—you must hit them hard with some sort of persuasive communication to budge them. Other attitudes, such as those which many Americans may hold toward U Thant, will change much more easily.

In practical situations, you may not need to measure strength directly. Theoretical and research considerations suggest that, if attitude intensity is high, strength is also apt to be high. Therefore,

⁶ John Kessel, "Cognitive Dimensions and Political Activity," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XXIX (Fall, 1965), 377-89.

may be feasible to use intensity as an index of strength. In fact, "special dimensions" of attitude obviously relate to each other.

Common sense suggests that strength may be high if one has lots of knowledge (the more good things we know about President Johnson, the more bad things it will take to make us change our minds about him).⁷

There are times, however, when attitudes seem change-resistant despite a lack of knowledge. For example, people with prejudice-based attitudes against China often know little about that country. Yet such people feel deeply committed—they aren't about to feel more friendly toward China, no matter how many pro-China arguments you throw at them.⁸

WHY THESE SPECIAL DIMENSIONS?

Why go into these special dimensions? There are at least two good reasons. First, the increase of attitude strength, knowledge level, and intensity-commitment may sometimes be a legitimate goal in Extension. As educators, you are not (or seemingly shouldn't be) concerned solely with converting folks from "anti" to "pro" positions, and vice versa. You want your audience member to thoroughly consider all sides of an issue and arrive at his *own* decision based on his unique personal goals and situation.

Extension may also need to increase attitude strength or "sales resistance." Consider, for example, a Michigan cherry farmer who faces a critical labor shortage at harvest time. Such a farmer may be duck soup for fly-by-night salesmen of harvest machinery. At least, he may unless someone alerts him to the dangers involved in changing his present skeptical attitudes toward such salesmen.

Second, there is reason to believe (though there is less research than one might like to indicate) that an attitude high in intensity, strength, and knowledge is *apt to be a good predictor of behavior*.

Let's say a farmer favors minimum tillage clearly and without qualification. Knowing this, we might still have some doubts as to whether he will actually adopt minimum tillage. Looking further, we may find that this farmer (1) knows minimum tillage and the theory behind it, (2) feels a deep personal commitment to the idea that minimum tillage is good, and (3) appears very resistant to anti-minimum-tillage arguments. Knowing all this, we can be pretty sure that he has thought through the matter carefully, which means that

⁷ Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachey, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

⁸ Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), pp. 184-88.

from his standpoint, it is probably related to important problems and goals. Thus, he will probably adopt minimum tillage if given half a chance.

One more point. Attitudes alone do not determine behavior. I may meet a person whom I greatly dislike at a party. I'd like to throw something at this person. But etiquette and perhaps my enemy's husky friends at the party forbid it, so I smile courteously. I behave as if I like him even though I detest him.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Social scientists and laymen alike often focus on attitude by looking simply at how good or bad the people feel an attitude object is. It is suggested here that the Extension educator might profitably look at several other dimensions of attitude:

1. How *intensely* does the attitude holder feel about the object? We can favor a person, innovation, or other object without qualification, yet we may hold this view with little intensity or deep commitment.
2. How much *information* does the attitude holder have to back up and interpret his beliefs? Is he able to make fine distinctions, or only crude ones, with respect to the attitude object? Does he have lots of related facts at his fingertips? And can he view the object from several points of view or perspectives?
3. How *change resistant* is the attitude? Extension workers sometimes try to increase change resistance when they seek to make farmers less gullible in the face of high-pressure salesmen and new, unproven gadgets.

Social scientists have tools to help measure all these aspects of attitude. It will require study, but there is no reason why you can't look below the surface to see if next year's annual report looks encouraging alongside this year's plan of work.

An attitude that is high on each of these subordinate dimensions would probably accurately predict behavior. Thus, knowledge of where people stand on these dimensions may greatly help Extension as it evaluates past efforts and makes plans for the future.