

BELIEF, ATTITUDE, INTENTION AND BEHAVIOR:

An Introduction to Theory and Research

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Preface

As Gordon Allport pointed out some forty years ago, “. . . attitude is probably the most distinctive and indispensable concept in contemporary American social psychology. No other term appears more frequently in experimental and theoretical literature.” Allport’s words are as true today as they were in 1935. The centrality of the attitude concept remains unchallenged and, if anything, its importance has increased. Nevertheless, conceptions of attitude have undergone many changes in the past four decades. Most of these changes were necessitated by the failure of attitudes to live up to their promise as the central device for explaining and predicting behavior. Unfortunately, despite the vast amount of research and the publication of countless books and articles on the topic, there is little agreement about what an attitude is, how it is formed or changed, and what role, if any, it plays in influencing or determining behavior. This state of affairs clearly presents a dilemma for students and teachers alike. How does one select a course of study from a truly overwhelming amount of literature on various attitude-related topics? To make matters worse, how does one select from a literature that, in almost every topic area, is characterized by a lack of integration, radically different approaches and definitions, and what appear to be nothing more than inconsistent, contradictory, and inconclusive findings? It should come as no surprise that some investigators are calling for the abolishment of the attitude concept by pointing to the lack of a systematic approach and the failure of the field to provide a cumulative body of knowledge.

It is our contention that these calls are premature and probably unwarranted. The purpose of this book is to present a coherent and systematic conceptual framework that can be applied to the diverse literature on attitudes. We hope to show that the attitude literature is neither as inconsistent nor as inconclusive as it first appears, and, more importantly, that we are, in fact, moving toward a cumu-

lative body of knowledge. While there is much to be criticized in the attitude area (and we will be severe critics when this seems necessary), we hope to show that our knowledge of attitudes has progressed considerably in the past twenty years.

Our conceptual framework has grown out of our own research in the attitude area. It emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing among beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behavior; four distinct variables that have often been used interchangeably in the past. This distinction not only permits us to classify previous research into conceptually independent categories but it also serves to eliminate many of the apparent inconsistencies in the area. Further, the distinction among beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors is accompanied by a consideration of the relations among these variables. Research which on the surface appears to deal with a single problem can thus be shown to involve different issues. While some investigators have been concerned with relations among beliefs or among attitudes, others have studied relations between beliefs and attitudes, beliefs and behavior, attitudes and behavior, etc. Distinguishing among these different types of relations again serves to eliminate much of the apparent inconsistency in the literature.

One purpose of this book is to expose the reader to as much of the diverse theoretical and empirical literature in the area as possible. Our second major aim is to show that this literature can be incorporated and understood within a unified and systematic theoretical structure. Generally speaking, we view humans as rational animals who systematically utilize or process the information available to them. The theoretical structure or conceptual framework we have adopted assumes a causal chain linking beliefs, formed on the basis of available information, to the person's attitudes, beliefs, and attitudes to intentions, and intentions to behavior. Since the performance of behavior may provide the person with new information that again influences his or her beliefs, the causal chain starts all over again.

We attempted to write this book so that it could be understood by readers with little or no background in attitude theory and research. At the same time we wrote the book to provide a comprehensive overview of the attitude area. Our approach has had two consequences: First, it has led us to write a book in which each chapter builds on the preceding ones. While an advanced student should have relatively little trouble skipping certain chapters, a beginning student may find some of the later chapters difficult to comprehend without having first read the earlier chapters or at least the Conclusions of those chapters. Second, because we attempted to be comprehensive, we have covered many issues that may appear tangential to, or unnecessary for, an introductory student. Further, we have included in our discussions issues and problems that, by their very nature, may be complex and confusing. Consequently, we hope the book will be used differently by readers who are merely trying to gain an overview of the field and those who are trying to understand the field in depth. For example, some of the material in Chapter 3—*Attitude Measurement* (such as the discussion of unipolar versus bipolar belief measures), the later parts of Chapter 5—*Belief Formation* (par-

ticularly the sections on cue utilization, learning to make accurate inferences, probability models) and some parts of Chapter 6—*Attitude Formation* (particularly the discussions of adding versus averaging, the section on information integration, and the discussion concerning the importance of opinion items) are probably more detailed than necessary for an introductory overview. We hope that instructors using the book will emphasize some sections and merely skim or omit others, depending on their special interests and the level of their class.

One cannot write a book like the present one without the help, assistance, and encouragement of many people. Before acknowledging these contributions, however, we want to do something a bit unusual and express our indebtedness to each other. Neither of us could, or would, have written the book alone, and it represents, in the truest sense of the term, a joint effort. There is not a single word or sentence that we did not write together. When theoretical, organizational, or semantic differences arose (and they did arise with unexpected frequency), they were often resolved only after heated debate. Thus the book served as a valuable learning experience for both of us. It provided us with an opportunity to try out and defend new ideas, and forced us to think about new problems.

Many of our colleagues and associates provided invaluable help. We are indebted to Jerry Cohen, Alice Eagly, Sam Himmelfarb, Patrick Laughlin, George Levinger, Arie Kruglanski, Tino Trahiotis, Nancy Wiggins, and Robert Wyer for their comments and criticisms of selected chapters. We are particularly indebted to Kerry Thomas and Mary Tuck for their criticisms and reviews of several drafts of the entire manuscript. Many of our students also read and reacted to all or some of the chapters. While it is impossible to acknowledge each of these students, we feel we should pay special tribute to James Jaccard, Güliz Ger, Myron Glassman, Bill Holmes, and Rick Pomazal.

We also want to thank our departments for their continual encouragement and assistance throughout this project. Most importantly, they allowed us to arrange our teaching schedules so that we could commute between Champaign and Amherst for long weekends that enabled us to get the work done. We came back from these trips with pages of handwritten manuscript, and we are grateful to Esther Celnik and Carol Marsh who took the time to almost unerringly transcribe our unintelligible hieroglyphics into a legible typed manuscript. They, as well as Ken Carls, Linda Carter Baker, Deborah Filipkowski, and Elsie Osterbur performed yeoman service in typing and retyping various drafts of the manuscript. We are especially indebted to Elsie for obtaining all of the necessary permissions to cite from the works of other investigators.

Finally, and in keeping with tradition, we want to thank our wives, Deborah and Rachel. It is worth noting that this entire acknowledgment section is one of the few concessions to tradition or a traditional approach that we have made in this book. If we did not feel that all acknowledgments were deserved we would not have made them. Thus, it is really with deep affection and admiration that we acknowledge our wives. Not only did they have to put up with a book that took more of our time and energy than any mistress, but unlike most authors'

wives, they were often physically abandoned for long periods of time. Despite some often deserved but usually untimely "bitching," our marriages have survived. While this book would definitely have been written sooner without them, our lives would not only be emptier, but a great deal less fun. We therefore dedicate this book to them.

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