

Analysis of the depths of social judgement theory



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Abstract

This paper explores the origins of the social judgment theory, an objective, communication-based theory, developed by Muzafer Sherif, Carl I. Hovland, and Carolyn W. Sherif. This paper analyzes multiple scholarly researched articles that went into the depths of the various concepts and principles associated with the social judgment theory. The theory examines the ways in which people make judgments based on persuasive messages, the range of positions the receiver has, and how their position compares to that of the persuader's. This paper discusses the ways the social judgment theory can help when an individual finds themselves in certain situations in their every day life. Sherif and Hovland (n. d.) stated that social judgment theory relates involvement of self to the situational contexts for communication and are tested through research findings derived through multiple and innovative methods.

Keywords: social judgement theory, communication

The depths of social judgement theory

Psychologist Muzafer Sherif originated social judgement theory in the early 1960s, with help from Carl I. Hovland and Carolyn W. Sherif. Sherif and Hovland (n. d.) proposed a theory of social judgment to clarify apparent contradictions in attitude change research (p. 218). The theory goes into depths of how people make judgments when being persuaded to accept or reject a message based on their current attitudes towards that message or topic. The theory suggests that attitude change is moderated through

judgement and its effects. In any given situation, a person will have multiple possibilities when deciding to make a judgement.

There are three possibilities (ranges) related to social judgement theory: the latitude of acceptance, the latitude of rejection, and the latitude of noncommitment. When an individual perceives an idea and is more likely to consider it, that is called the latitude of acceptance, which is also called the anchor. When an individual perceives an idea to be objectionable and is not likely to consider it, that is called the latitude of rejection. When an individual perceives an idea and doesn't consider it objectionable or within reason, that is called the latitude of noncommitment.

The controversial protests of taking a knee during the national anthem has everyone across the nation choosing a stance on the issue. One individual might believe that taking a knee is an acceptable way to protest racism and injustice against minorities, however, others might believe that taking a knee is disrespectful to the national anthem and all those who have served this country. Some people may not care about the protests either way, or they might have a number of various views on the issue.

The specifics of these latitudes have been researched to find that it helps when determining how to show the structure of the individual's attitude. Determining how involved an individual is personally, correlates to the size of the latitudes previously discussed. A person may not have prior knowledge, views or opinions regarding the information given, and that will be the determining factor in whether the message being persuaded will be rejected or accepted by the listener. Ego-involvement describes how

important an issue or message is in regard to a person's life. A latitude of rejection means a high ego-involvement.

The effect of assimilation is when a person who is receiving the idea or message believes that the position is closer to their own than what it really is. In assimilation, the listener seemingly has the same views as the person persuading the message. The effect of contrast is when the person who is receiving the message or idea believes that the position is farther from their own than what it really is. In contrast, the listener seemingly has different views from that of the person sending the message. When the message and position trying to be persuaded are clear, contrast and assimilation effects decrease. This paper examines the social judgement theory, its propositions, its application through literature, and associated research with the theory.

Literature Review

The listener changing their attitude depends on the position of the persuaded message. According to Salazar (2017) studies have shown that awareness of the application of these three latitudes strengthens the quality of speakers' arguments in the development of social campaign messages, the protection of the integrity of the organizations, the evaluation of occupational information, and the design of credible messages in the attitudinal change process (p. 90). The activity used in this research was to help researchers have a better understanding of the social judgement theory when trying to persuade a certain position.

During the activity discussed in " Changing Resistant Audience Attitudes Using Social Judgment Theory's " Anchor" Point Perspectives," each group

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was given cards that say, “ latitude of acceptance,” “ latitude of rejection,” and “ latitude of noncommitment.” The instructor had given the students controversial issues to base their persuasive message on. The students had to compose persuasive messages opposing the latitude on their cards, so if the card said, “ latitude of acceptance”, you would try to persuade the listener to a “ latitude of rejection.”

The instructor gave each group about 10 minutes to create their persuasive arguments and present them to their peers. Each student in each group was also asked to give their personal “ anchor” on the issue given to them to show how it might differ from their original latitude on the cards. The overall activity was able to help students create arguments and debate them in front of an audience with diverse viewpoints on a similar topic/issue. The students were able to have a better understanding of the social judgement theory. It can help them, not only practice persuasive arguments, but to practice being on the receiving end, too.

The social judgement model has been proven to be a resourceful and certified approach to certain situations, however, Brambilla (2014) suggested thinking about the communion dimension as including at least two distinct characteristics: sociability and morality (p. 398). Sociability refers to being good to others in order to maintain good, affectionate, and positive relationships. Morality can be defined as being good to people in ways that we see as being right and ethical to maintain trustworthy and respectful relationships. Participants in the experiment discussed in “ On the Importance of Being Moral: The Distinctive Role of Morality in Social Judgement” were asked to compose a list of characteristics that would help

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them in determining an impression of another person. Most participants choose characteristics that were in correlation to morality, opposed to sociability or competence.

These findings confirmed prior research stating that most people valued trustworthiness over any other characteristic. The findings confirm the point that morality is fundamental within the social judgement theory because of how it correlates to the judgement of an individual's intentions being favorable or unfavorable. The researched discussed in regard to sociability, morality and competence in relation to social judgement, researchers suggested observing one person who group of people as talented should have a variety of insinuations for social interactions and judgements opposed to seeing them as powerful, assertive, or vigorous. Some suggested looking into more specific ways that people judge themselves and their personal understanding.

Criticizing an individual's past won't directly result in a bad impression of that person, however, it might persuade someone to have a negative judgement about that person. Instead of using the form of direct criticism towards someone, a person might benefit more if they would just be indirect. For example, instead of directly stating what someone did wrong in a situation, one could take an indirect approach by stating things that they could have done better and to try next time. That approach in a situation is referred to as counterfactual statement, and Catellani (2014) stated that those statements are mental stimuli of how a situation might end differently if one or more antecedents had been different (e. g., " If you had studied more, you would have gotten a better grade") (p. 371).

The researchers in “ The Effects of Counterfactual Attacks on Social Judgement” examined counterfactual attacks and how their effects correlate to social judgements. Attack messages can be described as cynical information about the subject of the initial attack; specifically, behavior. One might argue that attempting to criticize an individual might lead to negative backlash to the source of the original message, opposed to the target. To avoid negative backlash, one might suggest giving criticism but also give compliments together to balance. The research examined the success of the counterfactual attacks about morality in a political stance. Politics was chosen specifically for this research because it’s naturally controversial, and often, political figures are always being judged by their looks and morality.

There were two studies completed within this experiment, and for both studies, participants (108 students) scrutinized a false interview between a political figure and reporter. The final thought of the reporter was changed into a factual or counterfactual attack. A control was also added to the study. The hypothesis was that the counterfactual attack would create a similarly bad conclusion than the factual, and this effect would be moderated to be believed that the counterfactual was less likely biased than the factual. The results showed that judgement in all was more critical after the counterfactual attack.

After the social judgement theory was originated, social psychologists began to lean towards the processing in correlation to social judgements. In recent research, the focus has shifted more to the context of judgments individuals are making with a firmer perspective. A study confirmed that psychological correlation of personality traits concluded with a layout where there is

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distance between those traits. Costa-Lopes (2016) suggested that personality traits are best spatially depicted when the structured along two dimensions: intellectual and social (good/bad) (p. 12). The intellectual included traits such as determined, intelligent, motivated for a benevolent manner and idiotic, stupid, or foolish for a negative manner. The social included traits such as heartfelt, warm, tolerable, and authentic on the positive side and untrustworthy, introverted, and cold on the negative end.

One study chose to examine anger when it's triggered by an event not related to the current situation an individual might find themselves in. Anger is an emotion evoked within people almost every day, and most of the time it is out of that individual's control. Regardless of why people get angry, they need to change that anger into a calmer emotion because it can get in the way of other important things going on. Every person is different in how they manage to control how they let their emotions affect other events. Different individuals have various techniques they use to help channel their emotions, specifically anger, and turn it into a positive emotion.

A study was done to look into how anger processes through an individual and how the repression of the information in a situation when anger was from a previous situation. Researchers guessed that individuals with a higher start of angry emotions would be more biased to social judgments after anger control. They guessed that individuals with a higher repression of angry emotions would have less bias because they have the ability to disconnect themselves from the stimuli. Participants read a story about a protagonist going through his day. Out of 20 sentences, five of those were mostly malicious but debatable actions. After reading the story, participants were

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asked questions regarding their emotional well-being after. Knowing that you feel a certain emotion may decrease how those impacts affect you.

The questions included general questions about the overall purpose of the study, but most participants had no knowledge about the purpose. When asked how they felt while reading the story about the protagonist, most said they felt angry. Anger being introduced was valid, and participants stated that background noise made them more irritable. Fiori (n. d.) stated that the results provided evidence that effects are specific to anger that was applicable to social judgements (p. 1). The more participants occupied awareness to anger, the more they let the anger affect a situation not related, which initially concluded with more bias in regard to social judgements.

Everyone makes judgements whether it be about an individual person or an idea or message. When people make judgments about people, specifically, it is most likely not based on observations based on how they look, but it is more so about how they act. Behaviors can be taken in various ways. For example, if a person decides to go skydiving, does that mean the person is “adventurous” or “insane?” Maringer (2009) suggested that there is no prior evidence to explain why prime awareness leads to contrast in social judgements (p. 720). Correction, an explanation about contrasted judgements, is defined as someone who is aware but will not use it or take it away from impressions. Comparison, another explanation about contrasted judgements, is defined as the individuals who are aware will more than likely use the information for weigh the behaviors.

Over the years, many scholars have researched the topics of reputation and how that relates to social judgement. People view a reputation as what you're known for and how people perceive you; what they think of you. Some might agree that reputations have a strong correlation to stereotypes. For example, in high school, an individual might have a good reputation for being the smart kid or valedictorian. Reputations and stereotypes can be good or bad and also perceived in a good or bad way. Mishina (2012) researched reputation, specifically organizational, and divided it into two categories: favorability about their character and favorability about their capability (p. 1). Developing the two categories when discussing organizational reputation is fundamental when analyzing the biases of social judgement. Reputation is strongly related to social judgment in that you are making judgments about an individual or group based on their sociability.

Conclusion and Evaluation

In many ways, social judgment theory is too vague to be an accurate and detailed account of persuasive messages. The only fundamental factors of the persuasive message are what the advocating position is and the confirmation of the position it names. It is not important if the persuasive idea is firm with its debates or has valid points. It all goes back full circle to what the message is defending. The social judgement theory could use some up to date research because a theory should never be validated. The case studies and research should continue as new hypotheses and new psychologists/researchers take on this communication-based theory.

Someone who is attempting to persuade a message may not be firm with what they believe in relation to the initial message, and they might believe that they were successful in their persuasions just because the receiver shows complete confirmation in agreeance. If the receiver of the message was unsure about what was trying to be persuaded, everything will be misleading about the message transfer. Aside from this perspective, we cannot forget that even though an individual will have a set position in their minds, they have other ranges to consider; the latitudes of acceptance, the latitude of rejection, and the latitude of noncommitment. The individual recovering the message doesn't have to be in agreeance with the person attempting to persuade them. It might be beneficial to persuade the receiver to see that their stance on the issue is within the range of the noncommitment latitude.

The social judgement theory has been examined, researched, questioned and analyzed since the early 1960s. It has not had much attention within the past few years, aside from a few studies used for the purpose of teaching the theory. It is overall a beneficial theory to think about as you go through everyday life experiences when you find yourself in a situation where you have to make judgments. Everyone judges, and this objective theory gives many principles and concepts on how to make judgements whether good or bad. I believe this theory could be researched more in depth as society evolves and methods of communication change over time. Most of the research I reviewed mostly discussed perceptions based on impressions of individuals, meaning how they looked (body language, gender, age,

behaviors, etc.) and that was the most important factor when determining their social judgments.

Today, we have new methods of communications as previously stated. We have virtual means of communicating, which makes it more difficult to have authentic judgments because we are behind a cell phone, laptop, game console, etc. People still make judgments using those methods, but they aren't as valid as a face to face interaction with someone. It could be easier or more difficult to attempt to persuade a person via text message or social media news feed. There are many determining factors about the person's current attitude towards the topic, their emotional state, and how vulnerable they are when it comes to discussing or debating controversies digitally. It would have been great to read more about social judgments in correlation to social media or new technologies.

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