

Does understanding  
a person's attitude  
help us to predict  
their behaviour



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To begin with I would first like to offer a definition of the term attitude or at least as much as I am able, as there has been a vast amount of research done into the concept of attitude and there are many different definitions for the term. Allport (1935) for example says that attitude is; " a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related.

Meaning that attitude is a learned reaction to something based on past experience, and without having these attitudes, people would find it hard in dealing with and reacting to events, decision making and in making sense of their relationships with other people in everyday life (Hogg & Vaughan 2002). There has been no agreed complete definition for what exactly an attitude is, though most agree that it consists of an " enduring evaluation - positive or negative - of people, objects, and ideas" (Olson and Zanna, 1993; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

This then is saying that people are actually constant evaluators in life, forming opinions and thus developing their own attitude to everything they encounter, no matter what that attitude is. Using this rather broad definition I will attempt to answer the set question, as it is basic enough a theory for most Social Psychologists to agree on. Different kinds of behaviour are explained by different causes, and to understand if attitude affects and therefore can predict behaviour, then we have to break down the different kinds of behaviour.

Planned behavioural theories place emphasis on the rationality of human behaviour, but not all kinds of behaviour are equally reasoned. Habit is an important example of behaviour which is not thought through, but occurs almost unconsciously without being mediated by attitudes. Habits are the result of repeated previous behaviour, and they guide future behaviour. Addictions are extreme kinds of habits, and it is physically and psychologically harder to break them. E. g. In the case of smoking, the smoker's behaviour is determined more by his habit than by attitudes.

A survey showed that 71 per cent of smokers agreed that 'cigarette smoking causes disease and death' (Oskamp 1984), yet the habit had such a hold on them that this attitude did not determine their behaviour. The behaviour attitude link has been doubted based on this very type of example, though obviously it is agreed that factors, for example nicotine in the case of smoking, can work against a person's attitude. If we can actually determine what people's attitudes are in the first place, then it seems that attitudes work best as predictors of behaviour when they are strong and consistent.

This is the view of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1960) whose research into attitudes in relation to voting behaviour shows that, if any voters are going to be moved by pre-election publicity, it is the uncommitted, as most voters who have a strong loyalty to their selected party, are very rarely deterred. One area where the question of can understanding a person's attitude predict their behaviour, has been and will remain to be important for a long time, is the area of advertising and Public Relations.

Here they use their skills to change people's attitude in order to influence their behaviour. For example advertisers assume that in changing our attitudes towards their products, making us feel that we want, and then changing us to needing that product and thus we will buy it. Statistics have consistently shown that people do respond to advertisements and they do help products sell, and so, in theory at least, the assumptions of the advertisers are justified. Its not just advertisers and Public Relations that uses this method to change people's attitude, opinion and behaviour.

This is evident also by the use of such programmes as anti-drugs, sexual health and drink-driving campaigns, to name but a few, where the government and other organisations use persuasive and sometimes shock tactics to change peoples attitude. When they do this, the desired effect will be that their target audience, such as children, will then behave in a certain way, or at the least avoid what the government deems wrong, thus they have changed a child's attitude towards the object, and in turn, have changed their behaviour in relation.

This suggests that people will act in accordance with their attitudes and yet, research has shown that this is not always the case; LaPiere (1934) carried out a study in which he took a Chinese couple on a sightseeing trip around the United States, where they stayed and ate at a number of different hotels and restaurants. Because of the prejudice against Asian people at the time, he worried that his Chinese friends would be refused service. However, out of the 251 restaurants and hotels they visited, only one refused them service.

After the trip, he wrote a letter to each of the places they had visited asking if they would serve an Asian couple; all but one of them answered 'no' or 'undecided'. Wicker (1969) also reviewed and studied many more cases similar to this using more planned, and structured methods, with more reliable results, but his research came to the same conclusion: People's attitudes are poor predictors of their behaviour (Aronson, Wilson, Akert 1997).

This is however too general a conclusion for so vast a topic, and since then more research has been carried out with a different suggestion: Attitudes do predict behaviour, but only under certain specifiable conditions (DeBono & Snyder, 1995; Zanna and Fazio, 1992). " One key factor is knowing whether the behaviour we are trying to predict is spontaneous or is deliberate and planned. " (Fazio, 1990).

If a person has time to plan how they react, meaning their reaction will be thought through and they can decide what to do, their behaviour can be quite different to a spontaneous reaction. As we see in LaPiere's study, the managers of all the establishments he visited, did not have time to plan their response to having a Chinese couple stay at their hotel or restaurant, unlike when they replied to the letter he sent, in which they would have had the time to react, and thus respond so differently to their initial action.

LaPiere's experiment is a good example of this difference between planned behaviour and spontaneous behaviour. Terry (1993) applied the theory of planned behaviour to the issue of safe sex, and found that the degree of control that people believe they have substantially improves the prediction

of their behaviour from their attitudes. A problem in recording attitudes could be the participants themselves. Perhaps experimental participants were expressing attitudes they did not really hold in order to create a favourable social impression.

Jones & Sigall (1971) tried to get around this by deceiving participants into thinking they were connected to a lie detector called a bogus pipeline, experimenters were able to show that participants revealed attitudes that were considerably different than when they were not connected to such a device. To conclude, I couldn't say what exactly my own views are and what theory or work I think is the better.

LaPiere's work, for me at least, shows the difference in attitudes in different circumstances the best out of the few I have researched, even though it has been said that the experiment wasn't carried out in a controlled setting, and therefore is quite unscientific and the results of which are open to much questioning. I disagree; this experiment was done in a real world sense showing people who were unaware that they were under any kind of observation and therefore acted completely natural.

This experiment shows a good representation of spontaneous behaviour (when he visited the different establishments without giving them any advanced warning), and planned behaviour where the respondents of the letters he sent had time to consider their response. I feel the question is a difficult one to answer, as it is far too general for too massive a topic. The quote " Attitudes do predict behaviour, but only under certain specifiable

conditions (DeBono & Snyder, 1995; Zanna and Fazio, 1992)" is perhaps the best expression I have heard in finding a way to break down the question.

From there on it may be possible to begin to form an answer, especially if those conditions are identifiable. Jones and Sigall found that they had to trick their participants to ensure they would get honest results through fear of the participants acting in a certain way to be thought better of. From this one could say that in order for us to study attitude, we need to ensure that whomever we are studying, is completely unaware of the fact and so structured experiments are perhaps not the way to achieve this. Oskamp's work also added, or even maybe subtracted many issues in regards to attitude.

Here he looks at habit and addiction, which are too issues that work against attitude, as we see that most of the smokers he talked to were quite aware that it was a danger to their health, and yet they continued to smoke. I believe to successfully measure attitude, and thus to be able to see if it can indeed predict behaviour, all these issues that work against their attitude should be, ideally, removed, to see how someone would act, and then building up an experiment to include such things as habit and addiction.

Unfortunately, many people have addictions, and even more of us have habits. It may be weak of me to say that this question can only be answered through more research, and that I have found, in the small part of a vast topic, that there is yet sufficient information to do. We cannot answer a question that asks whether or not understanding a person's attitude can

predict their behaviour, when there is not yet an agreed definition for the term 'attitude' itself.