

Do attitudes predict behaviour



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The relationship between attitudes and behaviour is one of the most controversial topics in social psychology. Though the definition of attitudes can not be confirmed yet, this essay uses the description in Hogg's and Vaughan's book (1995) that attitudes are " a general feeling or evaluation about persons, object or issue as well as a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols". This definition indicates that there is a close relationship between attitudes and behaviour. While some critical evidences arose to show that attitudes have little predictive power on behaviour after the LaPiere's experiment (1934), the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is still being researched as one of the main topic in the social psychology during recent years. This essay will analyse the link between the attitudes and behaviour. This essay begins by looking at the attitude-behaviour inconsistency and then will go on to focus on the theory of planned behaviour which may be regarded as the key theory to deal with the attitude-behaviour relationship.

It is so naive as to think a person's attitudes and behaviour are linked directly and consistently. It can be seen all the time that people say they want to keep fit but they never do excises, people are worried about global warming while they are driving high exhaust cars and using air-conditions.

The discovery of the attitude-behaviour inconsistency goes back to 1930s America depending on the work of the Stanford sociologist Richard LaPiere. At that time, the people in the US had a strong prejudice on Asian. After LaPiere and his two Chinese friends traveled through the US, they were

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pleasantly surprised to find that out of the 250 hotels and restaurants they visited, all but one served them courteously. Six months later, LaPiere sent a questionnaire to all the hotels and restaurants they visited, asking “ will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?”

Incredibly 90% of participants answered no, they would not accept Chinese race into their establishment. This experiment do shows the inconsistency of attitudes and behaviour. After this research, Wicker (1969) found that the average correlation between attitudes and behaviour was only 0. 15, which indicated the weak link between attitudes and behaviour. Though LaPiere’s experiment caused critics to the attitude-behaviour consistency, it did not deny the link between attitudes and behaviour. LaPiere’s experiment was not designed for attitudes research and there were some problems lay in the questionnaire that may lead some mistakes in this study: the people who answered the questionnaires might not be the person who served the Chinese couple; the responders did not be told that the Chinese couple was polite, educated and well-dressed; attitudes may have changed during the six months.

One of the influence factors in LaPiere’s experiment is the measurement method of attitudes. It is not easy to measure attitudes and researchers rely heavily on asking people and using questionnaires which are all self-described methods. States by Fiske (2004), self-report measurement is more easily to gain the explicit attitudes than the implicit attitudes. When the conflict between explicit and implicit attitudes happened, behaviour is always coursed by implicit attitude. As implicit attitudes always gained from indirect and complex methods, self-described method can hardly indicates it.

The research done by Sherman, Rose and Koch, et al (2003) on implicit and explicit attitudes toward cigarette smoking shows that implicit attitudes can predict behaviour more stably and accurately. Implicit attitudes are seldom influenced by other factors which can disrupt the correspondence between attitudes and behaviour. In the other words, the using of self-described questionnaires for measuring the attitudes may become a cause of inaccuracy in the prediction of the behaviour.

Another important factor influenced LaPiere's study is the six months. Though attitude is a stable and enduring evaluation, it may change as the time went by. So as the questionnaires were done after six months, the participants' attitudes may have changed during the six month which may lead to the illusion that attitudes do not predict behaviour. As to the other studies on the link between attitudes and behaviour, time interval always exists between the measurement of attitude and behaviour. Some times it would last a long time, six months, a month; or some times just a week. But no matter how long it was, attitude may probably have changed during this period. This will influence the consistency between attitude and behaviour as well.

When attitudes are used to predict behaviour, it would be influenced by many different variables, such as the methods of attitudes measurement as mentioned above, the attitude strength, social norm, past experience and habits, etc. So the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is not related in a one-to-one fashion (Hogg and Vaughan, 1995). The general models dealing with link between attitudes and behaviour are the reasoned action theory (TRA) and the planned behaviour theory (TPB). These two

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theories are not in conflict, TPB is an improvement of the first theory. The reasoned action theory was first put forward by Ajzen and Fishbein in 1974 which believed that behavioural intention is the result of the combination of subjective norm and attitude towards the behaviour and the behavioural intention leads to the behaviour. That is people will behaviour after evaluated by the attitude towards the behaviour and judge the propriety by the subjective norm. It emphasises that people can control the behaviour consciously, for example, “ I can do exercises regularly if I really want to keep fit”. However, as it mentioned above, there are few people do exercise though they want to keep fit. Further more some kinds of behaviour are less under people’s conscious control. For example, people will behave under the automatically activated attitudes without thinking rationally to choose the best reason for action. The repeated behaviour such as smoking as a habit may become divorced from attitude. This kind of automatically activated attitude like habits occurs frequently in daily. So people may only think rationally when they faced new or difficult situations. In addition, a behaviour that performed successfully not only depends on the behavioural intention, but also some other variables, such as opportunities and technologies [Peach, . Jimmieson and White, 2005]

In order to describe the link between attitudes and behaviour more accurately, the planned behaviour theory (TPB) was carried out by Ajzen at 1989 as the extension of the original theory. Perceived behavioural control is the improvement in the TPB which means the person’s belief about how easy or difficult to perform an act. To make such a decision, people need to combine the past experience with the present obstacles. The accuracy of the

prediction of behaviour was improved in the study that Beck and Ajzen (1991) have done about the student's dishonest behaviour since the perceived behavioural control has been measured (Hogg and Vaughan, 1995). So in the TRA and TPB, both the external variables such as opportunities, resources and the people's internal variables such as normative beliefs and abilities are taken into consideration. This combination of external and internal makes TPB becomes the key theory dealing with the relationship between attitudes and behaviour. In these two theories, the action could be predicted if the person's attitude and social norm are favorable, as well as the level of perceived behavioural control is high.

In this essay, the relationship between attitudes and behaviour has been analysed. The inconsistency between attitudes and behaviour was described followed by the reasons why this could happen in the LaPiere's experiment. The self-report measurement which is widely used to measure attitudes has been evaluated as it would cause some inaccuracy in the prediction of future actions. The reasoned action theory (TRA) and planned behaviour theory (TPB) have been introduced in details as the main theories dealing with the link between attitudes and behaviour. To conclude, attitudes do predict behaviour once the variables in the measurement and the TPB are well-controlled. The scope of this paper was limited by the lack of introducing other variables influence the correspondence between attitudes and behaviour. However the first step is to realize that attitude can predict behaviour no matter strong or weak.

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