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The Concept of Attitude

By DALE ORTMEYER

INTRODUCTION

The concept of attitude in psychological and social psychological literature has a variety of interpretations and meanings. In the past few decades, the quantification of attitude measurement has been an area of experimental investigation. Measurement of any phenomenon pre-supposes a proper definition and an analysis of the concept under consideration.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The present study is an approach to the clarification of the concept, preparatory to an experimental attack in the area of psychosociological measurement of attitudes. Contributions by men in the various schools of psychology are presented with emphasis placed upon the behavioristic* point of view. Delimitation of the concept and its relation to other categories of psychology are considered with suggestions for experimental investigation in the field of attitude measurement.

DISCUSSION

The word "attitude" is derived from the Italian "attitudine" which is traced to the Latin "aptus" meaning fitness.

Titchener (5), an exponent of the Structuralist School, regarded the nature of attitudes as "Behind everything lies a cortical set, a nervous bias, perhaps inherited and permanent, perhaps acquired and temporary. This background may not appear in consciousness at all; or it may appear as a vague, conscious attitude (passive imagination), or again as a more or less definite plan, aim, ambition, intention (active imagination)." He considered conscious attitudes as composed of the elementary processes; sensations, images, and feelings. Lack of success in studying attitudes by introspective methods resulted in a tendency of the introspectionists to regard attitudes as manifestations of the unconscious mind.

In the early twentieth century, Köffka (6), while still in Germany, was attempting to describe attitudes from the Gestaltist point of view. Considering attitudes as forces directed toward an object, Köffka maintained that their origin is in the ego of the individual.

* The ideas herein discussed were taken largely from Doob (2), Hull (1), and Sherif and Cantril (4).

Thus, the organization of stimulus patterns depends upon attitudes and other internal organizing forces.

Dewey (7) of the Functionalist School described habit, which he considers synonymous with attitude, as an adequate basis for social psychology. He holds that attitudes are acquired; and are operative even when not dominating activity. Further maintaining that attitudes are self-active, leading to action when counteracting "inhibitory" tendencies are removed, he implies that attitudes are motives.

Woodworth (8) defines attitude as "a set or disposition . . . to act toward an object according to its characteristics so far as we are acquainted with them." Thus, his definition is similar to that of John Dewey's.

Thurstone (9) describes attitudes in different terms but with similar meaning to Dewey and Woodworth when he writes: "The concept of 'attitude' will be used here to denote the sum-total of a man's inclinations and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, ideas, fears, threats, and convictions about any specific topic . . ." The view that opinion is the verbal expression of an attitude seemed to simplify Thurstone's theory of attitude measurement. Other definitions in the field of attitude measurement have been stated as an attitude is what an attitude scale measures.

G. W. Allport's (10) "state of readiness" corresponds to Thurstone's "inclinations" and Woodworth's "set or disposition." By describing two types of attitudes, one which drives and the other directs, Allport contributed to further delimitation of the concept.

The preceding contributions stress attitudes as involving stimulus patterns, dispositions toward overt action, learning, and drives. These characteristics may describe attitudes, but it is believed by the author that further clarification can be achieved by analyzing attitudes from a behavioristic point of view.

An attitude is an intervening variable which is not directly observable. Unless anchored to directly observable antecedents and consequences by definite functional relationships, predictions are likely to be made by intuition. To analyze attitudes requires consideration of stimulus patterns, observable responses, and the functional relationships involved.

Using this approach, Doob (2) has defined an attitude as "an implicit, drive-producing response considered socially significant in the individual's society." With changes in the definition, it is believed by the author that an adequate definition of attitude can be formulated. The implicit response involves reinforcement to convey the meaning of Woodworth's "disposition." Doob (2) states

that "socially significant" must be unspecific since social values fluctuate. Due to the difficulty of clearly defining social values and social significance, it would be preferable to delete this, and stress the response being evoked by a variety of stimulus patterns. With these modifications, an attitude is defined as a reinforced, implicit, drive-producing response evoked by a variety of stimulus patterns.

An implicit response is a response within the individual and not immediately observable by other individuals. Thus attitudes may effect overt behavior, but overt behavior is not considered the attitude itself. The implicit response may be conscious or unconscious, sub-vocal or proprioceptive. Reinforcing the implicit response results in a tendency to similar responses when evoked by similar stimulus patterns.

This implicit response is evoked by a variety of stimulus patterns which may be internal or external to the individual. Hull (1) states that the response involved in conditioning is connected with a zone of stimuli other than the stimulus conventionally involved in the original conditioning. This he calls "stimulus generalization." The word "Japanese" may through previous learning become the one part of the original stimulus pattern which evokes an attitude toward the Japanese. However, other parts of the stimulus pattern such as skin texture, color of hair, shape of nose, etc. may evoke the attitude. By conditioning, association, or secondary stimulus generalization, stimuli not involved in the original stimulus pattern may also evoke the attitude. The word "Pearl Harbor" may evoke the internal response of Japanese which in turn evokes the attitude toward the Japanese. Stimulus discrimination may occur when an individual has an attitude toward any particular Japanese. This differential effect of stimulus patterns, Doob terms "gradient of generalization-discrimination."

The above discussion stresses that attitudes involve learning, which in turn involves attention and perception. When an implicit response is associated with a rewarded response, the implicit response may be conditioned to elicit the reward, by reinforcement. If the goal involves reward, the implicit response may facilitate overt behavior, that is, an attempt is made to increase the likelihood of occurrence of reward.

The implicit response may also act as mediator between the stimulus pattern and the goal response, that is, it attempts to increase the likelihood of occurrence of reward rather than punishment in connection with the goal response. If the goal response involves punishment, the implicit response may inhibit overt behavior. Thus,

dislike of an individual may involve an implicit response that is sub-vocal or proprioceptive but does not lead to overt expression or behavior.

A perceptual response would indicate that an individual is responding because he has previously paid attention to or been oriented toward certain stimulus patterns. An attitude may orient the individual to certain stimulus patterns but not others. However, an individual's attitude may be evoked after certain stimulus patterns have been perceived. In this case, the individual's attention is aroused by the functioning of some other attitude or drive. This is exemplified in a clinical situation where an individual is oriented toward the interviewer prior to being oriented toward the items by which the interviewer seeks to determine the attitude of the individual.

Analyzing the relationship of stimulus patterns to overt responses involves the consideration of three fundamental relationships. (1) The relationship of stimulus patterns to an implicit response or attitude. This is a function of the number of previous reinforcements, and the position of the stimulus pattern along the gradient of generalization-discrimination. (2) The stimulus-value of the attitude in evoking other implicit responses. These responses may be perceptual or possibly proprioceptive responses which may eventually evoke overt behavior. (3) The drive-strength of the attitude seems a distinct relationship. This is substantiated by the tension of the attitude being reduced through subsequent behavior leading to a reward. It is this tension that is described by the introspectionalist as feeling-tone and emotion. Thus, it may be stated that a degree of affective response is implied in an attitude. A drive may be differentiated from attitude because a drive may be temporarily satiated whereas an attitude is not. This would imply that attitudes tend to be more or less enduring, at least unless some fundamental and involved changes in the organism take place.

The preceding analysis does not limit attitudes on the basis of social evaluation, as Doob (2) has done. It is admissible that a rat's aversion to a grid may be considered an attitude. It is to be noted that we have not used the term "posture" to replace attitudes as some behaviorists have done since the mere substitution of names will in no way help to clarify a concept. If attitudes are to be confined to implicit responses that are socially significant, it is believed by the author that attitudes should be prefaced by the word social. Sociologists such as Young (12) and Faris (13) have preferred the term "social attitudes" when delimiting attitudes in this manner.

In the field of social attitude measurement it has been maintained that opinions are the verbal expression of social attitudes, when opinions are being measured. This does not differentiate the drive-strength of the social attitude, the stimulus-value of the social attitude in evoking other responses, nor the interaction with simultaneously evoked tendencies. While experimental investigation in the field of social attitude measurement designed to determine the social stimulus patterns affecting an individual's social attitude is socially useful and should be continued; experimental investigation should also be concerned with why the social attitudes do or do not change. To investigate this problem requires further study of the functions of intervening variables between the social stimulus-patterns and the social attitudes. To predict behavior by measurement of social attitudes requires experimental investigation of the functions of the intervening and related variables stated in this paper. Unfortunately, this point has frequently been neglected in the design of experiments.

SUMMARY

In retrospect, to analyze the relationship of an attitude to overt response involves:

- (1) The relationship of stimulus patterns to attitudes, which is a function of the number of previous reinforcements and the gradient of generalization-discrimination established.
- (2) The stimulus-value of the attitude in evoking other responses, including other attitudes.
- (3) The drive-strength of the attitude.
- (4) The degree of reward or punishment involved in the goal to which the attitude is directed.
- (5) The interaction of other attitudes and drives with the attitude under consideration.

It is hoped that the preceding analysis will facilitate experimental design in the investigation of attitude measurement.

CONCLUSION

While this study involves clarification rather than experimentation and does not warrant the drawing of exact conclusions, some points do seem worthy of note:

1. The concept of attitude has been defined as a reinforced, implicit, drive-producing response evoked by a variety of stimulus-patterns.

2. A means of clarification of the concept of attitude involves the behavioristic point of view.
3. Prediction of behavior by measurement of social attitudes requires experimental investigation of the functions of intervening and related variables stated in this paper.

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