UNIT 1  DEFINITION, CONCEPT, DESCRIPTION, CHARACTERISTIC OF ATTITUDE

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1.0  INTRODUCTION

“Oooh chocolate ice cream. I just love it!”, “I hate smokers”, “Black colour looks really classy”, “Yuck! I can’t stand sea food”, “I love social psychology”, and so on. All the above statements show that we react to our environment in an evaluative manner. We are constantly making judgments about whether objects, events, ourselves, and others are favorable or unfavorable, likable or unlikeable, good or bad. This falls in the domain of attitudes. Social psychologists who study attitudes investigate factors involved in such evaluations; how they are formed, changed, and so on.

In this unit, we will examine the concept of an attitude, how attitudes are formed, and what functions are served by holding attitudes. When you have finished learning this unit, you should have some understanding of attitude and its relevance.
1.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

• Define attitudes;
• Differentiate between attitudes, values and beliefs;
• Explain how attitudes are formed; and
• Describe the functions served by attitudes.

1.2 DEFINING ATTITUDES

The study of attitudes has been at the forefront of social psychology for many years. Attitude field is vast and diverse accumulating over 80-plus years. The study of attitudes has been a core topic in social psychology. Attitudes are involved in practically every other area of the discipline, including social perception, interpersonal attraction, prejudice and discrimination, conformity, compliance, and so on. The chief reason why the concept of attitude is so central to psychology is because the aim of psychology is to study behaviour, and attitudes are supposed to influence behaviour (whether or not and how and when they will be discussed in Unit 3).

Let us first try to understand what exactly an attitude is.

Early on attitudes were defined very broadly. Allport (1935) defined attitude as

"a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, and exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related" (p. 784).

With such a broad definition it is easy to see why attitudes were seen as the central construct of social psychology.

Since Allport, the definition of attitude has evolved considerably and become narrower. Attitudes are now looked as evaluative statements— either favorable or unfavorable- concerning some aspect of the social world. For instance, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define an attitude as

"a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (p. 6).

"Object” includes people, things, events, and issues. When you use such words as like, dislike, love, hate, good, bad, yuck, etc. you are describing your attitudes. In this view, attitudes then are evaluations of a particular person, group, action, or thing.

A similar definition was proposed by Eagly and Chaiken (1993), according to whom,

“Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (p. 1).

Thus an attitude is focused on a particular entity or object, rather than all objects and situation with which it is related.
Psychologists use specialized terms to describe certain classes of attitudes. For example, an attitude towards the self is called self-esteem, negative attitudes towards specific groups are called prejudice, attitudes towards individuals are called interpersonal attraction, and attitude towards own job is called job satisfaction.

Simply defined, attitudes are generally positive or negative views of a person (including oneself) place, thing, or event (the attitude object).

**Self Assessment Questions**

Define attitude in your own words.

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Why is attitude considered the central construct of social psychology?

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1.3 ATTITUDES, VALUES AND BELIEFS

There are two psychological constructs closely associated with attitudes: values and beliefs.

1.3.1 Attitudes and Values

The most frequently cited definition of what constitutes a human value is offered by Rokeach (1973) as an “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (p.5). Values constitute an important aspect of self-concept and serve as guiding principles for an individual. Rokeach argued that, considered together, values form values systems where a value system is “an enduring organisation of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of importance” (1973, p.5). Thus the importance of different values should co-vary with the importance of others in the value system. For example, you may value ‘honesty’ over ‘success’.

Human values are strongly prescriptive in nature and form the core around which other less enduring beliefs are organised. As such they are important in a range of other processes, like attitudes. It is contended that the formation of specific attitudes is predicated upon more general values. Values indirectly influence behaviour through their influence on attitudes.
Although values can shape attitudes, it does not however mean that values shape all attitudes. For e.g. your attitude towards say love versus arranged marriage is probably shaped by your values, but your preference for one brand of toothpaste over another is less likely to be influenced by important life goals. It is clear that some attitudes are formed through the influence of long-standing values internalized early in life. These are called symbolic attitudes, because the attitude object is a symbol of something else. In contrast, there are some attitudes that are based on utility, a direct benefits and costs of the attitude object. These are called instrumental attitudes, because they are instrumental to meet those needs. Interestingly the same attitude object could serve a symbolic or an instrumental need. For e.g. your decision to eat only vegetarian food could be based on utility (if you stay in a place like Europe or America where it is more difficult to get vegetarian food) or taste-instrumentally based attitudes— versus considerations of animal rights and right to live-symbolically based values.

Values are relatively more stable and enduring than attitudes, since they are basic notions about what is right and wrong. Attitudes are less stable than values. Further, if we know an individual’s values, we are better able to predict his behaviour in a particular situation.

1.3.2 Attitudes and Beliefs

Beliefs are cognitions about the probability that an object or event is associated with a given attribute (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Some theorists regard belief as one component of an attitude. However, there are differences between attitude and belief. Attitude can be considered as the sum of beliefs. A person can have many beliefs about a phenomenon (positive and negative). This person will have an attitude toward that phenomenon based on the overall evaluation of her beliefs. For e.g. I may believe that Pepsi is sweet; it contains preservatives; it is high on calories (belief); I like Pepsi (Attitude).

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), it is possible to verify or falsify some beliefs (at least) using external criteria. For e.g. the belief that water freezes at 0 degree Celsius can be verified either factually or even by agreement among many individuals; yet few attitudes can be ‘tested’ using such interjudge consensus. Most social attitudes, such as political, aesthetic, or consumer preferences are largely variable across people. You may like Pepsi; your friend may not like it at all!

Both beliefs and values are central to the dynamic forces that form and transform existing attitudes.

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1.4 FORMATION OF ATTITUDES

Right from our birth onwards, we are exposed to a wide variety of stimuli, both directly and indirectly, which lead to our acquiring particular attitudes towards the attitudinal object. It is believed that attitudes are by and large acquired as a result of various life experiences, although a small but growing body of evidence indicates that attitudes may be influenced by genetic factors, too.

A number of theories have been used to identify what lead to formation and maintenance of attitudes (Refer Figure 1)

![Diagram of factors affecting attitude formation]

Let us examine these factors one by one.
1.4.1 Classical Conditioning

The process of classical conditioning was first described by Pavlov. In his experiments on dogs, he found that after repeated pairings of an unconditioned stimulus (e.g. bell) with a conditioned stimulus (dog), the latter acquires the capacity to evoke a conditioned response (salivation), similar to the old, unconditioned response (salivation).

It has been suggested that in the same way that a bell can evoke a physiological response, classical conditioning can produce a positive/negative attitude towards a previously neutral object. Arthur and Carolyn Staats (1958) were two of the first researchers who systematically studied the classical conditioning of attitudes. They conducted an experiment in which the goal was to condition positive and negative attitudes to the names of countries (Sweden and Holland) which previously were regarded neither positively nor negatively. During 108 conditioning trials, two nationalities were always followed by a negative word (e.g. failure), two were paired with positive adjectives (e.g. happy, gift), and two others were paired with neutral words (e.g. table). At the end of the experiment, it was indeed found that participants held more positive attitudes towards the nationalities associated with positive words and more negative attitudes toward those associated with negative words.

Classical conditioning could play a role in establishing some of the emotional components of attitudes and prejudice. Further, through classical conditioning, people may come to have powerful attitudinal reactions to social objects even in the absence of firsthand experience. Hence, children who hear repeated pairings of words in their parents’ conversations (such as say, Muslims-Aggressive, Muslims-Fundamentalists) throughout their early years of development may come to adopt such negative attitudes themselves— without even meeting them.

1.4.2 Instrumental Conditioning

Child: “Mummy, doesn’t Mausi look nice in her green dress? She really knows how to carry herself.”

Mother: “You are absolutely right dear. I’ve felt that for some time now and was hoping you would agree. Your dress sense is really getting evolved. You can now suggest me what to wear the next time we go out.”

This kind of conversation illustrates quite clearly the role of reinforcement in attitude formation. Following her mother’s agreement, it is likely that the child’s initial responses of a positive attitude about Mausi will be reinforced. Of course, had the child remarked that Mausi looks awful; the mother might have reacted with displeasure, thereby punishing the remark. Following reward, the child’s attitude is likely to be strengthened; whereas punishment would probably lead to a weakening of the attitude.

This is the process of instrumental conditioning, a basic form of learning studied by Thorndike (1911) and Skinner (1938). According to this, behaviours that are followed by positive outcomes tend to be strengthened, while those that are followed by negative outcomes are suppressed. The degree to which attitudes are verbally or nonverbally reinforced by others will affect the acquiring and maintenance of attitudes. For e.g. early in your life, if your parents and teachers
praised you for doing well in studies, you may have doubled your efforts and developed a positive attitude towards studies. However if your friend’s parents did not acknowledge her achievements in studies, she would have probably developed a negative attitude toward studies.

1.4.3 Observational Learning

In both classical and instrumental conditioning approaches to attitude formation, the person has direct contact or experience (as in the case of Staats experiment) with the attitudinal object. However, it is also true that people may acquire attitudes simply by observing the rewards and punishments that others get for their espousal of those attitudes. The phenomenon by which a person acquires new forms of behaviour or thought simply by observing others is called observational learning. For example, you might develop a negative attitude towards the college canteen if you saw someone throwing up after having a meal there. Although your friend’s newly formed dislike is due to instrumental conditioning, your negative attitude is a result of observational learning.

The rationale behind commercials of say, Pizza Hut which show someone ordering and then obviously enjoying a pizza is that the viewer will also form a positive attitude vicariously and imitate such behaviour in the future.

1.4.4 Genetic Factors

Some research (Waller et al., 1990; Keller et al., 1992) indicates that our attitudes, at least a tendency to develop certain views about various topics or issues, are inherited. For instance, Arvey et al. (1989) studied the level of job satisfaction of 34 sets of identical twins separated from each other at an early age, and found that approximately 30% of job satisfaction appears to be explainable by genetic factors. Tesser (1993) has argued that hereditary variables may affect attitudes—but believes that they may do so indirectly.

Additional research suggests that genetic factors play a stronger role in shaping some attitudes than others. For e.g., attitudes involving gut-level preferences (say a preference for a certain kind of food) may be more strongly influenced by genetic factors than attitudes that are more cognitive in nature (say attitudes towards environment conservation).

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**Self Check Exercises**

**Note:** i) Tick mark the correct answer.

ii) Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the unit.

1) The psychological construct that deals with important life goals that go beyond specific situations is:
   a) Value,  b) Attitude,  c) Belief,  d) Behaviour

2) Parents reward children with smiles, approvals, or hugs for stating the ‘right’ view— the ones that they themselves approve. Which type of learning does this process represent?
   a) Classical Conditioning
   b) Instrumental Conditioning
   c) Observational Learning
   d) Insight Learning
3) Khushi and Ayush are two well-behaved and happy children who are members of a loving family. During the course of their young lives they have developed extremely negative attitudes toward various minority groups. They have listened to their parents and other adults continuously use negative words such as stupid, lazy, dirty in referring to minority members. Which type of learning does this process represent?
   a) Classical Conditioning  
   b) Instrumental Conditioning  
   c) Observational Learning  
   d) Insight Learning

4) What are the components of attitudes? Give an example to substantiate your statement.

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5) Discuss the process of attitude formation.

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6) Put forward the 4 theories that help in explaining attitude formation.

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1.5 FUNCTIONS OF ATTITUDES

From the above it is obvious that we hold many attitudes about almost all aspects of the world around us. Are you wondering why we bother forming the many attitudes that each one of us have? In this section, we will throw light on some functions served by attitudes.

The functional utility of attitudes was pointed out by Allport (1935) in his classic discussion of attitudes. According to him, attitude was social psychology’s most indispensable concept. He stated, “Without guiding attitudes the individual is confused and baffled…Attitudes determine for each individual what he will see
and hear, what he will think and what he will do...they ‘engender meaning upon the world’; they draw lines about and segregate an otherwise chaotic environment; they are our methods for finding our way about in an ambiguous universe” (Allport, 1935, p. 806).

This has been termed as the object appraisal function by Fazio (2000). According to him, the mere possession of any attitude is useful to the individual in terms of orienting him to the attitudinal object. This object appraisal function can be regarded as the primary value of having an attitude. Fazio goes on to state, “Every attitude, regardless of any other functional benefits that it may also provide, serves this object appraisal function”. (p. 4)

Similarly both Katz (1960) and Smith, Bruner and White (1956) commented on this object — appraisal function in their functional theory of attitudes. One of the fundamental assumptions of functional theory is that we often hold or express our attitudes and preferences in order to communicate something about ourselves to other people. This implies that attitudes towards specific issues, products, or ideas serve to convey broader information about us to those who are interested. For e.g. Smith et al. (1956) said, “Attitudes aid us in classifying for action the objects of the environment, and they make appropriate response tendencies available for coping with these objects” (p. 41).

Katz (1960) takes the view that attitudes are determined by the functions they serve for us. People hold given attitudes because these attitudes help them achieve their basic goals. Katz distinguishes four types of psychological functions that attitudes meet. Let us examine these four functions now.

1.5.1 **Utilitarian Function (also Called Instrumental Function)**

We develop certain attitudes towards objects that aid or reward us. We want to maximize rewards and minimize penalties. Katz says we develop positive attitudes towards those objects that are associated with rewards and develop negative attitudes toward those that are associated with punishment. For e.g. if you are a graduate looking for a job, if you belong to a minority community (say Other Backward Classes) which has job reservations, you will favour the political party that introduced such reservations. On the other hand, if you belong to the majority, you might develop a negative attitude towards the same party because it ‘took away some jobs from the general quota and reserved them for OBCs’. We are more likely to change our attitudes if doing so allows us to fulfill our goals or avoid undesirable consequences.

If you think this function seems close to instrumental conditioning, you are right. It does come from a behaviourist perspective.

1.5.2 **Knowledge Function**

We all have a need to attain some degree of meaningful, stable, clear, and organised view of the world (just as most of us have a need to maintain an organised cupboard!) Attitudes satisfy this knowledge function by providing a frame of reference for organizing our world so that it makes sense. Using such a cognitive perspective, attitudes serve as schemas that help us in organizing and interpreting social information.

For e.g. people who hold traditional gender stereotypes (such as ‘a woman’s place is in the home’) will have greater satisfaction with the current status of
women at work and will explain the low number of women in high positions in office (glass ceiling effect) with traditional gender explanations. Via such attitudes as stereotypes, we can bring order and clarity to the complexities of human life (even if misplaced!)

1.5.3 Ego-Defensive Function

Some attitudes serve to protect us from acknowledging basic truths about ourselves or the harsh realities of life. These can help a person cope with emotional conflicts and protect self-esteem. As you would’ve noticed, this comes from a psychoanalytic perspective, and assumes that attitudes serve as defense mechanisms. For example, a new mother might feel bad about herself after experiencing a sudden urge to hit her crying child, and to defend against this threat to self-esteem, she might develop a positive attitude toward spoiling the child. The rationalisation might be, ‘of course I don’t want her to get spoiled by giving in to her whims every time.’

1.5.4 Value-Expressive Function

Value-expressive attitudes show who we are, and what we stand for. Hence they serve to demonstrate one’s self-image to others and to express our basic values. This function comes from a humanistic perspective. It seems logical to assume that only important and strongly self-related (central) attitudes should serve the value-expressive function.

For e.g. you may have a negative attitude towards homosexuals because your religion considers homosexuality to be immoral (although I personally don’t think any religion degrades homosexuality). The fact that you may never have had a bad experience with anyone who was homosexual is irrelevant. Your negative attitude satisfies your value-expressive function, allowing you to express an important value associated with a religious group with which you strongly identify. By extension, if you don’t strongly identify with your religious group, your negative attitude towards homosexuals will not have much effect on your self-esteem.

1.5.5 Social Identity Function

Other than the basic four functions served by attitudes suggested by Katz, Shavitt (1989) added another social identity function of attitudes. This refers to the informativeness of attitudes for person impressions, or how much attitudes appear to convey about the people who hold them. Shavitt and Nelson (2000) suggested that products tend to engage a utilitarian function to the extent that they are seen as expressing identity and values, the product is generally displayed in public or is visible to others, or the product is widely seen as symbolizing membership in a particular group. For e.g. the purchase of an Indian flag on the Republic Day may be driven primarily by social identity goals.

In addition to investigating how attitude functions vary among people, current researches in the field also consider the possibility that different attitude objects may actually serve different functions for different people. For e.g. people purchase certain products to fulfill utilitarian needs (computers, television, etc.) and other products to satisfy value-expressive needs (for e.g. a particular brand of car). Further, an attitude changes when it no longer serves its function, and the individual feels blocked or frustrated. Thus, those who are interested in changing
other people’s attitudes must first determine what functions those attitudes serve for the targeted individuals, and then use an appropriate approach.

**Self Check Exercises**

1) What are the various functions of attitudes? Discuss each of these functions with an example from real life situation.

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**Note:** Tick mark the correct answer.

Check your answer with the answers given at the end of the unit.

1) Rahul is not performing well on his job and is unjustly blaming his problems on his ‘difficult’ boss. Which function is served by holding such negative attitudes towards his boss?
   a) Value-Expressive
   b) Knowledge
   c) Utilitarian
   d) Ego-Defensive

2) Roshni regards herself to be an enlightened feminist; and therefore cultivates attitudes that she believes indicate such a core value. Which function is served by such attitudes?
   a) Value-Expressive
   b) Knowledge
   c) Utilitarian
   d) Ego-Defensive

**1.6 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit, we have discussed the definition, concept, formation, and functions of attitudes. Attitudes are generally positive or negative views of a person (including oneself), place, thing, or event-the attitude object. They differ somewhat from values and beliefs. Values are concerned with important life goals and may shape attitudes; beliefs are one component of attitudes that can be verified (or falsified) using external criteria.

Attitudes are formed by a number of mechanisms. In classical conditioning, attitudes form when a previously neutral attitude object comes to evoke an attitude response by being paired with some other object that naturally evokes the attitude response. Another powerful way in which attitudes are formed is through instrumental conditioning, using reward and punishment contingencies. Some attitudes are also formed via observational learning by vicariously experiencing rewards and punishments given to others. Finally, genetic factors play a role in shaping some attitudes. The functional approach says that we hold attitudes that fit our needs. All attitudes, regardless of any other needs that they fulfill, also serve an object appraisal function. Early functional theorists proposed four psychological functions that attitudes may serve: utilitarian, knowledge, ego-defensive, and value-expressive. A social-identity function of attitude was added later.
1.7 SAQS- POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1) a: Value
2) b: Instrumental Conditioning
3) d: Ego-defensive
4) a: Value-Expressive

1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Define attitudes. Explain the difference between attitudes, values and beliefs.
2) Discuss the theories that explain how attitudes are formed.
3) What functions are served by attitudes? Using the same example, discuss how the same attitudinal object may serve different functions.

1.9 GLOSSARY

Belief : Any cognitive content held as true.
Classical Conditioning : Learning through association, when a neutral stimulus (conditioned stimulus) is paired with a stimulus (unconditioned stimulus) that naturally produces a response.
Defense Mechanisms : Unconscious tactics used to safeguard the mind against feelings and thoughts that are too difficult for the conscious mind to cope with, for instance, forgetting, rationalisation, denial, repression, projection, etc.
Functional Theory of Attitudes: Attitudes are determined by the functions they serve for us.
Glass Ceiling : Attitudinal or organisational bias in the workplace that prevents women and other minorities from advancing to leadership positions.
Instrumental Conditioning : A type of learning in which behaviour is strengthened if followed by reinforcement and weakened if followed by punishment.
Schema : A cognitive framework that helps organise and interpret information.
Values : Enduring beliefs about important life goals that go beyond specific situations.

1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS