Part II: Understanding Ourselves — Attitudes, Behavior, and Persuasion

Curtis Peterson, PhD

Full Transcript

[00:00 – 00:13]

(Acoustic-electronic introductory theme music plays)

Host:

"All right, now that we focused on attributions, which really deals with our attributing behaviors to others, but as we saw, attributing to our own based on the information we uh have, we're going to go more deeply into understanding ourselves by discussing attitude, behavior, and per-persuasion.

Um and to begin, I should discuss that attitudes uh is probably the uh most studied uh subject within social psychology. Going back to that notion we had in the beginning of our discussion, because we know that people have their own subjective experience, and we differ between why we may engage in the same exact behaviors.

So today, we're going to explore what is arguably one of the most extensively studied subjects in the history of social psychology, and that's attitudes. And in fact, in 1935, uh social psychologist Gordon Allport described the concept of attitudes as among the most distinctive and indispensable concepts in American social psychology. Now nearly a century later, attitudes remains a central in psychological research. Why have psych—so—*chuckles* I can't talk all of a sudden—why have social psychologists devoted so much attention to understanding attitudes?

And it's really because if we can understand how people develop ev-develop evaluations of the worlds around them, how these evaluations influence their behavior, and how those evaluations change, we can begin to understand an enormous range of human experiences. Research on attitudes informs our understanding of things like prejudice, discrimination, political behavior, consumer decision-making, interpersonal relationships, healthcare decisions, advertising, education, and public policy.

However, one of the most interesting things psychologists have discovered is that relationships between what people believe, how they feel, and what they actually do is considerably more complicated than we might have assumed.

So let's a-be begin with: what is an attitude? In social psychology, an attitude refers to an evaluation of a person, object, event, group, behavior, or idea. We may evaluate something positively or negatively, or we can experience conflicting evaluations simultaneously.

So one of the traditional ways of understanding attitudes is what psychologists call the ABC model of attitudes. The letter A represents affect, or our emotional response. The letter B represents behavior, or our actions and behavioral tendencies. And C represents our cognitions, which includes our thoughts and our beliefs.

In this analysis, consider a person's attitude towards exercise. Cognitively, the ma—the individual may believe exercise improves physical and psychological health. Emotionally, the individual may dislike exercising because they associate it with discomfort. Behaviorally, the individual may rarely engage in physical activity.

These different components do not necessarily align. A person can believe something is beneficial without enjoying it, and they can enjoy something while recognizing that it may be have negative consequences. This is one reason psychologists distinguish between attitudes and behaviors, rather than assuming that they are interchangeable."

[02:00 – 02:08]

(Short musical interlude)

Host:

"This leads us to a fundamental question: How well do attitudes predict behavior?

Imagine asking a group of college students whether they believe completing assignment on time is important. I'd argue that most students would probably agree that submitting assignments on time is important. However, if we examined actual submission records at the end of the semester, we would probably discover some considerable variation in students' behaviors.

Does that mean students were dishonest when they reported their attitudes? Not necessarily. A student may genuinely value education while simultaneously experiencing things like employment demands, family responsibilities, transportation difficulties, limited internet access, or concerns about their physical and psychological health.

This brings us back to our discussion of Lewin and the relationship between the individual and their environment. Attitudes represent one influence on behavior, but they are not the only influence. Research generally demonstrates that attitudes are more likely to predict behavior when they are personally important, relatively stable, easy to retrieve in memory, and directly relevant to the behavior being examined. Psychologists refers to the ease to which an attitude can be retrieved as attitude accessibility. Throughout the day, we may experience situations where we must make decisions relatively quickly. Attitudes that are really easily accessible may exert greater influence on those decisions.

However, there is another important issue: whether the individual has the opportunity and perceived ability to engage in that behavior. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior proposes that behavioral intentions are in-form influenced by our attitudes towards a particular behavior, our perception of our social expectations, and our perceived control over engaging in that behavior. A person may have a positive attitude towards attending college, but may believe they cannot afford tuition, as an example. Another individual may strongly disagree with a group decision, but remain silent because they believe expressing disagreement would threaten their employment and acceptance with the group.

In 2026, psychologists Mark Conner and Paul Norman continues to examine the relationship among attitudes, intentions, and actual be-behavioral change. What they find is understanding attitudes is important, but predicting behavior also requires understanding the conditions that allow or prevent individuals from acting consistent with those attitudes."

[03:55 – 04:02]

(Short musical interlude)

Host:

"So this leaves us with another interesting question: How and why do attitudes develop?

And it's important to note that attitudes are not developed in isolation. They emerge through our interaction with the social and physical environment which we live. We will consider three important processes here: something known as mere exposure, learning, and social isolation [socialization].

The mere—mere ex—*chuckles* the mere exposure effect refers to the tendency for repeated exposure of a stimulus to sometimes increase our liking of that stimulus. Think about a song that you initially did not particularly enjoy. After hearing the song repeatedly, you may have discovered that you have developed a more favorable attitude towards it. Familiarity can make something feel more predictable and comfortable. Advertisers understand this phenomenon. Part of the purpose of advertising is simply to increase their familiarity with a product—or your familiarity with a product, company, or message. However, repeated exposure does not guarantee that we will develop a positive attitude. Rep-repetition can also become irritating, and repeated negative experiences may strengthen that unfavorable evaluation.

A second process involves learning. Think back to our discussion on classical conditioning. Attitudes can develop when something becomes associated with experiences that produce positive or negative emotional responses. An advert—advertiser may associate a product with friendship, happiness, family, or success. That product itself may have very little to do with those emotional experiences—I often think of, for example, alcohol commercials when I analyze this—but advertisers hope that some of the positive evaluations will become associated with that product.

We can also develop attitudes through direct consequences and observational learning. If experiencing a particular opinion results in praise and acceptance, we may be more likely to express that opinion again. If, however, expressing a different opinion results in criticism or rejection, we may come become less willing to express it publicly.

The final process is socialization. Throughout our lives, our attitudes are influenced by caregivers, peers, educators, religious communities, *sighs* cultural institutions, political leaders, and the media. Albert Bandura's social learning theory helps us understand how we acquire attitudes and behaviors by observing other people and the consequences associated with their behavior. Children may develop attitudes about a

particular social group long before they have even had meaningful personal interaction with a member of those groups. Their attitudes may develop through observing how family members speak about those groups, how those groups are portrayed in media, and how what beliefs are reinforced within their social environment. This is one reason prejudice can persist across generations."

[05:39 – 05:43]

(Audio retake marker)

Host:

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[07:14 – 07:19]

(Short acoustic guitar transition)

Host:

"Another dimensions of attitudes are two dimensions of attitudes that we should discuss. The first is what is known as explicit attitudes, and the second is implicit attitudes.

Social psychologists distinguish between explicit attitudes and what are commonly referred to as these implicit attitudes. An explicit attitude is an evaluation that we can consciously report. If someone asks you uh whether you support equal education opportunities, your response represents your explicit reported attitude.

On another level, we have implicit attitudes. And these are commonly investigated through a measure designed to capture relatively automatic evaluations and associations, sometimes outside deliberate conscious control. One of our most widely discussed measures is the Implicit Association Test, or IAT. The IAT examines the difference in how quickly people categorize

concepts when those concepts share response catego—response categories and positive or negative evaluations.

However, there has been considerable debate within social psychology about how we should interpret these measures. It would be inappropriate to administer an IAT to someone and conclude from their single score that an individual is prejudiced or discriminatory. Automatic associations may reflect cultural exposure, learned stereotypes, personal experiences, or other prep processes. They do not necessarily represents a person's consciously endorsed beliefs.

A substantial meta-analysis investigated by Phipps, Hagger, Hamilton in 2025 examined more than a thousand studies to better understand how implicit and explicit measures relate to behavior, and that relationship varies across conditions, like many of the other contemporary findings that we have. This continues to be an active area in psychology.

It is also important to recognize that awareness of a stereotype does not necessar—set necessarily mean that the person endorses that stereotype. An individual may recognize that certain stereotypes exist within society while actively rejecting them, and making them considerable efforts to prevent those stereotypes from influencing their behaviors."

[08:40 – 08:44]

(Gentle chime)

Host:

"So I think at this time, it's a good idea to do a reflection activity, like we did in the first podcast in this series. And I've kind of titled this one 'Attitudes and Behaviors Differ.'

And what I want you to identify is something that you have genuinely believe it is important, but do not consistently incorporate into your behavior. Perhaps it involves healthy eating, getting sufficient sleep, *chuckles* managing your finances, completing an academic assignment, spending time with family, or participating in an activity that supports your well-being.

And then I want you to, for a thirty or so seconds, think about: what prevents you from behaving consistently with your attitude? Is it a lack of motivation,

competing responsibilities, financial limitations, and-slash-or social expectations? And afterwards, consider whether explanation would be different if you were observing someone else who did demonstrates the same inconsistency.

You probably see how our discussion of attributions and attitudes are closely connected."

[09:35 – 10:00]

(Ambient reflection pause with gentle music)

Host:

"Now what I want to talk about is what happens when a strongly held attitude conflicts uh with our behavior.

In 1957, social psychologist Leon Festinger proposed what he called the theory of cognitive dissonance. Now, I want to be very careful in describing cognitive dissonance, because through my years of teaching, I see students try to apply this theory to a lot of things that are experienced as things like anxiety, or stress, or conflict. So I want to be careful about the definition.

Cognitive dissonance refers to an uncomfortable psychological state that can arise when we recognize meaningful inconsistencies among our beliefs, attitudes, decisions, and behavior.

So, as an example, I want you to imagine someone who strongly believes that honesty is important, but finds themselves lying to another person. The inconsistency between their attitude and their behavior may create psychological discomfort. There are several ways the person might reduce this discomfort as well. They could change their behavior; they could decide to become more honest. They could change their attitude and decide that honesty not particularly important in certain situations. They could develop additional explanations that justify their behavior, such as deciding lying was necessary to protect someone's feelings. Or they might minimize the significance of the inconsistency.

One of the most interesting aspects of cognitive dissonance is that changing our attitude may sometimes be psychologically easier than changing our own behavior.

So let's explore something known as insufficient justification. Uh in 1959, Festinger again and another uh psychologist Carlsmith conducted one of the most recognizable experiments in the history of social psychology. What they did is participants completed a series of extremely repetitive and boring activities. Some participant were subsequently asked to tell another person that the activities were interesting and enjoyable. One group received one dollar for doing so, while the other group received twenty dollars.

The interesting thing is that participants who received one dollar subsequently evaluated the boring activity more positively than those who received twenty dollars. Why might this occur? The individuals who received twenty dollars had a substantial external justification for making a statement that contradicted their actual experience. The individuals who received only one dollar had considerably less of what's known as external justification. They interpreted these findings as evidence that people may sometimes modify their attitude to reduce the inconsis—inconsistency between their behavior and existing val—evaluation. This is referred to as the insufficient justification effect.

The study remains historically important, although we should note that contemporary psychologists recognize that dissonance processes depend on variations and conditions, including perceived choice, personal responsibility, and importance of the conflicting information."

[11:42 – 11:47]

(Short instrumental interlude)

Host:

"This bring us brings us to the interesting topic of effort justification and post-decisional dissonance.

This other related concept of effort justification: Imagine spending considerable time, uh money, and personal eff-effort obtaining membership within a group. After making that invest-investment, it may become psychologically difficult to acknowledge that the group does not provide the benefits you originally anticipated. One may reduce that inconsistency is to develop a more favorable evaluation of the group.

Aronson and Mills examined the process in a classical study in 1959 involving the severity of imitation—initiation experiences. Effort justification is sometimes used to help explain why people why individuals develop stronger attachments to groups after undergoing difficult initiation experiences. However, we must be careful not to treat effort justification as a complete explanation for things such as hazing that we see often in university life and sports groups. Group pressure, obedience, cohesion, fear of rejection, and the desire for social acceptance can also contribute to participation in harmful group practices.

Another related phenomenon, known as potential post-potential or post-decisional dissonance, goes something like this: Imagine choosing between two equally attractive employment opportunities. After making your decision, you may begin to emphasize the positive correct characteristics of the job you accepted, while only focusing on the negative characteristics of the job you declined. These changes in evaluation can help you become more comfortable with the decision you made.

But an important aspect of post post-decisional dissonance is when we have two equal opportunities, we also are more likely to use post-decisional dissonance when we need to justify the one we choose when the other one becomes more appealing or more likeable."

[13:42 – 13:50]

(Short musical transition)

Host:

"So what we've been talking about to this point is defining attitudes, but also how uh we aim to make our attitudes congruent with our experience, and what happens when those experiences don't always match with our attitude. Now what I want to focus on is how to create attitude change. And I'd like to start with persuasion and attitude change.

In this, traditionally psychologists have identified three important components of persuasion: the source, the message, and the receiver.

The source refers to who delivers the message. Does the individual pip—appear knowledgeable? Do we trust them? Do they represent social groups with which we identify?

The message refers to content of communication as well. Does the message provide convincing evidence? Does it appeal to our emotions? Does it address existing concerns?

And the receiver refers to the person processing the information. How personally relevant is a message? What attitude does the individual already hold? And do they have sufficient time and motivation to evaluate the information?

We can also include cultural expectations and social relationships influence each of these components. Some-a some may have a particularly receptive to a message communicated by a respected community member, while another person may be more receptive to the same information when it's communicated by recognizing scientific expertise. I go back to my classroom example of the foot and personality that I did in a class several years ago.

But let's focus on some nuances, such as cross-cultural meta-analysis that was published into 2025 examine things like emotional and con—cognitive persuasiveness and their appeal across 22 countries. And what their findings suggest is that relatively effectiveness across those appeals can vary with broader cultural patterns. However, we should not assume that cultural background alone determines how a particular individual we-will will respond to a persuasive message."

[15:35 – 15:40]

(Rhythmic chime)

Host:

"Beyond the traditional model used to explain how persuasion occurs, we should now introduce what's known as the elaborate Elaboration Likelihood Model, and this was developed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo. Uh and they developed a model which remains one of the most influ-met influential frameworks to understand persuasion.

In the model, traditionally distinguishing between central and peripheral routes of persuasion. When we get engaged in relatively high elaboration, sometimes referred to as central route processing, we develop considerable attention to the evaluation uh and evaluating the arguments and evidence presented to

us. Imagine purchasing a vehicle. You might investigate the reliability ratings, safety information, fuel efficiency, finance financing options, and long-term maintenance costs. Your evaluation develops through relatively ex-sens—extensive considerable and relevant information.

When elaboration is relatively low, sometimes referred to as per-peripheral processing, our evaluation may depend more heavily and readily on emotional and available readily available cues. Perhaps a celeb-celebrity endorses a particular vehicle, and the advertisement makes the vehicle appear exciting, or someone you admire recommends it.

Contemporary interpretation of model recognizes that persay-persuasion exists along a continuum, rather than just pure elaboration uh involving two entirely psycho-diff—two entirely different psychological systems. So instead of thinking of these as two separate systems, they often uh overlap with each other in a continuum of elaboration to uh letting things go. If you want to think about it in earlier terms that we used in the class, we looked at shallow processing and deep processing. They weren't in—uh they weren't independent of each other; each one built on the next.

So ea—but with this, even the same piece of information can in-influences differently depending on how we process it. For example, a person's professional expertise might serve as a simple credibility cue, or we might carefully investigate whether that expertise is relevant to the claims that are being made. Attitude developed through careful considerations tend, under appropriate conditions, to be more persistent, resistant to counter-persuasion, and predictive of subsequent behavior. However, carefully considering information does not guarantee we'll we'll react—we will reach an accurate conclusion. Our existing attitudes and motivations can also influence how we interpret that same me—uh same uh interpretation and based on that same evidence."

[17:45 – 17:50]

(Gentle melodic transition)

Host:

"One way of ending this podcast, which I think would be really interesting, is: what about persuasion in the digital world?

Today, we encounter persuasive messages almost every time we use our phones. Social media platforms present information alongside indicators of social approval, including liking, sharing, comments, and a number of followers. If you think about that, a social media post represents many of the psychological concepts that we've talked about in the section.

This brings me to a really interesting review done in 2025 by Oktar and Lombrozo, and they examined how aggregated opinions influence people's beliefs, particularly within contemporary online environments. And this is kind of what they found. Imagine encountering two social media posts containing similar information. One post has three likes, while the other post has 50,000. Does the popularity of the second post make its information more accurate? And we would say, of course not. However, the appearance of widespread social engagement may influence how credible or important we perceive the information to be.

Social media algorithms can influence the information we repeatedly encounter, connecting contemporary persuasion to the mere exposure effect, social learning, conformity, and group identification. We may begin developing the impression that a particular attitude is widely shared because we repeatedly encounter it within our own informational bubble and environment. That impression may not accurately represent the broader population.

We can think of this in recent elections. If we look at 2024, uh among people who were anti-MAGA, uh assumed that Trump President Donald Trump would not get elected a second time. So that influenced their attitudes, and therefore their uh voting behavior. We see the same thing in the recent election where uh the Dem—where Democrats took over the majority of both the Senate and the House. Because information was in a bubble, if you go look at the algorithms for people who are in the MAGA or uh uh Republican sphere, the information that they were continually receiving is that there's no way with the current president in power that the American people are going to elect someone else. So they had an overconfidence, and what we know about electing behavior is when a party has overconfidence that they will win, they tend not to show up at the election polls.

So something to consider as we conclude this. I want you to recognize why attitudes have received so much attention throughout the history of social psychology. Attitudes influence how we perceive the world, how we interpret information, how we interact with others, and how we make decisions. Yet attitudes don't develop independently of our social environment, and neither

do our behaviors. Our families, communities, online experiences, cultural expectation, our own social identities, and the opportunity to influence both—have the opportunities to influence both attitudes we develop and our willingness and ability to act consistently with those attitudes.

Think about our previous discussion on conformity, compliance, and obedience. An individual may consistent on be-behave consistent with a group expectation, while privately disagreeing with those expectations. Over time, that individual may change their attitude, continuing who are continuing to experience discomfort, or develop explanations to justify their behavior. Alternatively, those individuals may evaluate eval—*chuckles* may evaluatively decide that maintaining their personal belief is more important than continuing to meet the expectations of a group.

I'll leave you with just some final questions that I'd encourage you to think about: How many how many of the attitudes you currently hold developed through your own deliberate evaluation of infor-information, and how many developed because those attitudes were consistently reinforced within the social environment in which you grew up?

There's another inherently problematic about learning attitudes from other people. Social learning is fundamental part of human development. However, developing psychological awareness means recognizing that we have the capacity to examine those attitudes, reconsider their origins, and determine whether they continue to reflect our values and understanding of the world.

All right, thank you for joining me throughout this discussion of social psychology. I hope this section of the course has encouraged you to think differently about your own behavior and the behavior of other people, as we head into the mysterious world of abnormal psychology and psychological disorders, where I strongly encourage you to take these tools of evaluation we considered in social psychology in the evaluation of people who suffer from psychological disorders, and some of the attitudes and biases that groups could take into evaluating someone struggling with mental health or are hurting from a psychological disorder."

[22:00 – 23:45] Outro Theme Song