

Attitude Research: Between Ockham's Razor and the Fundamental Attribution Error

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Attitudes are hypothetical constructs invented by researchers to explain phenomena of interest. Their appeal reflects the common preference for dispositional explanations. Construal models account for the same phenomena without assuming enduring predispositions and are better suited to accommodate a core requirement of any adaptive system of evaluation, namely, high context sensitivity.

What can be accounted for by fewer assumptions is explained in vain by more. (William of Ockham [c. 1280–1349])

In 1935 Gordon Allport asked, "How does one know that attitudes exist at all?" His answer: "Only by necessary inference. There *must be something* to account for the consistency of conduct" (Allport 1935, 836; emphasis added). But is the inference necessary? Or is it merely a scientific version of the layperson's fundamental attribution error (Ross 1977), our well-known tendency to "explain" behavior by reference to personal dispositions?

In recent years, several researchers have presented models of judgment and behavior that account for the bulk of the accumulated attitude findings without assuming that people have the enduring predispositions usually referred to as attitudes (e.g., Lord and Lepper 1999; Schwarz 2000; Schwarz and Bohner 2001; Smith and DeCoster 1998). These models treat attitudes as evaluative judgments that are constructed on the spot, and they specify the conditions under which the judgment process results in similar or dissimilar outcomes across time and situations. Traditional attitude research infers "stable" attitudes from similar judgments at time 1 and time 2 and unstable attitudes or "nonattitudes" from dissimilar judgments (with the criterion for "sufficient" similarity being open to debate). Construal models show that the inferred predispositions are not necessary to account for the data. Judgments at time 1 and time 2 will be similar if the person draws on the same inputs or draws on different inputs with similar evaluative implications or if the inputs

give rise to small rather than large context effects (Bless, Schwarz, and Wänke 2003; Schwarz and Bohner 2001). Similarly, construal models predict that attitude-behavior consistency is high when individuals draw on similar inputs in forming an evaluative judgment and a behavioral decision but low otherwise. This assumption again provides a parsimonious account of the available data, including Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) admonitions regarding proper measurement, which specify the conditions under which the inputs at judgment and behavior will overlap (Lord and Lepper 1999; Schwarz and Bohner 2001).

The core process assumptions of attitude construction models are mainstays of social cognition research and are not controversial—as long as we talk about "judgment." Once the particular judgment made can be thought of as a person's "attitude," however, construal assumptions elicit discomfort, presumably because they dispense with the intuitively appealing attitude concept. Even the authors of attitude construal models are often tempted to maintain the attitude concept, either by redefining attitudes as the memory structures on which judgment processes operate (Lord and Lepper 1999; Tourangeau 1992), limiting construction to some attitudes (Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler 2000), or reintroducing attitudes in the form of previously constructed judgments as inputs into later construction processes, as in Cohen and Reed's Multiple Pathway Anchoring and Adjustment (MPAA) model (2006, in this issue).

I am sympathetic to Cohen and Reed's attempt to assign an important role to previously formed evaluative judgments, although such a role is not needed to make construal models work. For the purpose of making their argument, Schwarz and Bohner (2001) began with the extreme assumption that people can never recall previously formed judgments and always have to start from scratch using only information accessible at the time. As anyone who recalls that a movie was boring but cannot recall any details will realize, this assumption is unrealistic. Nevertheless, and admittedly to our surprise, we were hard put to identify conditions under which the validity of this extreme assumption

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made a difference in the predicted results. So, too, are Cohen and Reed, who acknowledge that “it may not be parsimonious to develop theory that incorporates both traditional attitudes and constructed judgments (*especially since there is no convincing empirical evidence that this distinction is necessary*)” (Cohen and Reed 2006, in this issue, 5; emphasis added). In fact, Cohen and Reed’s model assumes that the relevance of recalled attitudes to the task at hand is evaluated on the basis of metacognitive fluency experiences and competing information, that is, in much the same way as any other information (Cohen and Reed 2006, in this issue). If this is the case, why should we privilege previous evaluations as a special entity? In the end, the previous evaluation is only one of many possible inputs, and its informational value for the present circumstances needs to be assessed just like the informational value of other inputs. If it is deemed sufficient, no other inputs may be sought—but that holds as well for any other piece of information with sufficient diagnosticity.

Cohen and Reed further note that the constructivist challenge is “impossible to resolve empirically. Even reaction time measures have difficulty distinguishing between retrieved and constructed judgments since computation can be rapid (e.g., given few relevant and highly accessible pieces of information) or slow (e.g., for multifaceted and/or mixed valence belief elements)” (Cohen and Reed 2006, in this issue, 5). Schwarz and Bohner (2001) arrived at the same conclusion. But there is a preferred solution on logical grounds. Attitudes are hypothetical constructs that we, as researchers, introduce to explain phenomena of interest. They derive their right to life from their explanatory power and live at the mercy of Ockham’s razor, articulated in the fourteenth century: “What can be accounted for by fewer assumptions is explained in vain by more” (Moody 1974, 173). Given that the phenomena of interest can be explained without invoking enduring predispositions, why does the attitude concept maintain its unparalleled popularity? One possible answer is that the concept is central to the observer’s dream: “If only I knew your attitude, I could predict your thoughts and behavior” (aka the fundamental attribution error). The high context dependency of attitude judgments and weak attitude-behavior relationships are bothersome from this perspective and give rise to ever more sophisticated attempts to find people’s “true” attitudes.

But this context dependency is not a problem from the actor’s perspective. Thinking is for doing (James 1890), and evaluation serves orientation and behavior. An adaptive system of evaluation should be informed by past experience but highly sensitive to the specifics of the present; it should overweight recent experience and experience from similar situations and take current goals and concerns into account. Only context-sensitive evaluation can guide behavior in adaptive ways by alerting us to problems and opportunities when they exist, interrupting ongoing processes when needed (but not otherwise), and rendering information highly accessible that is relevant now—in this context. This situated nature of human cognition (Smith and Semin 2004) is central to construal

models, from the automatic evaluation of novel stimuli, for which no previous attitude could possibly have been stored in memory (e.g., Duckworth et al. 2002), to the use of one’s current feelings as information (Schwarz and Clore 1996) and the contextualized construction of deliberate judgments (Lord and Lepper 1999). From the actor’s perspective, the context sensitivity of evaluations is an asset, not a liability.

Historically, many of the above functions have been attributed to attitudes, but the emphasis on enduring and largely context-independent predispositions has distracted the research program from the necessarily situated nature of an adaptive system of evaluation. Cohen and Reed’s MPAA model brings the relevant elements together and provides a stimulating framework for thinking about the context sensitivity of evaluative judgment and its role in guiding behavior—if only they did not insist on maintaining a distinction between judgments and attitudes, for which they see “no convincing empirical evidence” (Cohen and Reed 2006, in this issue, 5). But the MPAA model’s lack of parsimony accommodates our everyday intuitions, which bodes well for the acceptance of a model that derives its explanatory power from constructivist principles while couching some core processes in predispositional terms. After all, theories are more likely to die from a lack of intuitive appeal than at the hand of Ockham’s razor, as the popularity of the attitude concept illustrates.

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