

Beyond Fact or Artifact: An Assessment of Fishbein and Middlestadt's Perspectives on Attitude Change Processes

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In this brief article, we respond to some specific issues raised in Fishbein and Middlestadt's (F & M's; 1995) article. We suggest that F & M's perspective is inconsistent with current research findings, and we focus on examining how various moderator variables may influence the processes of attitude formation and change. Next, we discuss the links between theory and measurement and issues that we feel need to be prioritized in this area in the light of F & M's comments.

In a recent *Journal of Consumer Psychology* article, Fishbein and Middlestadt (F & M; 1995) took issue with the idea that factors such as emotional reactions, variables serving as heuristics, and so forth can directly influence attitudes without consideration of changes in cognitive structure. F & M outlined conceptual and empirical issues they believe are important in distinguishing between what they characterize as cognitive and noncognitive bases of attitudes. They argued that evidence showing that variables other than beliefs and their evaluation serve as the basis of attitude formation and change stems from research that is fundamentally flawed. In essence, they suggested that proper measurement will reveal the overwhelming importance of beliefs as mediators of observed attitude change.

This response to F & M raises a broader range of issues that we believe need to be taken into account when attempting to understand the bases of observed attitude changes. We focus our response to a consideration of alternative perspectives on

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persuasion and measurement issues raised by F & M. Specifically, we examine the influence of various moderator variables on processes of attitude formation and change, and we address the link between measurement and theory in this context.

THE ROLE OF MODERATING VARIABLES

Although contemporary theoretical perspectives address how situational and dispositional factors may influence the qualitative or quantitative influence of different processes on attitude change, Fishbein has continued to espouse what can be characterized as a single process model of attitudes (Petty, *in press*). Contemporary models such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989) have benefited from explicit consideration of several moderator variables that influence the extent of participant motivation and ability. From the perspective of these models, the level of the moderators influence whether qualitatively different processes or different degrees of the same process will account for observed changes in attitude.

Motivation and Ability

For example, the ELM posits that, under conditions of relatively low participant motivation or ability, variables capable of serving as peripheral cues in a particular setting (e.g., the attractiveness or expertise of an endorser) will influence attitudes by a peripheral process. Conversely, relatively thoughtful responses to variables like message content or product attributes will have a greater impact under conditions of relatively high participant motivation and ability. Thus, the question is not, what is the true process of attitude change, but rather, under what circumstances and through what processes do particular variables have greater or lesser influence? We agree that the processes outlined by F & M (1995) may serve as the basis for attitude change in some circumstances. However, we feel that is also important to recognize a large body of research has accumulated in recent years showing that the kind of process and degrees of processes are moderated by situational and dispositional variables (see Petty, Wegener, & Priester, 1994, for a review).

Experience

Interestingly, one of the earliest criticisms of the Fishbein model was based on data showing different patterns of influence for persons who had different degrees of experience with an attitude object. Songer-Nocks (1976) found stronger associations between attitude and behavior for persons with greater degrees of personal experience. Such a finding is exactly what one would predict from the ELM

perspective or Fazio's (1990) MODE model. Personal experience is likely to be associated with greater degrees of elaboration and attitude accessibility—factors that have been hypothesized to play important roles in attitude–behavior relationships and attitude strength (see Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). Understanding why certain factors may be given more or less weight in judgment is important to understand how changed attitudes may guide behavior, persist over time, or resist change in the face of attack (see Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Petty et al., 1995).

A large concern for F & M (1995) are studies showing that attitude toward the advertisement (A_{ad}) sometimes has a direct impact on brand attitudes. F & M cited the Brown and Stayman (1992) meta-analysis as providing support for their hypothesis that A_{ad} should not be linked to brand attitude directly, but rather indirectly, via brand cognitions. In fact, Brown and Stayman found significant direct *and* indirect paths, and this meta-analysis appropriately examines factors that moderate the relationship between A_{ad} and brand attitude. In our view, studies employing manipulations that influence the likelihood of different paths being taken to attitude formation and change (e.g., Miniard, Bhatla, & Rose, 1990) may provide the clearest evidence of the boundary conditions for each process specified by the two-route perspectives.

Prior Knowledge and Mere Exposure

Research on classical conditioning and the effects of mere exposure also provide evidence against F & M's (1995) perspective. In fact, research in both domains provides evidence that such effects are also moderated by theoretically relevant factors and that under some circumstances, direct effects are more prevalent. For example, one study (Cacioppo, Marshall-Goodell, Tassinary, & Petty, 1992) examined the ELM prediction that classical conditioning effects should be more powerful when preexposure to and prior knowledge about a conditioned stimulus is low versus high. Neutral words and pronounceable nonwords served as the conditioned stimuli. Results revealed that classical conditioning of attitudes was more effective for nonwords than words (i.e., nonwords followed by an electrical shock were more effectively conditioned). Similarly, a recent study by Kim, Allen, and Kardes (1996) revealed that depictive visual images can promote inferential belief formation (Experiment 1) and that brand attitudes can be conditioned using attractive images that promote direct affect transfer (Experiment 2). Contrary to F & M (1995), and as Kim et al. noted, cognitive and affective mediation do not need to be viewed as rival explanations (see also Gorn, 1982).

Other Task Factors

In a similar vein, in meta-analyses as well as original experiments, Bornstein (1989) showed that a number of factors (including stimulus complexity, exposure time,

delays between exposure and ratings, etc.) moderate the relation between exposure and affect. In general, the effects of mere exposure on attitude favorability are stronger when the stimuli are low in prior experience and meaning. Manipulations that increase thinking tend to reduce mere exposure effects (cf. Petty & Wegener, *in press*).

Moderation of Mood Effects

Recent research on the role of affect in persuasion suggests that the same variable can influence persuasion through different mechanisms as a function of theoretically relevant moderator variables. For example, Petty, Schumann, Richman, and Strathman (1993) showed that variables like participant mood were more likely to have direct effects under conditions of reduced elaboration. Thus, mood affected attitudes through issue-relevant thoughts under high involvement but had a direct influence on attitudes under low involvement. This finding supports the ELM perspective that variables can play different roles under different levels of motivation (see Petty, Glicher, & Baker, 1991). Thus, although a variable may have an impact by a peripheral process under conditions of low motivation or ability, the same variable can have a similar or even larger influence on attitudes when motivation and ability are high but not via a peripheral process (e.g., through biasing processing; see Petty, 1994). This research also illustrates the inappropriateness of attempts to universally categorize specific variables as cues or arguments (see Petty, Kasmer, Haugtvedt, & Cacioppo, 1987; Stiff, 1986).

MEASUREMENT ISSUES

One of the points that Fishbein has noted over the years is the failure of researchers to carefully assess the salient beliefs relevant to a domain for participants in a research project. Although we agree that such background work is important, we also wonder if different sets of salient beliefs would be elicited under different levels of moderator variables. Variables like mood state might make certain kinds of beliefs more salient than others, causing some interesting interactions with other message factors. For example, a recent study by Wegener, Petty, and Klein (1994) demonstrated that mood could influence attitudes by affecting the perceived likelihood of occurrence for consequences presented in message arguments (Study 1) and that argument framing qualified this effect (Study 2). Positive mood led to more persuasion than negative mood when a message was framed positively but less persuasion when the message was framed negatively. These effects were observed for persons categorized as high in need for cognition illustrating that participant motivation may be an important moderator of the effect. In any case, it

is clear that examination of such mood and framing effects in the context of an expectancy-value framework may be useful direction for future research, especially when elaboration about the object is relatively high (Wegener et al., 1994).

F & M (1995) stressed the importance of detailed elicitation procedures in the assessment of salient beliefs. However, it is likely that their advocated measurement process might influence the results that are obtained. For example, in two of the studies presented in F & M (1995), respondents indicated “their beliefs about each candidate, their beliefs about voting for each candidate, and their evaluations of each salient attribute of the candidates and of each consequence of voting for the candidates” plus “their attitude toward each candidate, as well as attitude toward the behavior of voting for each candidate, ... subjective norms, ... intentions to vote for each candidate, [and] actual voting behavior” (p. 189). In the third study examining attitudes toward a brand of apple juice, participants rated the strength of their beliefs that drinking the juice would lead to a number of consequences, their evaluation of these consequences, and their overall attitude. We wonder if such extensive measurement might increase the likelihood that persons cognitively process their evaluation relative to situations where they are not questioned so extensively. In fact, such procedures may leave little room for the direct influence of other (less thoughtful) factors that might normally serve as the basis for the attitudes (cf. Wilson, Dunn, Kraft, & Lisle, 1989).

Existing research and theory also supports the idea that some attitudes might be more or less influenced by context effects (Haugtvedt, Roehm, & Pullins, 1995; Simmons, Bickart, & Lynch, 1993). That is, attitudes based on higher degrees of experience or knowledge may be influenced less by question order context effects. For example, Simmons et al. showed that question order (e.g., general to specific or specific to general) had less influence on the attitudes of persons with prior voting experience than those with less experience. Likewise, research by Haugtvedt et al. suggested that attitudes formed or changed under conditions of high elaboration (operationized by high need for cognition) should be less influenced by question order manipulations than attitudes formed under conditions of lower elaboration (low need for cognition). Especially useful future research might focus on closely examining the processes by which factors associated with attitude formation or change are related to the extent to which attitudes are changed as a function of attitude measurement techniques and the situations under which such influences are more or less likely. Future research should also more closely examine the processes that cause some attitudes to become stronger than others (cf. Petty et al., 1995).

THE LINK BETWEEN THEORY AND MEASUREMENT

As Ostrom (1989) pointed out, attitude theory and measurement are interdependent, and researchers need to recognize how their measurement choices might influence

the ability to address theoretical concerns. Certainly this advice applies to F & M (1995) as well as research stemming from two-route perspectives. However, we believe that research from the two-route perspective has the additional benefit of comparing how similar measurement techniques might depict different relations among variables as a function of some moderating condition. We hope that such findings and research will lead to important insights as to when (and why) some relations are strengthened or weakened. However, one must always be cognizant of the possibility that other unmeasured variables or processes, or simply poor measurement, might lead researchers to inappropriate conclusions. Thus, although we argued that a moderator variable perspective has and continues to be an important advance in attitude change and persuasion research, we share with F & M (1995) the fundamental belief that careful consideration of measurement should remain a salient factor for all researchers interested in understanding how persons develop and maintain attitudes toward persons, objects, and issues. We look forward to future research that ever more fully provides new insights as well as potential boundary conditions of existing theoretical models and measurement techniques, perhaps providing the foundation for even more complete understanding from theoretical models or research methods that are yet to be proposed.

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