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A THEORETICAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE TYPES OF
SIGNIFICANT OTHER

Joseph Woelfel



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written in 1968

There are two current definitions of attitude which characterize a twofold split in present social-psychological thinking: 1.) an attitude is "...a mental and neural state of readiness exerting a directive influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations to which it is related,"¹ and 2.) "... (a) syndrome of response consistency with regard to a set of social objects."² The first definition implies that attitudes are real, existing entities which direct behavior, while the second suggests only that attitude is a term used to refer to an empirically existing regularity of behavior under given conditions. Le Muer rejects the first definition, since he claims empirical evidence tends to indicate that it is not valid. If an attitude really was an internal "something" which directs behavior, then we would not see the variability of behavior with regard to the same object or set of objects which we do in fact see, he suggests.³ There are two reasons why I tend to reject his analysis.

First, the empirical examples he gives do not contradict the notion of attitude contained in the first definition at all. Le Muer cites as evidence the fact that Southern workers exhibit prejudicial attitudes toward Negroes when off the job, but not when at work. If there were an internal something

1. Burt F. Green, "Attitude Measurement" in Gardner Lindzey Handbook of Social Psychology

2. Ibid.

3.

which determines behavior, then it would have to direct the individual to the same action in both circumstances, he reasons, since the object (Negro) is the same in both cases. This is clearly not true. While a Negro co-worker and a Negro neighbor may be the same object to Le Muer, it is doubtful that they constitute the same thing at all to the individuals in his own example. The psychological meaning of an object is at least partially situationally defined. A person may have a very favorable attitude toward pianos in his living room, but it is unlikely in the extreme that this attitude refers as well to pianos falling from a block and tackle toward the piano lover's head. Similarly, a lion in a cage is a wholly different object than a lion in one's living room. There is no reason whatsoever to suggest that attitudes expressed toward an object in one situation should carry over into another, unless the meaning of the object is carried over intact from the first situation into the second. Attitudes, then, like the objects to which they refer, are situational phenomena.

Secondly, the idea that attitude should be used to convey only an empirically observed regularity of behavior is a confusing one. It reminds me of Lindesmith and Strauss' rejection of the term "physical self" to refer to the body, since "...we already have a perfectly satisfactory word for body--namely 'body,'"⁴ If the term does nothing but refer to consistency of behavior, then perhaps we would be better off just

4.) Lindesmith & Strauss, Social Psychology

to list the consistent behavior, e.g., "Jones votes democratic 73% of the time." To code that statement into "Jones has a democratic attitude" is to lose information only to gain nothing in return.

I would suggest, then, that an attitude is something more than an abstraction from observed behavior. The problem now is to find out what it is.

There are several essential conditions which must be met before an attitude can be said to exist. First, there must be an object. I hope that it is clear from the above argument, though, that it is not the object itself which is a term of the attitude, but rather the individual's conception of that object. (This is not meant as a denial of the reality of objects apart from individual's conceptions of them; I only mean to say that it is the individual's conception of the object which is the important factor in his relationship toward it. If the individual thinks there is a lion in his living room, he will stay out of the living room even if the lion is really not there.) It might be more accurately said, then, that a person must have a conception of an object before there can be an attitude.

But a conception of an object alone is not enough. The individual might very well say "Negroes are wonderful people." This is a conception of an object, but it is not an attitude. The individual might go on to say "...but I don't like them." By adding this last, we have constructed an attitude (I don't like Negroes) but to do so, we have had to add a state-

ment about the individual's relationship to his conception of that object. The elements of an attitude, therefore, are 1.) the individual's conception of an object (or set of objects); 2.) the individual's conception of his relationship to that object.

At this point, an interesting theoretical convergence can be seen. The two terms of an attitude--the individual's conception of an object and his conception of his relationship to it--are reciprocals. Any statement an individual makes about himself is necessarily a statement about some object or objects as well. It is in terms of his relationship to the objects of his experience that an individual is able to identify himself. Unless we assume that an individual is born with intrinsic knowledge about himself, the only way he can learn about himself is either through his own inferences about himself on the basis of what he sees himself do (Mead's self-reflexive act) or through the testimony of others about himself. And these others who tell him about himself can only get the information they have about him from their observations of his actions. Since all actions are relationships to some object or set of objects, then all the information an individual has about himself is inferred from his relationship to objects. Each element of an individual's self-conception is an attitude, and the sum of all his attitudes is his self-conception. This is consistent with Kuhn ("What is meant by the self as being object to oneself if it is not that the self is attitudes--symbolic proposals for action toward or

with respect to the self?"⁵ and Mead (the self is ... "a set of organized attitudes which one himself assumes."⁶ We can thus offer the following definitions: (1) the self-conception is the individual's conception of his relationship to the objects of his experience, and (2) an attitude is the individual's conception of his relationship to an object or set of objects.

It should be apparent at this point that neither of these definitions contain any cathectic (emotional) elements. The cathectic dimensions of behavior are neither necessary nor sufficient to account for the formation of attitudes, much less to account for behavior itself. This is simply to say that an emotion that an individual had without knowing that he had it could hardly be thought of as a motivator of behavior, even if such a thing is possible at all, and that an individual's thinking he has an emotion would be sufficient to motivate behavior even if he really had no physically determinable drive state at all. But to deny cathexis determining importance is not to deny it any importance. In this theory, cathexis or emotional factors are objects in the situational field of the individual, and they must be defined in relation to the individual just as any other object. This is essentially why different individuals behave differentially

5.) Manfred Kuhn, "Major Trends in Symbolic Interaction Theory in the Past 25 Years," Sociological Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 1, Winter, 1964, pp. 61-79

6.) George Herbert Mead, The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead, Anselm Strauss, Ed., Chicago, Phoenix Books, 1956, pp. 81, 243.

when they feel the same emotion.

The important dimensions of attitudes, then, are conceptual: specifically, the individual's conception of objects and his conception of himself. Anything which affects either of these two elements will alter the attitude of the individual. We may tentatively define significant other, then, as anyone who exerts an important influence on the individual's definition of objects or himself. This means that there will be several distinct types of significant other.

A.) Significant others as definers of objects:

1.) The only way that an object can be defined is to specify its relationship to other objects already known. One way this is done is by placing the new object in categories already defined. Anyone who exerts an important influence on the individual's inclusion of a new object into a previously evaluated category can be seen as a significant other with regard to that object. These "previously evaluated categories", insofar as they exercise a filtering effect on the individual's definition of the new object, I term "filter attitudes." Thus a person who convinces an individual that education is a member of the class "means to success", given that the individual already has an attitude toward means to success, has defined the individual's attitude toward education. He is a significant other as far as education is concerned.

2.) But the inverse is also true. If the individual already sees education as a member of the class "means to success", then anyone who defines the individual's relation-

These seem to be similar to my work "Can I have the world?"

ship to that class (you are one who seeks success) has also exerted important influence on the individual's attitude toward education. He too, is a significant other. Thus an individual may be said to be a significant other insofar as he (1) defines the object directly by including it in an already evaluated category of objects, or (2) defines the individual's relationship to a class into which the object has already been included.

B. Significant others as definers of the self-conception

1.) Since the individual's conception of objects and his conception of himself are reciprocals, it stands to reason that the same net result (definition of attitudes) will result when the individual is defined in relation to objects as when objects are defined in relation to him, as above. This too, can be done either directly or indirectly. The direct method involves simply stating the relationship between the individual and the object, e.g., you are the kind of person who seeks education. Note that this is the same kind of technique as in A2 above--the individual is placed in a class whose relationship to education is already known, i.e., those who seek education. (2) But again the inverse is also true. The individual may already see himself as a member of a class whose relationship to the object in question is unknown. Specifying the relationship of this class to the object will suffice to form the individual's attitude toward the object. If the individual considers himself a member of the category "intelligent people", then anyone who convinces him that in-

telligent people seek education will be a significant other for him with regard to education even though they have never said anything directly about him at all.

Several important considerations should be made here. First of all, I specifically employ the terms "class" or "category" here, rather than "group", even though it is clear that the members of these classes or categories are always people, since it is categorical membership that is the determining influence here, not group participation. A membership group may be a reference category, but it does not have to be. Thus the term "reference group" tends to confuse rather than clarify when used in this context, and perhaps would best be renamed "group referent" in order to distinguish it as a subclass of all referents. It has force in defining attitudes for the individual insofar as it serves as a membership category--not insofar as it is a group.

Secondly, a reference category serves as a referent only in regard to those objects which are related to the criterion which compose it as a category. The category "democrats", for example, will serve as a referent only for political objects. This follows from the fact that a category is said to exist only when and insofar as all its members stand in the same relationship to the objects which define it as a category. The category "dog-lover" exists insofar as all the members of that class stand in similar relation to dogs and things related to dogs. Thus it serves as a referent only toward dogs and things related to dogs.

Third, when a reference category also comprises a membership group, additional sources of influence come into play. The members of the group referent serve as role models for the individual insofar as they act with regard to the object(s) which comprise it as a category. An important extension of this group referent takes place when the objects which comprise it as a category are diffuse. In the extreme case, when the objects which categorize the members of a membership group are extremely diffuse and numerous (as would be the case in a family or childhood friendship group) the group referent can be seen to be coextensive with the concept "primary group" since members of the group will serve as attitude models for almost any object. Attitudes will be interchanged on almost every topic.

Significant others for the definition of the self, then, are those who (1) define the individual as a member of a class whose relationship to the object of the attitude is already known, (2) define the relationship to the object of the attitude of a class of which the individual already considers himself a member, or (3) are members of a reference category which is at the same time a membership group.

Combining these with the types of significant others identified in section A, then, we find that there are five types of significant others: (1) those who define the object of an attitude by including it in an already evaluated category of objects; (2) those who define the individual's relationship to a class into which the object has already been

included; (3) those who define the individual as a member of a class whose relationship to the object of the attitude is already known; (4) those who define the relationship to the object of the attitude of a class of which the individual already considers himself a member, and (5) those who are members of a reference category which is at the same time a membership group.

C.) Characteristics of significant others:

It can be seen from the argument above that, in all cases, significant others function as such by providing the individual with information, either directly or indirectly, about his relationship with the objects of his experience. There are two sets of conditions which must be fulfilled yet in order to account for the influence of significant others. We must still assess, (1) under what conditions information can be transmitted to the individual, and (2) given that the information is transmitted, under what conditions it will be believed.

1.) Conditions for information transmission:

It should be clear that the conditions for information transmission are structural. In order to provide the individual with some information about his relationship to objects, the potential significant other must be in a position to interact with him, even if in an indirect manner; e.g., through writing, mass media, etc. All information must be passed through a communications network, and, other factors being equal, the individual's location in this communications network will

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determine for him the kinds and quantities of information about himself which he receives. Those who occupy key positions in that structural network will be the individual's significant others. There is a possible computer technique for defining these relevant structures whose scope is limited only by economic considerations. If each individual in a given structural unit (say, for example, a school class or a neighborhood group) is asked to report the number of intercommunications he has with ^{each} all other members of that unit on a given topic (in this instance education) over a given time, then the following matrix can be constructed:

	1	2	3	4	5
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					

The numbers in the cells will be whole numbers which indicate the number of interactions between individuals over a given time period. Thus individual 4 reports 4 interactions per time unit with individual 2, but since the members will report different total interactions, and since two individuals may disagree on how often they interact with each other, the matrix will be non-symmetric. The second problem can be

This is not a matrix, it is just a comparison of two individuals to each other. This is a comparison of two individuals to each other.

eliminated by averaging the two reports (average number reported in parentheses in table), but the first is not so easy to eliminate. Percentaging the reported frequencies will make the matrix sum to 100% across the rows, but the columns will not do so. If, however, a technique can be found to translate the raw numbers into an index of interaction which varies between zero and one (possibly by averaging the interaction scores of the individuals and measuring the distance from each reported score from the mean in standard-score units, with the area under the curve defined as one)? then the result will yield a symmetric matrix which can be factor-analyzed.) The factors which analysis yields should correspond to sub-groups within the larger structure along which information is passed. The loadings of the items (persons) on the factor (sub-group) should be a measure of the degree to which they constitute significant others for any given individual in that sub-group, (all other factors equal.) What value number should be considered "high" must be determined by empirical research. It is also possible, by assigning a negative value to those individuals' scores with whom the person reports he usually disagrees, to account for negative influence.

Although this model will account for some of the variance in personal influence, it will not account for all of it, as I will try to make clear below.

2.) Conditions for acceptance of transmitted information:

Given that we can establish who communicates with whom,

either by means of the technique outlined above or other methods, it is necessary to establish the conditions under which the information transmitted will be effective in defining the relationship under consideration. This task falls under the rubric of communications analysis and the even older field of rhetoric. The standard division of areas of study in these fields has been (1) characteristics of the communicator, (2) characteristics of the communication, and (3) characteristics of the audience. Since our main concern here is with the detection of significant others, we can confine our analysis to the first of those three areas. The quality which renders a communicator effective has been termed "ethos." Unfortunately, after 2000 years of study, ethos is not clearly understood. (Reliable sources suggest that there is a graduate student in the rhetoric department who's master's thesis is an attempt to discover a mathematical formula for ethos. He is now beginning his seventh year on the project. Since Plato says it takes seven years to learn the truth, we may be close to a major breakthrough) There are several characteristics of the other, though, which we would expect to be important in getting his communications to the individual accepted. One is the degree to which he is positively evaluated ("liked") by the individual, insofar as the individual values the relationship between himself and the other, and insofar as he sees the continuance of that relationship as contingent upon his acceptance of the evaluation of the object that the other has provided for him, the indi-

vidual would be likely to accept that evaluation. This relationship is analytically the same as type A1 above, in which the new object is placed into a previously evaluated category. In this case the new object (going to school) is placed into the previously evaluated category (those things which X wants me to do.) It is worth citing separately, however, since it occurs so frequently empirically.

Another characteristic of the communicator which should have a significant effect on the acceptance of his communication is the degree to which the individual conceives him to be competent to make the judgment about the object (or the individual) that he is making. It is important here to distinguish general competence from competence in the specific area in which the information is being provided. The latter is the important variable for our purposes.

A third characteristic worth mentioning is the individual's conception of the degree to which the communicator is likely to tell the truth. (If the communicator is thought to lie consistently, he can still be a significant other, but the attitude formed will be the converse of the one he tries to implant.)

D. Summary:

I have taken the position in this paper that attitudes are more than arbitrary constructs, that they do indeed exert a directing influence on behavior, and that they can be defined specifically as the individual's conceptions of his relationship to objects or sets of objects. Given this

They may be inputs. Probably not. It is the input to the person who is the most important part of the system. As a person will be motivated and he competes to be reflected in the system.

definition, it follows that a significant other can form attitudes for the individual in five different ways. There are several preconditions which must be met before any of these techniques can occur, the first of which is that the other must occupy a location in the social structure which allows communication of some sort between that other and the individual. A factor-analytic technique for the designation of this structure is suggested, along with the conditions under which it will be effective. The effectiveness of these communications themselves, however, are further mediated by several attributes which the individual sees as predicated of the other: affective relationship, competence in the relevant area, and trustworthiness.

While there may be other conditions under which an other becomes "significant", these at least must be taken into account.