PAUL DICKERSON

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

TRADITIONAL & CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Sage

6

ATTITUDE CHANGE AND PERSUASION

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this chapter you will have a deeper understanding of:

- different ways of thinking about attitudes
- the ways in which attitudes have been measured
- different perspectives on the relationship between attitudes and behaviour
- classic social psychological perspectives on persuasion
- critical, discursive and rhetorical perspectives on attitudes and persuasion

Opening Case

The Ipsos *Global Advisor* – or 'Earth Day' – survey published in April 2022 identified a global issue on which there appeared to be marked differences between the 23,577 adults in 31 countries who were surveyed. The survey included multiple questions but a key one – which appeared to identify important attitudinal differences – was this: *'Here is a list of some things that some people worry about these days. To what extent, if at all, have you worried about each one in the last 2–3 weeks?'* Survey respondents then had to rate whether they 'worried about' each item listed 'A great deal', 'A fair amount', 'A little' or 'Not at all'. One item on the list that followed this question was 'climate change'. Take a moment to think how you would respond if you were asked that exact question.

(Continued)

Figure 6.1 Adult polar bear with cub on part melted ice

Source: AWeith, CCBYSA 4.0

The survey found that across the 23,577 adults in 31 countries, 48 per cent reported that they worried 'a great deal or a fair amount', 31 per cent 'a little' and 15 per cent 'not at all'. This overall finding that 48 per cent reported worry whilst 46 per cent reported little or no worry could be concerning, but perhaps not entirely surprising. However, at the national level an interesting and more varied picture emerges. For Mexico, Chile, Italy and Colombia 68, 69, 69 and 71 per cent of participants respectively reported that they worried 'a great deal or a fair amount' about climate change. By contrast in Canada, Great Britain, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia and China less than half of respondents expressed the same concern – with 34, 34, 34, 31, 29 and 28 per cent of respondents respectively in these countries expressing that they worried 'a great deal or a fair amount' about climate change.

These survey findings raise some key issues about attitudes. How should we measure attitudes? Is that question, '*To what extent, if at all, have you worried about …?*', worded in a way that could shape how people respond – for example might there be an issue about 'admitting' to 'being worried' that would not arise if the question had asked '*To what extent, if at all, have you been concerned about …?*' If people are reluctant to admit to certain attitudes, is there any way that we can still ask them about their attitudes – can we be more indirect in our approach? Should we expect people's concern about climate change to map onto their behaviour, for example concerning consuming fossil fuels or recycling? More fundamentally, should we think of attitudes as *individual* stances or positions or should we look for shared 'national attitudes', and if we do start to rethink the whole concept of 'attitudes', just how radical should we be?

INTRODUCTION

The survey data reported above are certainly interesting in terms of their important content, and journalists have often taken the data reported here at face value – one interpretation being that those countries who perceive themselves as most impacted by climate change report most

worry about it. But one of the glorious things about studying social psychology is that it can be like having x-ray vision – we can bring perspectives that enable us to view attitude phenomena in a fresh way, engaging with it through insightful and reflective questions.

Questioning what we know can be experienced at many different levels. For some questioning may lead to refining an attitude questionnaire, or switching to a less direct measure of attitudes. For others questioning can lead to insights concerning how it is that attitudes sometimes do and sometimes don't predict behaviour, or how attitudes can change – or be changed. Still others might engage in more fundamental questions concerning how 'attitudes' might be reconceptualised as shared social stances on disputed issues – or as understandable principally as actions in interaction.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter starts by reflecting on some different ways that we might think about attitudes. The dominant approach within social psychology has understood attitudes as measurable, quantifiable, individual stances towards a target (which might be any aspects of our world – people, animals, things, events or experiences). This is briefly contrasted with an alternative rhetorical approach that challenges the focus on thoughts, or cognitions, within individuals and, instead, emphasises the way we have attitudes on issues that are up for debate and how they are shaped by the argumentative context in which they arise. Related discursive work is briefly outlined that suggests we should examine what **attitude talk** does, rather than the traditional concern with notions of 'underlying' cognitions, evaluations, beliefs or intentions.

> **Attitude talk** Here refers to the talk through which we express our attitude(s) with a particular focus on where this occurs and what it accomplishes. For example, my 'I love Marmite too' attitude talk, if following someone else's positive evaluation of Marmite may be doing some form of affiliation with that other person.

After this initial outline of radically different approaches to how we can best conceptualise attitudes some consideration is given to the more narrowly focused issue of how attitudes are measured. In considering attitude measurement attention will be given to three different *explicit* measures – the Thurstone, Likert and semantic differential attitude scales – which directly ask about attitudinal stance. These explicit measures will be contrasted with *implicit* measures which attempt to assess positive or negative attitudes towards a target object (such as members of a different ethnic, national or religious group) by examining reaction times to stimuli that are presented.

The chapter then addresses a crucial focus of research that has spanned several decades – namely, the extent to which attitudes relate to behaviour. In discussing this

literature, attention is given to research which has identified problems with the link – arguing attitudes are poor predictors of behaviour – and which attempts to improve their predictive power. One particularly important argument, which is central to the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, is that the specificity of the target behaviour should be matched to the specificity of the attitude measured. This research suggests that, for example, my attitude to *environmental issues in general* might be a poor predictor of whether or not I actually recycle my cornflake boxes, but my attitude to *recycling itself* should be a much better predictor.

The chapter then addresses research into persuasion, considering how and under which circumstances people can be persuaded by others to change their attitudes. The Yale Communication and Attitude Change Program (which commenced because of US 'propaganda needs' during World War II) developed a taxonomy of source, message and audience factors that might most predictably result in successful persuasion. These 'ingredients of persuasion' are considered, along with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which attempts to describe the circumstances under which one set of factors (such as the *source of a message*) will become more important than another (such as the *message content*).

Finally, the chapter will revisit some of the debates concerning different conceptualisations of attitudes and persuasion that were touched on at the start of this chapter. We will consider in more detail what some of the critical, discursive and rhetorically inspired approaches might offer in terms of our understanding of attitudes and persuasion and how this differs from the predominant focus on attitudes and persuasion in terms of internal, cognitive objects and processes.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT ATTITUDES

Most textbook chapters on the topic of attitudes and attitude change start with a definition – sometimes acknowledging the differences between one-, two- and three-component definitions – and then, having established some broadly common ground, move on to consider how attitudes relate to behaviour and when and how they change. This chapter, too, considers the one-, two- and three-component definitions of attitudes, but also goes further. It considers some of the issues that rhetorical and discursive psychology raise for our understanding of attitudes; it will be seen that these perspectives are a radical challenge to traditional perspectives.

Rather than getting the definition out of the way so we can move on, the very different perspectives considered here provide different understandings of not only how we should conceptualise 'attitudes' but also how we should research them and what we should be looking for in that research. It can be noted that consideration of how attitudes relate to behaviour and how they come to change are typically informed by a 'traditional' understanding of what attitudes are – as broadly stable cognitive structures – whereas a concern with what attitudes *do* – in ideological terms and in interaction – are informed by rhetorical and discursive approaches to what attitudes are.

Traditional approaches to attitudes

Stop for a moment and think about the last chat you had with someone. Chances are, at least one of you expressed your liking or disliking for an object, experience or person – you might have complained about someone, or raved about something you experienced or are about to experience. It seems our lives are full of these responses, stances, evaluative positions with regard to almost everything and everyone that we encounter. These evaluative stances – the positive or negative responses we have to people, experiences and things – are 'attitudes'. At least, that is how social psychologists have traditionally approached the topic. From this traditional perspective, then, attitudes are our positive or negative judgements, evaluations or responses concerning people, events or objects.

The fact that you love your phone, can't stand being ignored and feel sick at the thought of invasive research on animals are, in traditional terms, *attitudinal positions* that capture how you feel about certain *attitudinal targets* (anything about which you can hold an attitude). This places attitudes firmly in the head of the individual, with each of us 'containing' a collection of attitudes about the person sitting next to us in a lecture theatre, the food served up in the canteen, the video clip we watched last night, or what we think of the current government.

There is certainly some debate within the traditional perspective regarding whether we should think of attitudes as comprising different components, but there is fundamental agreement on several key aspects. Attitudes are essentially *mental objects* – that is, things located within the mind of the individual. Furthermore, attitudes are understood as being measurable – or at least they have the potential to be meaningfully measured if sufficient care is taken. For many attitude researchers attitudes relate – or potentially relate – to future behaviour. These axiomatic assumptions mean that for many attitude researchers – and crucially those that commission and utilise attitude surveys – attitudes can be used to identify likely future behaviours, to group and differentiate people and also form the target for persuasive campaigns. If attitudes even partly determine future behaviour then changing them through persuasive communications can be seen as a very desirable objective for those with commercial, political and other vested interests. Some alternative conceptualisations of attitudes as more socially situated and socially constructed will be considered later, but for now it is worth staying with how attitudes have 'traditionally' been conceptualised.

Attitude components

Thurstone (1931) understood attitudes as being particularly important for understanding key aspects of social behaviour such as prejudice. This early research was particularly focused on US prejudice towards Chinese people. What became known as the Thurstone scale (see below) involved a series of 26 statements – including 'I like the Chinese [*sic*]', 'I have no desire to know any Chinese [*sic*]' and 'Chinese parents are unusually devoted to their children'. Respondents – who in Thurstone (1931) were children who had

watched a film with either a positive or negative depiction of Chinese people – were invited to agree or disagree with the statements. In this early work, whilst feeling and thinking components were present in the scale, 'attitude' was treated as a single entity, without the need to differentiate between sub-components or to consider how feelings (affect) and thoughts (cognition) could be related, yet distinct.

Subsequently the idea of a broad single 'attitude' construct was challenged. Allport (1935), who saw attitudes as perhaps the most important concept within social psychology, developed a different way of conceptualising them. Allport argued that attitudes comprised *both* a feeling-response (affective) dimension *and* a thinking (cognitive) dimension. In Thurstone's (1931) study referred to above these different dimensions appear to be present, but not specifically acknowledged. The affective component appears to be measured in items about liking/disliking, such as 'I like the Chinese [*sic*]'; and the cognitive component in items that seem to identify what is believed to be true, such as 'Chinese parents are unusually devoted to their children'. For Allport, the cognitive and affective dimensions of attitudes are *coherent yet distinguishable*. That is, they relate to each other sufficiently to suggest they can be treated as facets of a coherent entity – an 'attitude' – but they measure distinct aspects.

This two-component understanding of attitudes was subsequently developed into a three-component model. In addition to the affective and cognitive components a third was identified, which Ajzen (1998) referred to as 'conative', or behavioural intention. This third component has often been thought about in terms of *behavioural intentions*, although some research has conceptualised the conative component in terms of past actual behaviour as well as future intended behaviour. The conative component is present in many surveys, including Thurstone's (1931) survey. The item 'I'd like to know more Chinese people' could be understood as identifying a positive stance ('like') regarding specified future behaviour ('know more Chinese people').

Reflecting on components of attitudes

As Kotzur et al. (2022) comment, whilst the three-component model is popular in most psychology textbooks, many studies within psychology in general – and attitudes towards social groups in particular – tend to use measures that focus on 'capturing overall positivity or negativity towards the attitude target' (2022, p. 1306). In their research examining attitudes towards refugees, Kotzur et al. (2022) compared whether a one- or three-component perspective best fitted the data. Kotzur et al. (2022) suggest that their results endorse a three-component conceptualisation of attitudes – with affective, cognitive and conative components emerging as distinct but interrelated facets of the measured attitude.

From a more radically critical perspective, it can be argued that the distinctions between components such as affective and cognitive may be reifications of distinctions that are not necessarily meaningful to the respondents themselves. In some cases, the preface 'I think that ...' is used for questionnaire items intended to measure cognitive

components of attitudes and 'I feel that ...' is used for items intended to measure affective components. We can ask whether any differences found using this approach are *real* differences between distinct psychological objects (such as 'cognitions' and 'affect') or merely reflect how participants make sense out of the situated interactional business of answering questions about their attitudes (see Box 6.4 below).

Finally, with regard to the three-component model of attitudes, it is possible to question whether future behavioural intentions and past actual behaviours should really be conceptualised as being part of the structure of attitudes. The problem is not their predictive efficacy – Ajzen (1998) and Ouellette and Wood (1998) suggest that these aspects of the 'behavioural component' of attitudes *improve* predictions of attitude-relevant behaviour – but, rather, the theoretical justification for their inclusion. Does thinking of 'past behaviour' as 'part of the structure of attitudes' run the risk of being a sort of 'cognitive imperialism' where non-cognitive elements (past behaviour, habit) are implicitly incorporated into what is traditionally thought of as an essentially cognitive structure (attitude)? Does including 'behavioural intention' (especially if it is highly specific) become almost tautological? It may be true to say that my *intention* to place the empty recyclable bottle next to me in the recycle bin outside is a good predictor of my future recycling behaviour – but is it meaningful and insightful? Some of the alternative perspectives outlined below offer a radically different way of thinking about the whole domain of attitudes.

Rhetoric and attitudes

One such alternative perspective is provided by Billig's (1987, 1991, 1996) **rhetorical approach** to attitudes. The word 'rhetoric', as Shiappa (2017) points out, comes from the Greek *rhetorike* and denotes the discipline concerned with theorising and teaching: 'oral and written composition and performance aimed at influencing audiences' (2017, p. 33). Billig's social constructionist work has been partly informed by a careful thinking through of the theorising and teaching – concerning the art of persuasion – that emerged in ancient Greece.

Many social psychologists would reject such ancient work on the grounds that the ideas were not tested in controlled experiments or that they predate modern understandings of the human mind – it may be worth noting your own reaction to finding out that a current social psychology textbook is referring to ideas that are nearly 2,500 years old! One advantage of investigating ideas that come from a different time and place in our current setting, however, is that, *precisely because* they emerge from a culture with very different sets of assumptions from our own, they might have insights our 'common-sense' everyday understandings and assumptions blind us to. Thus, our own cultural biases may make us expect to find measurable, mental objects within the individual that cause behaviour – indeed, this may be so much a part of how we see the world that it is hard to imagine how or why we should question it. Billig demonstrates

how a careful engagement with certain ancient ideas can provide a refreshing contemporary critique of current social psychology.

In particular, Billig has drawn on concepts developed by a contemporary of Socrates called Protagoras (it is from his name that we get the word 'protagonist'). Among many pithy and insightful statements about life and argument, Protagoras is reported to have said that 'for every question there are two sides to the argument exactly opposite to one another'. For Billig, this brilliantly captures just what it is we come to have an attitude about and what form that attitude takes. That is, Billig argues an important way of approaching attitudes is to think of them as questions or issues that are 'up for debate' or controversial. Few of us count among our attitudes our stances towards notions regarding the causes of rain or the rotation of the Earth around the Sun, but these were positions of argument and stance – or *attitude* – in the past. In more recent history, it is possible to see how attitudes about the Cold War, nuclear power, unilateral nuclear disarmament, damage to the ozone layer, melting ice caps or anthropogenic climate change can become more salient during times when these issues become matters of debate and controversy. That is, we seem to have attitudes about things that are being debated or argued about *at the moment* – when those things are no longer controversial, then our thinking and talking about them may not take the form of a clearly identifiable *attitude*.

Rhetorical approach In the context of the literature considered here, this refers to Billig's work, which emphasises how attitudes are argumentatively shaped, being formed on matters that are up for debate and designed to argue against other stances on these argued-about issues.

This makes the *topics* of attitudes (the issues we have attitudes about) much more socially situated; but Billig goes further and argues that *the very expression of our strong views* (our attitude talk or evaluations) is shaped by the context of argument out of which they are forged. That is, from Billig's rhetorical perspective, attitudes cannot be adequately conceptualised as relatively fixed mental objects within the mind of the individual that can be neatly captured by a number on a scale (such as rating someone as having a '5' for strongly agreeing with the sentence 'Stem cell research should no longer be funded'). Instead, whenever we produce attitude talk – or make an evaluation (such as, 'I can't stand people who moan about mobile phones') we are not just expressing an evaluation but also *doing so against counter-positions*. That is, the way in which we express our strong views or make our evaluations is shaped by the fact they arise out of issues which are controversial.

This is all the more evident when, instead of one-sentence snapshots, we let people talk in more detail about their views. Here, we may find apparent contradictions in what

they say. For example, the person who is against people who complain about mobile phones may concede that they themselves do not like phones ringing when they are watching a film. These apparent contradictions point to the sort of argumentative (or rhetorical) work that evaluations do (conceding I recognise limits to the public use of mobile phones may make my position that generally people shouldn't complain about mobile phone use seem more reasonable and convincing and me seem less of a crazed techno-freak, for example). This approach to attitudes as being held on topics of current controversy, and attitude talk, or evaluations, being designed to argue against counter-positions will be returned to later in this chapter.

The traditional perspective – with its emphasis on attitudes as quantifiable mental objects – can also be contrasted with discursive social psychology (which is closely related to Billig's rhetorical approach). As has been detailed in previous chapters, discursive social psychology – particularly as developed by Edwards and Potter (1992, 1993) – is critical of social psychology's attempt to conceptualise and explain all aspects of social behaviour in terms of what is taking place in the mind of the individual. That is, discursive social psychology criticises the ways in which social psychology has approached many of its objects of study (whether self, attribution, attitudes, stereotypes or groups) as being essentially *cognitive entities in the mind of the individual*. From the traditional perspective, attitudes, too, are mental phenomena – ones that might predict our behaviour (see section on Persuasion) and might themselves change as a result of the effects of external persuasion on our thinking.

Discursive psychology provides an approach to the topic of attitudes that reformulates the object of study as *attitude talk itself.* Whether the analysis is of a speech made by an Australian prime minister (Augoustinos et al., 2002) or everyday talk about food preferences (Wiggins & Potter, 2003), the focus is on *what is said* rather than any thoughts, feelings or other mental features. In a discursive approach to attitude talk, or evaluations, there is a particular interest in *what the talk itself might do* (rather than how it is caused by, or relates to, the thoughts of the speaker). Discursive psychology then sees attitude talk or evaluations as action-orientated, accomplishing or doing things in interaction – that is, it is understood as '*practical* rather than *abstract* or *theoretical*' (Wiggins & Potter, 2003, p. 520).

As will be seen below, the discursive perspective would make sense of a specific piece of attitude talk, such as 'I hate being rushed' or 'That bus service is rubbish', as *doing* something in the interaction where it is uttered. The utterance 'I hate being rushed' might not tell us about some fixed mental evaluation of 'being rushed' that the speaker has, but could be a means by which the person saying it can object to or resist some attempt to hurry them. Similarly, 'That bus service is rubbish' need not be simply seen as an abstract evaluation of the bus service in question, but could be a means by which someone arriving late explains, or accounts for, their lateness. Alternatively, saying 'That bus service is rubbish' could be a means by which someone demonstrably sympathises with the negative bus experience of someone else – perhaps a friend who

has just reported waiting for hours for a bus. In these examples, the talk has not been traced back to some measurable, relatively fixed 'attitudinal mental entity' that is thought to have caused the words to be said. Instead, these examples show how talk can be investigated in a different way – by considering *what it might do in the interaction* in the light of where and when it is uttered.

Critical Recap

Different ways of thinking about attitudes

1. Whilst, as Kotzur et al. (2022) note, social psychology textbooks use the three-component view of attitudes, many studies in practice treat attitudes as a single 'evaluative judgement'. Kotzur et al. (2022) report that attention affective, cognitive and behavioural (or conative) components emerged as separable but related components in their data.
2. The distinction between cognitive and affective components of attitudes may be problematic. From one perspective, the two components may be thought of as psychological objects that are bound to influence each other. From a very different perspective, the reliance on abstract representations of affective and cognitively based attitude positions in isolation may be challenged. Does this tell us about *real, separate* psychological entities or replace genuine investigation of how positions are constructed in interaction with an abstract test of semantic associations?
3. It is possible to question the extent to which past behaviour and intended behaviour should be conceptualised as a component of attitudes.
4. Rhetorical and discursive approaches provide new ways of thinking about attitudes. Rhetorical work has highlighted how the issues about which we can have attitudes are shaped by what is contestable or debatable in our society at any given time. Discursive work has highlighted how verbal expressions of attitude are shaped by – and their shaping of – the interactional context in which they occur.

Reflective Questions

1. If you were assessing attitudes towards recycling would it be most helpful to think about cognitive, affective and behavioural components?
2. When was the last time you expressed a strong attitude, such as 'I can't stand X!' If we examined the surrounding talk context – for example, what the other person or people said before and after your attitude talk – what insights might we get?

HOW ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR ARE MEASURED

Methods of measuring attitudes are often presented as relatively unproblematic and sometimes as restricted to three very well-known attitude scales – the Thurstone, semantic differential and Likert scales, with the Likert and semantic differential scales being the most frequently used in contemporary research. These scales are presented below and illustrated in Box 6.1, but, along with discussing potential problems with the individual scales, consideration is also given to the problem with explicit scales and the relative merits and demerits of implicit measures of attitudes. Finally, some issues with measuring the 'attitude-relevant behaviour' are also addressed.

Attitude scales

One of the most effective ways to get an initial understanding of attitude scales is to try them out – so before reading on take a moment to try out not one, but three mini scales in Box 6.1 below.

Box 6.1 Focus

Illustrations of three different attitude scales

Thurstone scale

☑ Tick the statements that you agree with.

Governments should listen to the demands of the *Just Stop Oil* activists.

Governments should not be forced into actions by the *Just Stop Oil* activists.

It is crucial that *Just Stop Oil* activists take any action necessary to force governments to reduce the global reliance on oil.

It would be worth *Just Stop Oil* activists meeting with government representatives so that both sides can discuss their concerns.

Just Stop Oil activists who engage in direct action should be dealt with severely.

Semantic differential

Indicate the position on each scale that best reflects your feelings about each item.

(Continued)

Just Stop Oil activists' direct actions have been

Completely justified - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Not at all justified

Just Stop Oil activists' direct actions have been

Positive - *Negative*

Just Stop Oil activists' direct actions have been

Good - *Bad*

Concerns regarding *Just Stop Oil* activists' direct actions are

Completely justified - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Not at all justified

Likert scale

Indicate the position on each scale that reflects the extent of your agreement or disagreement with each statement.

Governments' actions regarding the global reliance on oil are a matter for them alone.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - Disagree strongly

Just Stop Oil activists' direct actions have a positive impact on society.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - Disagree strongly

Just Stop Oil activists' concerns about the global reliance on oil are completely misguided.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - Disagree strongly

The **Thurstone scale** (as seen in Box 6.1) involves presenting participants with a number of attitudinal statements on the issue about which researchers are seeking to measure people's attitudes.

The five Thurstone style questions in Box 6.1 were just created as an example to demonstrate statements that represent different attitudinal positions on the issue. As you look through the statements you will notice that this statement appears to represent a more negative attitude towards direct action undertaken by *Just Stop Oil* activists: '*Just Stop Oil* activists who engage in direct action should be dealt with severely'; whereas this one represents a much more favourable attitude towards the activists: 'It is crucial that *Just Stop Oil* activists take any action necessary to force governments to reduce the global reliance on oil.' You will also notice statements that indicate more moderate, neutral or 'closer to the mid-point' attitudes, with this statement occupying the mid-point itself: 'It would be worth *Just Stop Oil* activists meeting with government representatives so that both sides can discuss their concerns.'

A full Thurstone scale would include just these sorts of different attitude statements that are illustrated here. There would however typically be approximately 20 statements and these would have been selected from a list of approximately 100 attitude statements on the issue in question, which would have previously each been rank-ordered by 100 or so people in terms of the direction of attitude (pro/anti) and strength of attitude (neutral, mild, strong). By looking at each statement's median ranking – by the 100 people involved in ranking – a weighting for each statement would be given. The 20 statements used in the final Thurstone scale would be those which showed good inter-rater reliability – that is they had each been ranked similarly by the 100 people involved in ranking the statements – and care would be taken to ensure that the 20 statements covered an appropriate range of attitude positions. Participants whose attitudes are being measured would subsequently be asked to tick each statement that they agree with and their attitudinal position would be calculated by looking at the attitude weightings of those statements that they have indicated agreement with.

Thurstone scale An attitude scale that involves the participants selecting preweighted statements they agree with on a given topic. Unlike the other popular scales, the participants do not have to indicate their position on a linear scale (such as the extent of their agreement or disagreement).

Semantic differential scales (see Box 6.1) involve the presentation of a sentence stem, such as 'Drastically cutting public expenditure is . . .', with a response scale that has terms (often single-word adjectives) on either end – for example, 'good ..... bad'. The scales provide an opportunity for the respondent to indicate not only which term better describes their attitudinal position, but also the extent to which it depicts their position, typically using a five- or seven-point scale. Placing your tick or cross in the middle of the scale is taken to mean that both terms are equally agreed or disagreed with, while placing it immediately next to one term indicates that term is very strongly agreed with.

Semantic differential An attitude scale that requires participants to indicate where they are positioned on scales labelled with mutually incompatible adjectives at opposite ends to each other.

The **Likert scale** has characteristics of both the Thurstone and semantic differential scales. Similarly to the Thurstone, the Likert scale presents attitude statements to the participants for them to respond to – for example, 'More needs to be done to protect the environment.' The participants are, however, required to express the extent of their agreement or

disagreement, usually using a five- or seven-point scale. The scales are typically labelled along these lines – 'agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly' (the order may be reversed to address response biases). To try the Likert scale and explore critical thoughts about it see Box 6.2.

Box 6.2 Try it Out

Measuring attitudes

Using a Likert scale, measure the strength of your agreement or disagreement with the statements listed below. Do you have clearly defined attitudes about some items more than others? Can you identify anything about the items you feel most and least strongly about – for example, are they topics of wider social controversy or debate, do the statements reflect one side of an issue that is being, or can be, debated (Billig, 1987, 1991)?

Unilateral nuclear disarmament is necessary for world peace.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - - *Disagree strongly*

Immigration has been beneficial for my country.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - - *Disagree strongly*

Same-sex marriages are a positive social development.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - - *Disagree strongly*

It is right that people should pay the full cost of their university education.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - - *Disagree strongly*

Direct action protests – such as sitting down to block traffic – are an effective way of encouraging people to be less reliant on oil.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - - *Disagree strongly*

Issues with the Thurstone, semantic differential and Likert scales

The Thurstone, semantic differential and Likert scales considered above have each been criticised in several respects. Here, attention will be paid to the scaling of attitudes using the Thurstone scale, the issue of neutral responses for semantic differential and Likert scales, and the issue of self-presentation and demand characteristics with all three scales. In developing this third issue, the idea of implicit attitudes and their measurement will be addressed.

As can be seen in Box 6.1, the Thurstone scale is the only measure of the three considered in which the respondents do not assign themselves to a point on a scale. For the semantic differential and Likert scales, it is the respondents filling in the scales who puts their marks on a point between two adjectives (semantic differential) or measure of agreement scale (Likert) to identify the valance (or positive/negative direction) and strength of their attitudes, but the Thurstone scale gives responsibility for that to the researcher. Rather than the respondents indicating where they are on an issue, it is the preassigned weightings that are used.

On the one hand, it could be argued that this may overcome any small element of self-presentational bias – that is, not seeing the weighting given to the statements may, at least in theory, enable respondents to answer without being overly concerned with the position that they are seen to adopt on an issue. On the other hand, however, the procedure presumes that some preassignment of attitudinal weightings is possible for a range of statements and the respondents' own positions can be judged as the midpoint (median) of the various (attitude-weighted) statements that they have agreed with. Can statements be neatly assigned an uncontentious attitude weighting, though, and, even if they can, are respondents' 'real' attitudes the midpoints of statements that they agree with? In other words, the Thurstone scale opens up the issue that the position of the respondent on the attitudinal scale is not directly measured but assigned, using a procedure with certain questionable assumptions.

While the semantic differential and Likert scales overcome the issue of assigning respondents to an attitudinal scale position, they have a problem that arises from requiring participants to indicate their own positions on these scales. One difficulty is that, while responses at each end of the scale may (though not inevitably) be indications of a clear attitudinal position, responses in the middle of the scales may be open to different readings. This is particularly evident in cases where a semantic differential scale uses labels that are not semantically opposite – for example, imagine being required to describe a tutor using this scale:

Kind ..... Wise

Likert scale An attitude scale that requires participants to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with attitude-valanced statements – that is, they are required to mark on a scale their agreement or disagreement with distinct attitudinal positions.

Imagine that you placed your tick in the middle and someone had to make sense of it. Does the tick in the middle mean that you perceive the tutor as both kind *and* wise or as neither kind *nor* wise. Kaplan (1972) refers to this problem as the 'double definition of the neutral category'. The person choosing the midpoint might be communicating that

they want to endorse *both* of the scale items (sometimes this is referred to as ambivalence) or *neither* of them (sometimes this is referred to as indifference). The situation might appear to be resolved when the scale is labelled with seemingly opposite terms – as with these examples from Box 6.1:

Semantic differential

Just Stop Oil activists' direct actions have been

Positive - - - - - - - - - - - - - -- - - - - - - - - - *Negative*

Likert

Just Stop Oil activists' direct actions have had a positive impact on society.

Agree strongly - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -- - - - - - -*Disagree strongly*

Even with this case, however – and others for which the scale's ends appear to have mutually exclusive labels – it is possible to consider the way in which the midpoint could have more than one meaning. With the first example above, the midpoint could signify that the respondent feels that *Just Stop Oil* activists' actions are neutral – *neither* positive nor negative – or that they are ambivalent – both positive *and* negative. These are quite different positions. In one case, the totality of the actions are neither black nor white – they are judged as being somewhere in between positive and negative; in the other, the actions may be complex, involving both very markedly positive and very markedly negative elements.

Likewise, the midpoint on the 'agree' scale in the second example above may indicate *neither* fully agreeing *nor* disagreeing about the *overall impact* of the totality of direct actions undertaken by *Just Stop Oil* protesters. Alternatively, the midpoint may indicate a more complex stance which indicates strong agreement that *some* of the direct actions have 'had a positive impact on society' *and* strong disagreement that *other* direct actions have had a positive impact on society.

Implicit Association Test

An issue that relates to all three scales is they are quite explicit about what they measure. In many cases this might not be a problem – you might be quite happy to disclose your attitudes about music, academic subjects, activities you enjoy, perhaps even politics and religion – but what about attitudes likely to be less favourably received?

Imagine asking people to reveal their liking or disliking for different ethnic groups. It is possible that even those whom we might consider to be prejudiced may not reveal their prejudice. There may be some element of self-presentation (see Chapter 7) with people concealing their 'true' attitudes so as to appear in a more positive light. In recent

years, many attitude researchers have become interested in measuring not just *explicit* attitudes – like the scales above attempt to do – but also *implicit* attitudes.

The most popular **implicit attitude measure** is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), developed by Greenwald et al. (1998) - see Box 6.3 to access an IAT yourself and to reflect on this type of measure. In order to understand this test it is worth thinking about a computer keyboard. Imagine having to press either the 'A' key on the left side or the '5' key on a number pad on the right side. Now let us suppose that, on the screen, different stimuli appear – perhaps words or images that you had to respond to quickly but accurately using either the 'A' key or the '5' key.

Let us suppose that some stimulus words ('happy', 'peace', 'crash', 'rotten' and so on) are presented and you have to categorise them, hitting the 'A' key if they are pleasant and the '5' key if they are unpleasant. Imagine that you are a Korean participant and are presented with names and you have to decide whether they are Japanese or Korean surnames (Youn, Kawa and so on, for example), hitting the 'A' key if they are Korean or '5' if they are Japanese. Now it starts to get interesting. How about the screen showing a mixture of names and words – you now need to hit the 'A' key for both Korean names and pleasant words and the '5' key for Japanese names and unpleasant words. Finally, there is a reversal of this – you are again shown a mixture of words and surnames, but now it is the 'A' key for pleasant words and Japanese surnames and the '5' key for unpleasant words and Korean surnames.

Box 6.3 Try it Out

Project Implicit

You can try out a form of Implicit Association Test (IAT) online at Harvard University's 'Project Implicit' – https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html. It is worth reflecting on your experiences of completing – or looking at – the test. Try thinking about these issues:

- Was it obvious what attitudes were being measured?
- Could you control your impression?
- Do you feel that the results of the test provide useful information about your attitudes?
- Does the test provide information about culturally based associations that you have been exposed to?
- What are the shortcomings of IATs?

Reflecting on these sorts of issues may inform your thinking about the value of IATs and what they do and do not tell us.

This experimental procedure is complex, but the idea behind it can be readily grasped. We are likely to be faster on tasks that require us to perform the same action – pressing the same key, in this case – *when that action has a shared or consonant meaning for us*. Do you think that the Korean participants in Greenwald et al.'s (1998) experiment were faster when the same key ('A') was used to mean 'pleasant' and 'Korean' or when it was used to mean 'unpleasant' and 'Korean'?

Implicit attitude measures These are indirect measures of attitudes that are thought to avoid problems anticipated if a more explicit (such as a self-report) measure were to be used. Implicit attitude measures are often used where it is thought the participants might be reluctant to admit their 'real' attitudes – for example, research into prejudice. Often reaction times to stimuli presented on a computer screen are used for this sort of measure.

If the key has some shared meaning that can readily be grasped, then it is easy to respond with it, but, when it is used to represent things that do not fit together for us, it slows us down. The Korean participants were faster when 'pleasant' and 'Korean' were combined on the same key (a compatible combination for them) and slower when 'pleasant' was combined with 'Japanese' (an incompatible combination for them). The reverse was true for Japanese participants. This difference in speed of response can, of course, be measured and is often known as the IAT effect (measured in milliseconds by subtracting the 'compatible' from the 'incompatible' combinations).

The IAT has stimulated something of a renaissance in attitude research – being drawn on in quite different ways to understand the link between attitudes and behaviour (considered further below) and to provide a more sophisticated conceptualisation of people's attitudinal positions. Some work following the development of the IAT has emphasised the difference between implicit and explicit attitudes – for example, suggesting that implicit attitudes predict spontaneous behaviour (such as where there is no opportunity or motivation to think about the behaviour), while explicit attitudes predict deliberate behaviour.

Dovidio et al. (2002) found measures of implicit prejudice better predicted spontaneous prejudice in interaction than explicit measures did. Other work, such as Spence and Townsend (2007), by contrast, stressed that implicit and explicit measures get at different aspects of a single attitude construct and both are predictive with regard to the same target behaviour.

Finally, some work has sought to draw on both implicit *and* explicit measures to arrive at a more fine-grained attitudinal typology. Son Hing et al. (2008) drew on the IAT to suggest that, instead of simply categorising people as high or low in prejudice on the basis of their explicit attitudinal responses, integrating explicit and implicit measures

allows for a more complex conceptualisation in which people can be high or low on implicit prejudice and high or low on explicit prejudice. These combinations allow for four quite distinct prejudice subtypes that overcome the simplicity of earlier high–low prejudice conceptualisations.

The considerable impact that IATs have had within – and beyond – social psychology should not make us blind to the controversies surrounding their use and the interpretation of data which they generate. Bartels and Schoenrade (2022) point out how frequently textbooks fail to adequately engage with criticisms of Implicit Association Tests, giving a misleading impression of the tests themselves and the literature surrounding them. In order to avoid these potential lacunae it is worth considering some of the questions that have been raised concerning IATs.

A key concern in criticisms of IATs concerns how the findings of a difference in reaction time are interpreted. Arkes and Tetlock (2004) refer to the 'inferential leaps' in the interpretation of results. If, as Arkes and Tetlock (2004) suggest, IATs highlight not so much an individual's level of prejudice but, rather, cultural associations then civil rights leaders themselves could appear to be prejudiced as they too have typically been exposed to particular cultural associations concerning the very groups they seek to emancipate. From this perspective the tests might reveal something about the sorts of associations that participants have been exposed to – but tell us little or nothing about their own attitudes and behaviours.

In a similar vein, Payne and Hannay (2021) suggest that implicit associations are best used as an indicator of systemic prejudice rather than of the prejudicial attitudes of an individual completing an IAT. This context-based view offers a redefined role for IATs in which individual IAT 'results' point not to the individual themselves but to possible features of their social environment or milieu – giving an indication of expectations based on the environment. This would include all of the associations found in the media that the participants have been exposed to. Some further consideration of IATs and prejudice is considered in Chapter 3.

Schimmack (2021) argues that empirical evidence claiming to support the validity of IATs is limited and flawed and – as touched on in Chapter 1 – is typically interpreted through the paradigm that researchers occupy. Empirical IAT findings may be interpreted quite differently according to the overarching sense making framework – or paradigm – with which any particular researcher is associated.

Forscher et al. (2019) sought to examine the importance of implicit measures by addressing the issue from an interesting perspective. Forscher et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 492 studies which involved procedures *designed to change participants' scores on implicit measures of attitudes*. The authors argued that whilst it is possible to change implicit measures these changes do not necessarily appear to have a measurable impact on explicit attitudes or relevant behaviour. If, as Forscher et al. (2019) suggest, a change in implicit measures can be caused by experimental interventions and yet the change does not appear to consistently have implications – particularly for behaviour –

then this does raise potential issues for the whole concept of Implicit Association Tests. Specifically we may – as Schimmack (2021) suggests – question what meaning someone's implicit association results actually have.

Measuring behaviour

Before moving on from our consideration of attitude measurement it is important to note that even the seemingly straightforward 'attitude-relevant behaviour' may pose issues in terms of its measurement.

Imagine for a moment that you, like Elliott et al. (2007), are concerned with how attitudes relate to behaviours – that is, will someone's attitude about speeding while driving relate to their actual driving behaviour? How do you measure actual speeding behaviour? Many studies would use self-reports of speeding behaviour, so you might present the participant with some stimulus, such as 'I often speed on my way to work', but would this really reflect what the participants actually do? Elliott et al. used both self-reported behaviour and observation of behaviour in a driving simulation (issues concerning this measure will be touched on later).

Elliott et al.'s (2007) research raised questions regarding whether or not observations (notwithstanding their limitations) tended to confirm self-reported behaviour. What Elliott et al. found was that they did not, thereby identifying problems regarding how behaviour is actually measured in attitude research. The question that this discrepancy raises is what measure of behaviour should be used – self-report or observation?

Box 6.4 Focus

Are attitudes an artefact of the procedures used to measure them? (Puchta & Potter, 2002)

Puchta and Potter (2002) analysed focus group interviews in an attempt to understand something of the apparent contradiction between the arguments made in discourse and rhetorical studies and the apparent evidence from more traditionally framed attitude research. While discursive and rhetorical research has suggested that attitude (or evaluative talk) is variable, constructed to *do* interactional and argumentative work, various 'attitude' studies appear to find evidence of 'enduring underlying attitudes'.

Puchta and Potter (2002) argue that the 'freestanding individual opinions' produced in focus groups are a product of the ways in which the focus group interactions are conducted by the moderator. That is, moderators encourage participants to produce 'abstract', 'freestanding' (or context-free isolatable) attitudes and ignore those elements of talk (such as refinements, qualifications, self-contradictions) that do not conform to this freestanding

format. Thus, the product of focus group research – freestanding, isolatable, context-free attitudes – can be seen as a direct result of the practices that occurred within the group.

Puchta and Potter (2002) make the broader point that, just because certain forms of attitude (such as freestanding ones) can be the product of research, it does not mean that is how attitudes *really* are. It could be – as in the case of the focus group research that they investigate – that the means of data collection (the interactions, instructions, specifications and scope for participants' responses) shape the form attitudes arising from such research appear to take. By examining the process of their production, Puchta and Potter (2002) seek to provide a means of questioning certain dominant conceptualisations of attitudes – the latter being shaped by the data collection processes involved.

It might seem that observation of actual behaviour is the obvious choice – surely that is the 'true' behaviour, whereas self-reporting involves some sort of distortion from that 'truth'. Even observation may be problematic, however, as some behaviours might not easily be observed. Imagine, for example, being interested in whether or not people respond violently during heated arguments. How would you go about observing someone's behaviour in the context of such an argument? Would you film someone non-stop until a heated argument occurred (which would be difficult practically and ethically) or would you try to create a heated argument (which might not be realistic). Both options seem far from ideal.

As noted above, even Elliott et al.'s (2007) measure of speeding raises questions as they used a driving simulator, which we might well expect to yield different speeding-relevant behaviour from that of *actual* driving. The issue, however, is still not readily resolved even if *actual* speeding-relevant behaviour could be observed, as the mere fact of observation would be likely to change the target behaviour.

Critical Recap

How attitudes and behaviour are measured

1 The Thurstone scale relies on preweighting items presented to participants, with each participant's position being inferred from their responses to these items. The process of preweighting and inference can be criticised as insensitive to the individual participants' own understandings and meanings with regard to the target of the attitude.

(Continued)

2 Both semantic differential and Likert scales use scales (typically with five or seven points) on which participants can indicate the strength of their attitudes. For both scales, however, responses in between the two ends of each scale are open to contradictory interpretations. Does a midpoint response mean *disagreement* with both of the ends of the scale (neither) or *agreement* with both of them?

3 Explicit measures of attitudes may *all* be problematic when certain non-socially desirable attitude stances are relevant. Thus, explicit measures may be limited by self-presentational concerns when attitudes regarding certain topics are being investigated.

4 Implicit measures of attitudes have been developed to overcome the possibility of respondents seeking to conceal their true attitudes – for example hiding their prejudice. However, as Forscher et al. (2019) and Schimmack (2021) suggest, there is some debate concerning the extent to what, if any, meaning measures of implicit attitudes have. In the light of this we could ask whether implicit evidence of prejudice actually corresponds to an individual's attitude, or is informative about their behavioural intentions. It may be that Implicit Association Tests tell us more about culturally formed associations. This, in turn, relates to a big issue returned to in a later section, concerning whether in fact we should think of attitudes in terms of individual stances or wider culturally informed positions.

5 Measurement of behaviour is frequently assumed to be relatively straightforward, but some research identifies inconsistency where different measures are used (self-reported behaviour is not always the same as observed behaviour, for example). Even observation of behaviour is far from perfect, as the mere act of observing may well change the target behaviour itself.

6 A more radical critique is provided by Potter (1998). Taking a discursive approach concerned with talk within its interactional context, Potter (1998) argues that instead of focusing on responses to abstract sentences presented in isolation to participants, attention should be given to *what is happening within real-world sequences of interaction*. Rather than asking participants for their level of agreement with statements such as: 'I think direct action to bring attention to climate change is justified', we could instead examine how people take, justify and critique stances regarding the environment in their everyday talk in interaction.

Reflective Questions

1 Choose a particularly important 'attitude' that you have (or could be thought of having). Which scale would be best – and worst – at measuring your attitude? What are the reasons for your choices?

2 If an Implicit Association Test suggested that you or someone you know well was more prejudiced than you ever imagined, how would you interpret these results?

ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

The idea that attitudes relate to behaviour seems obvious and almost intertwined – your voting activities and purchasing behaviour, for example, seem unavoidably linked to your attitudes. This presumption has a long history of being challenged and rethought within social psychology, starting with the famous study of LaPiere (1934).

LaPiere began his research by touring the USA with a Chinese couple, visiting 66 hotels, caravan parks and tourist homes and eating in 184 restaurants – a research programme the like of which, sadly, may prove difficult to fund these days. LaPiere and the Chinese couple were refused service once in more than 170 service encounters.

Six months later LaPiere sent a questionnaire that sought to establish the attitude (perhaps more accurately, behavioural intention) of the places they had visited. In response to the question, 'Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?' a stunning 92 per cent (of the 128 establishments that replied) said they would not, only 1 per cent they would and 7 per cent indicated it would depend on circumstances.

LaPiere's study raised serious questions regarding the method and theory of attitude and behaviour research. Methodologically, issues were raised about how attitudes and behaviours were measured. One example of this is the **levels of specificity** of the measurement of both attitudes and behaviours. Thus, as noted below, while specific behaviours might relate poorly to general attitudes, they might relate better to measures of specific attitudes. In the context of LaPiere's study, perhaps asking about attitudes concerning this specific Chinese couple (sending a photograph and details of who they would be arriving with, for example) would yield different results that would better relate to actual behaviour.

Levels of specificity In the context of this literature, the term refers to a concern that the specificity of the attitude measure and the behaviour measure are compatible – that is, either both are highly specific or both are quite general.

Theoretically, LaPiere's study raised questions about how the relationship between attitudes and behaviours was conceptualised – the simple, common-sense link was problematised and some more complex models were developed that built in specificity and a range of moderating factors which might affect the link between attitudes and behaviour. In between LaPiere's study and some of the dominant models of attitudes developed between 1975 and 1991, however, a radical suggestion was made: perhaps social psychology should *abandon* the concept of attitudes altogether.

In 1969, Wicker wrote a review of 42 attitude studies that reported attitude–behaviour correlations. These studies measured attitudes (using questionnaires) and overt behaviours

that were taken to be directly related to the expressed attitude. In a hypothetical world of perfect predictability, the correlation coefficient would be 1.0. Such correlations are never found – if they were, they would be viewed with great suspicion – but the higher the number is (between 0.0 and 1.0), the stronger the correlation and the more closely the measured attitudes are related to the measured behaviour. So, what was the mean correlation that Wicker found across these studies? Was it a remarkable 0.7 or above or a respectable 0.5? It was neither. Wicker found a mean correlation of 0.15. It does not take a great deal of statistical knowledge to recognise that, as it stands, 0.15 is quite a weak correlation. Wicker (1969, p. 64) argued that, 'taken as a whole [it] is considerably more likely that attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviours than that attitudes will be closely related to actions'.

Wicker's (1969) paper and his call to abandon the concept of attitudes, as Eagly (1992) suggests, formed part of what became known as the 'crises' in social psychology. If attitudes could not be found to be reliably correlated to any measurable behaviour (let alone predict it), then the construct of attitudes could be abandoned and, with it, not only a crucial area of social psychological research but also a conception of the person as shaped by measurable cognitive entities.

In the wake of Wicker's research, two distinct strands can be discerned. One strand kept to the idea of attitudes and more broadly a somewhat cognitive approach to social psychology and concentrated on refining the ways in which the relationship between attitudes and behaviours was conceptualised and measured. The Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behaviour considered below represent particularly important milestones in this tradition. Another strand, which perhaps found its fullest expression with rhetorical and discursive psychology, developed a radically different conceptualisation of attitudes and, indeed, social psychology.

Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action

Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen (1975) developed an extremely important and influential model of the relationship between attitudes and behaviour that addressed or attempted to address some of the issues regarding poor prediction of behaviour raised by Wicker (1969). Figure 6.2 shows their model – the Theory of Reasoned Action.

As Figure 6.2 suggests, the model identifies three core factors that determine attitude-related behaviour. First, there is the *'attitude'* towards the behaviour – that is, the individual's positive or negative feelings about performing a behaviour, comprising both the individual's beliefs about the consequences of the behaviour and an evaluation of the desirability of those consequences. Second, there is the **subjective norm** – the individual's perception of what people who are important to him or her think about the target behaviour and how motivated the individual is to comply with those perceptions.

Perhaps most important for our current concerns, the Theory of Reasoned Action introduced a crucial mediating variable between attitudes and behaviour – the **behavioural intention**. It was argued that this was a better determinant of actual behaviour than attitude alone. The behavioural intention was described as the decision to engage in a particular action and this was understood as shaped by a highly specific attitude – that is, the attitude towards the specific behaviour about which a decision is being taken.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action shown in Figure 6.2, if we want to know whether or not a friend's pro-environmental attitude will mean that they engage in a specific act of recycling their waste, then we need to consider something much more specific. We need to take into account their attitude towards the specific action of recycling and the perceived attitudes of their significant others – their partner, family, best friend – towards the behaviour in question and our friend's motivation to comply with these (subjective norms). For Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), this will influence their intentions to recycle and this, in turn, will be a strong predictor of the target recycling-relevant behaviour.

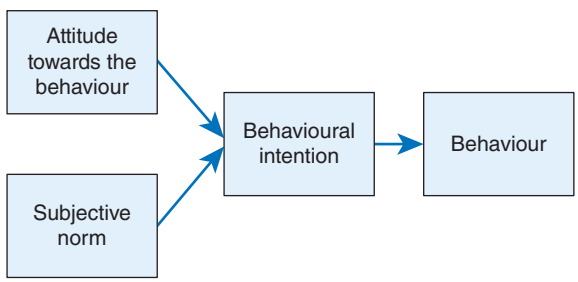

Figure 6.2 Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory Of Reasoned Action

Source: Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. Reproduced with permission from Pearson Education, Inc.

Subjective norm The individual's perception of what people who are important to him or her think about the target behaviour and how motivated the individual is to comply with those perceptions.

Behavioural intention The decision to engage in a particular action.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1974, 1975) and Ajzen (1988) argue that much of the apparently poor prediction of behaviours from attitudes rests on a problem of differential levels of specificity in measures of attitude and behaviours – that is, for example, a general pro-environmental attitude might not predict specific pro-environmental behaviours (such as recycling), but might be better at predicting **aggregated behaviours**. Our friend's pro-environment attitudes and subjective norms might predict their behavioural intentions and actual behaviour

across a wider spectrum of 'green' behaviour (our friend might not recycle, but cycle everywhere, never take a flight, always turn the heating down, only buy local organic foods and insist on renewable sources of energy for their electricity).

Aggregated behaviours A collection of comparable behaviours – for example, all environmentally friendly behaviours (such as recycling, energy consumption, not burning fossil fuels, steps to reduce carbon footprint) – rather than just one (such as recycling). The emphasis on aggregated behaviours is thought to be important where the attitude being measured is at a relatively broad level.

Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) model is often known as an 'expectancy value' model and, more specifically, as the theory of 'reasoned action'. Expectancy value is the idea that the attitudes are formed by a scrutiny of the consequences of behaviour – it is our appraisal of the outcomes or the positive or negative consequences we expect that produces for us an attitude towards engaging in a specific behaviour. Likewise, it is this evaluation of outcomes that guides our intention to behave in a specific way.

The model is referred to as the Theory of Reasoned Action precisely because it emphasises behavioural intentions as determined by careful, reasoned weighing of perceived outcomes. The assessments that we make of the outcomes of a behaviour might be erroneous. We may be inaccurate in our perception of subjective norms – for example, we might think that our partner wants us to place their notebook in the recycling bin when they do not. Likewise, our attitude-relevant beliefs may prove to be incorrect – for example, we might believe that our recycled waste will be reused locally and later discover that it will be transported many thousands of miles. For this model, however, it is our perceptions that guide our behaviour, not the 'objective truth'. Furthermore, our behaviour is still reasoned in that it is our reasoning about – *with the information that we have as we perceive it* – likely outcomes that is the basis for our behavioural intentions and subsequent behaviour.

Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour

Ajzen (1985) introduced an important development that has largely superseded the Theory of Reasoned Action. As Figure 6.3 illustrates, Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour has several of the ingredients found in Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action (see Figure 6.2). The Theory of Planned Behaviour still has behavioural intentions that are shaped by attitudes and subjective norms, but more emphasis has been placed on the possibility of interaction between these elements (note the two-way arrows in Figure 6.3) and, crucially, it introduced the novel element of **perceived control**. Indeed, perceived control is *so* important in the Theory of Planned Behaviour that it not only influences behavioural intentions but is also depicted as having a direct effect on behaviour (which is not mediated by behavioural intentions).

Perceived control This refers to how easy or difficult the target behaviour is thought to be by the individual.

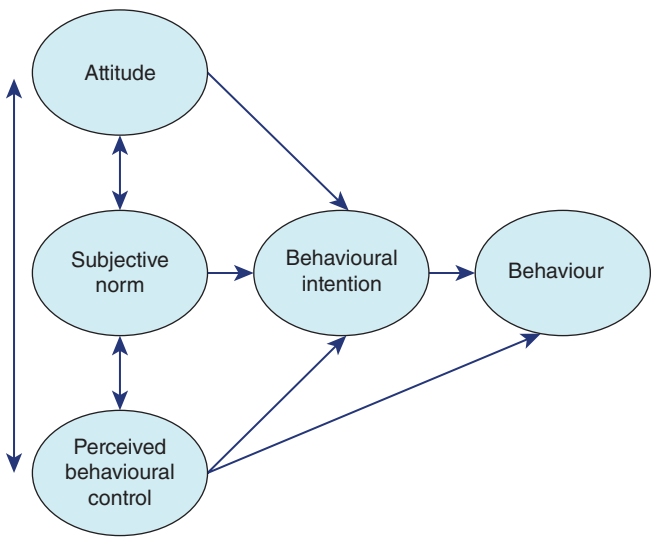

Figure 6.3 Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour first developed in 1985

Source: Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50,* 179–211. Reproduced with permission from Elsevier Science.

Perceived control is how easy or difficult the behaviour is thought to be by the individual themselves. Our friend may have pro-environment and even pro-recycling attitudes and a partner and many significant others in their lives who are perceived to encourage recycling behaviour, but these motivational factors may not result in a specific intention to recycle if the friend thinks of recycling as too difficult for them to do. For example, we may catch our friend saying, 'I would love to recycle, but I am too busy to sort through my waste' and then, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, we might not expect their behaviour to reflect their attitudes.

According to Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour (see Figure 6.3), our friend's target behaviour, such as their completion of an essay, is not only predicted by their attitudes and subjective norms (as in Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action discussed above) but also, crucially, and potentially directly, by their perceived behavioural control. Thus, even though our friend may expect consequences they positively value (attitudes) and may perceive that important others want them to complete their essay (and those others have opinions they are motivated to comply with), their sense of behavioural control could still be a vital determinant. If, for example, their attitude and subjective norm suggest that they will intend to complete their essay, their sense that the

task is too difficult for them could change their behavioural intention or even stop them from completing the essay *despite their intention to do so.*

Applying Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour

Schifter and Ajzen (1985) undertook research that applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour to the issue of weight loss over a six-week period. A total of 83 female undergraduate psychology students were recruited to the study. Initially, the participants were weighed and completed various questionnaire scales. The questionnaire items sought to measure the key components of the Theory of Planned Behaviour – that is, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived control and behavioural intention. 'Attitudes to weight loss' was understood as the participants' favourable or unfavourable evaluations of losing weight and trying to lose weight over the next six weeks, such as, 'For me to reduce weight in the next six weeks would be good ... bad ... desirable ... undesirable ... harmful ... beneficial.' 'Subjective norms' was understood as the participants' perceptions of what others who are important to them were perceived as feeling about the participants' weight loss over the next six weeks. Subjective norms were measured by questionnaire items asking if most people who were important to them would think that they 'should ... should not' lose weight and try to lose weight over the next six weeks and whether they would 'support ... oppose' their weight reduction over the next six weeks. 'Perceived control' was understood as the ease or difficulty of losing weight – that is, the extent to which participants felt their actions could affect weight loss over the six-week period. Items measuring perceived control included asking participants about the 'likelihood, if you try, you will manage to reduce weight over the next six weeks'. 'Behavioural intentions' was understood as the desire or intention to reduce weight over the next six weeks and was measured using items such as 'I intend to reduce weight over the next six weeks' and 'I have decided to lose weight over the next six weeks'.

Schifter and Ajzen (1985) investigated the relationships between attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control and behavioural intentions and found that, together, the regression coefficient was a highly significant 0.74. Even on its own, 'attitude' was found to have a 0.62 regression coefficient with behavioural intentions. When actual weight loss (that is, how many kilos of weight were lost after six weeks) was considered, the picture changed in two important respects. First, the regression coefficient for 'attitude' and 'actual weight loss' was 0.1, even 'behavioural intention' and 'actual weight loss' gave a modest regression coefficient of 0.25. It can be concluded – as Schifter and Ajzen (1985) do – that, with weight loss, they are measuring not simply 'behaviour' but, rather, 'behaviour-related outcome'.

Thus, it may be that behavioural intention and, indeed, attitude have higher regression coefficients with weight loss behaviour than with actual weight loss, where factors independent of the participants' behaviour and control such as metabolism might play a part. Indeed, most other attitude studies are concerned with the relationship between attitudinal factors and target behaviours, not subsequent outcomes. Second, perceived control became

particularly important – it was the single factor that had the strongest association with actual weight loss (yielding a modest but significant regression coefficient of 0.41) and, combined with behavioural intention, the correlation increased slightly to 0.44.

Schifter and Ajzen, then, provided some support for the Theory of Planned Behaviour and their results could be understood as affirming the importance of perceived control in particular. For Schifter and Ajzen, perceived control is important not just as a factor that influences our behaviour by shaping our attitudes and our behavioural intentions but also as a factor which has an important direct independent influence on our actual behaviour. For Schifter and Ajzen, perceived control is important because of both its subjectivity and the objectivity from which it is, in part, derived. Subjectively, it is our sense of control that is an important determinant of our behaviour – how we feel about the ease or difficulty of the behaviour, for example, is crucial. Schifter and Ajzen also argue, however, that perceived control gives useful information about things as they really are – that is, the presence or absence of real constraints are reflected in perceived control. In Schifter and Ajzen's study – albeit with its unusual focus on behavioural outcome (weight loss) – perceived control not only told us about motivationally relevant information (how participants felt about the ease or difficulty of the behaviour and outcome) but also told us something about whether or not there were other constraints (time, money, opportunity, metabolism) that would affect weight loss.

Reconceptualising and modifying Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour

It is possible to distinguish roughly two concerns in research that relate directly to Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour. One strand raises questions about how variables – in particular, 'perceived control' – are conceptualised. A second strand introduces additional variables or moderating factors into the model.

Looking first at attempts to reconceptualise perceived control, Terry and O'Leary (1995) suggest that internal control-related perceptions – for example, my perceptions of what I can or cannot do or self (or self-efficacy) – should be distinguished from my perceptions of external constraints or perceived control over the behaviour. Similar distinctions occur in a range of subsequent research, including Kraft et al. (2005).

Kraft et al. investigated attitudes and subsequent self-reported behaviour regarding regular exercise and recycling drinking cartons among 112 undergraduate students at Bergen college. In this research, the concept of perceived control was reconfigured in terms of a combination of both perceived confidence (which relates to efficacy) and perceived control (which incorporates perceptions of external constraints). Items such as 'If I wanted to, I would not have problems in succeeding to *perform behaviour* over the next two weeks' were thought to measure perceived confidence, while items such as 'I have full control over *performing behaviour* over the next two weeks' were thought to measure perceived control.

Kraft et al. (2005) argued that the distinction between perceived *confidence* and perceived *control* is consequential for the predictive efficacy of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Perceived *confidence* was found to predict subsequent self-reported exercise (but not recycling), whereas perceived *control* was found to predict subsequent self-reported recycling (but not exercise). For Kraft et al., then, the variable of perceived control as conceptualised in the Theory of Planned Behaviour conflates two separable elements – efficacy (the individual's ability to do the behaviour) and opportunity (the opportunity for the behaviour to be executed). Kraft et al. argue that the influence of these elements of efficacy and opportunity varies according to the behaviour in question, some behaviours being far more influenced by efficacy and some by opportunity. By developing the model to incorporate these separate elements, it can better account for behavioural intentions and behaviour.

Cooke and Sheeran's (2004) meta-analysis of 44 studies investigated seven potential moderating factors – accessibility, stability, direct experience, involvement, certainty, ambivalence and affective-cognitive consistency. They argued that each of these factors moderated and improved the attitude–behaviour correspondence, apart from involvement. Thus, our attitudes better predict our behaviour where the attitudes are readily accessible, stable, certain, low in ambivalence and high in consistency across our thoughts and feelings about the behaviour. Furthermore, where we have direct experience of the attitude-related behaviour, our attitudes will better predict our behaviour. This last factor – prior behaviour – has received attention in a number of studies, including Fazio and Williams (1986), who linked it to accessibility, and Sheeran et al. (2005), who were particularly concerned with habit (see Box 6.5).

Sheeran et al.'s (2005) study of drinking behaviour confirmed the idea that prior, habitual behaviour can be an important influence on our behaviour. They found that participants responded differently to stimuli that were linked to drinking depending on whether they had a drinking habit or not. For those with a drinking habit, merely presenting questions about socialising (and other 'goals' that are sometimes related to the behaviour of drinking) was enough to result in heightened levels of subsequent 'drinking behaviour'. By contrast, participants who did not have an established drinking habit did not show heightened drinking behaviour as a result of exposure to the same stimulus questions about socialising (and other drinking-related 'goals'). It should, however, be noted that, in Sheeran et al.'s (2005) research, the dependent variable 'drinking behaviour' was measured in initial studies by speed of response to the word 'drinking' in a verb identification task and, subsequently, by the participants' choice of a voucher for beer/wine or tea/coffee. Notwithstanding issues about how the dependent variable of 'drinking behaviour' was operationalised, their research suggests that past behaviour – particularly habitual behaviour – may predict, or at least be associated with, subsequent behaviour once goals relating to the behaviour are activated.

Box 6.5 Try it Out

Good intentions, bad habits

In order to appreciate Sheeran et al.'s (2005) study, it is worth thinking for a moment of some New Year's resolutions – perhaps you or someone you know resolved to stop smoking, drinking, eating jelly babies or sending texts during lectures. Things might go well with our resolutions for the first few days, hours or, perhaps, minutes, but – as we all know from bitter experience – some repeated or habitual patterns of behaviour seem hard to break. Soon we find ourselves smoking, drinking, eating jelly babies and sending texts.

Ajzen (1991) was somewhat ambivalent about the role of past behaviour and habit, arguing that much of the influence past behaviour has on a given behaviour can be understood as mediated by factors already within the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Thus, our past engagement may well shape or, indeed, reflect our attitude (having undertaken the behaviour – especially repeatedly – may be related to our liking of it) and our perceived control (if I could do the behaviour in the past, then I may perceive that I can do it again). Our past behaviour may also reflect our perception of a behaviour-supporting subjective norm (if I undertook the behaviour previously, clearly my perception of the subjective norm was either sufficiently supportive to enable me, or not sufficiently prohibitive to stop me). Ajzen (1991) is somewhat sceptical about any independent influence of past behaviour on present behaviour. He is therefore reluctant to embrace it as another independent variable alongside attitude, subjective norm and perceived control, but does suggest that it would be 'premature' to draw definite conclusions.

Mohiyeddini et al.'s (2009) investigation of people's intention to exercise identified an intriguing moderating factor that may have been assumed to be already present in the attitude component of both the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behaviour – that is, the *emotional appraisal of the behavioural intention*. Mohiyeddini et al.'s research suggests that, rather than being simply another facet of the attitude component, *emotional appraisal of intention to exercise* is a separable component. They measured *emotional appraisal* by asking participants to rate their feelings when 'thinking about their intention to exercise the following day' using the items 'alert, energetic, unhappy and downhearted'. The inclusion of the emotional appraisal of behavioural intention led to much better prediction of future exercise behaviour over the basic Theory of Planned Behaviour. For Mohiyeddini et al., behavioural intention remained the most important factor in predicting exercise behaviour, but it was considerably stronger when emotional appraisal of behavioural intention was also taken into account.

In their meta-analysis of 91 studies that measured what factors best predicted recycling behaviour, Geiger et al. (2019) found that both individual issues (including attitudes

towards recycling) *and* contextual issues (including home ownership and the possession of a recycling bin) predicted recycling behavioural intention and – though to a lesser extent – actual recycling behaviour. Geiger et al. (2019) argue for an increased emphasis on examining the impact of contextual factors on behaviour and how these may interact with individual factors such as attitude.

Critical Recap

Attitudes and behaviour

1. Wicker (1969) found such low correlations between attitudes and behaviour that he suggested the attitude concept should be abandoned.
2. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) produced a rebuttal to Wicker by arguing that, in assessing the correspondence between attitudes and behaviour, the level of specificity must be considered – general attitudes, such as being pro-environmental issues will have a good correlation with aggregated environmentally related behaviours (for example, support for Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, recycling, low energy use, low carbon-emitting transport choices and so on), but cannot be expected to correlate highly with each specific strand of behaviour. To find better correspondence with specific behaviours, we need to consider attitudes to that specific behaviour.
3. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Ajzen (1985) can themselves be criticised for moving some distance from the sort of attitude–behaviour correspondence that many researchers were initially interested in (Eagly, 1992). That is, it may be more interesting to know how our attitudes to the environment might impact our voting or consumer behaviour rather than to have to settle for an impact on aggregated pro-environmental behaviour. Likewise, knowing that our attitude to buying organic fruit is likely to correspond closely with our decision to buy organic fruit may tell us, or appear to tell us, less than expected behaviours inferred from more broadly based attitudes.
4. Some researchers have critiqued the Theory of Planned Behaviour, suggesting that it should be modified, revised or rethought in the light of moderating factors such as habitual behaviour (Sheeran et al., 2005). Ajzen (1991) acknowledges the possibility of modification, but argues that, in many cases, the impact that moderating factors – such as past behaviour – have is precisely as a result of the variables already identified in the Theory of Planned Behaviour model.
5. Geiger et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis confirms a concern that behavioural intent is easier to predict than actual behaviour. It also points to the importance for research to pay increasing attention to *contextual factors*, including issues of ownership and access and the practicalities of engaging with the target behaviour.

6 From a discursive social psychology perspective (Potter, 1996, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), the entire conceptualisation of the correspondence between attitudes and behaviour is mistaken. Rather than conceptualising attitudes as essentially unitary cognitive concepts that form – or should form – important causal antecedents of our behaviour, we could understand 'attitudes' as evaluative practices in their own right. That is, attitudes need not be considered in terms of how they relate to *a separable phenomenon of action* – we could investigate *how attitudes themselves do or accomplish certain interactional actions*. My spontaneous expression of an attitude in everyday life may do a blaming, an exoneration or an agreement, it might start or end a conversation. These are all actions – not caused by or corresponding with a separate mentalistic 'attitude', but accomplished in the 'attitudinal' or 'evaluative' talk itself. Each of these actions and any number of other talk actions are not prespecifiable from the utterance alone, but, rather, it is the precise sequential placement of any given utterance that enables it to undertake specific work or do certain types of action.

Reflective Questions

1 Does your behaviour reflect your 'attitudes'? Can you think of one case where it does and one where it does not? How can you account for the differences?
2 Think of someone you know well whose behaviour appears to be inconsistent with certain attitudinal positions you believe them to have. How can you explain this discrepancy?

PERSUASION

So far, this chapter has focused on how we might describe, measure and think about attitudes and how we can understand their relationship (or lack of it) with behaviour. This section focuses on Hovland's list of ingredients for effective persuasion and Petty et al.'s (1981) Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion. Then, in the next section, some alternative ways of thinking about both attitudes and persuasion are considered.

Ingredients of persuasion

A markedly different programme of research on attitude change was concerned not with how change was brought about through an internal quest for consistency but, rather, through external attempts at persuasion. Much of this work springs from the Yale Communication and Attitude Change Program. It was developed, as Billig (1987, 1996) notes, out of the US military's perceived need for propaganda in World War II. Specifically,

the US government approached Hovland to identify how to create effective propaganda for convincing US service personnel that the war with Japan may last longer than envisaged. This may seem an unusual propaganda aim, but the US government wanted to prepare their military for a lengthy war in advance, rather than risk seeing their morale drop as the war stretched for many months longer than they had expected – the war in fact did not last as long as the government thought it might.

Hovland et al.'s (1953) research programme (which started in the 1940s, giving rise to a large number of publications in the 1950s) identified a number of factors that were thought to be consequential for persuasion – some of these concerned the source of the message (expertise, credibility, likeability), some the message itself (numbers of arguments, strength of arguments, inclusion of counter-arguments) and others the audience (is the audience initially pro or anti the message to be communicated, how many years of schooling have they had?). The findings, which emphasise the components of source, message and audience, have sometimes been captured in the phrase 'who says what to whom' – 'who' being the source, 'what' being the message and 'whom' being the audience or other recipients of the persuasive attempt.

Perhaps the most promising component proved to be the message source, but, before considering this, it is worth briefly touching on some key findings regarding the message itself and the audience. Research on the persuasive message has suggested, for example, that more supporting arguments can lead to jurors having an increased certainty of guilt (Calder et al., 1974). Furthermore, 'strong' arguments (which marshal substantial evidence or are perceived as logically coherent) are (not entirely surprisingly) deemed more effective than arguments judged to be 'weak' (Axsom et al., 1987), though as O'Keefe and Jackson (1995) note, researchers not only have differing explanations for this phenomenon but also have yet to agree upon a credible and convincing means of measuring 'argument quality'. Regarding the audience, McGuire (1968) argued that increased self-esteem and intelligence were associated with increased comprehension, but decreased yielding – that is, confident and intelligent audiences might better understand the message, but they may be more resistant to persuasion.

One particularly important piece of research arising from Yale's work was Hovland and Weiss's (1951) investigation of the importance of 'source credibility'. They sought to understand the effect of high- versus low-credibility sources of a communication. Participants received an essay and were informed that it was written by a specific source – these sources were varied between participants to include highly valued, credible sources and low-value, less credible sources. One group of participants received an essay arguing about the practicality of building an atomic-powered submarine and were informed that it had been written by the esteemed US physicist – instrumental in developing the atomic bomb – Richard Oppenheimer. Another group received the same essay, but were told that it came from a much less credible source for the US participants at that time – the Russian newspaper *Pravda*. As Billig (1987, 1996) notes, Hovland and Weiss summed the results from high-credibility sources and did the same for low-credibility sources. Hovland and Weiss found that highly credible sources were more persuasive (by measuring subjects' reported attitudinal positions), on average, than those with low credibility.

This finding became axiomatic for subsequent research and, indeed, interventions regarding persuasion – sources had to be credible to be persuasive. It is worth noting, however – as Billig (1987, 1996) points out – this summary of Hovland and Weiss does gloss over important variations within the results. Thus, they found that, when audiences were exposed to a message about the future of the cinema, the low-credibility source had more persuasive effect than the high-credibility source. Billig observes that, while it would have been interesting to explore this inconsistent and intriguingly counter-intuitive finding, Hovland and Weiss (like most social psychologists faced with inconsistent results) largely brushed it under the carpet and concentrated on aggregate results.

Dual process models of persuasion

Some of the work arising from Hovland et al. (1953) and outlined above can give the sense of being a list of ingredients – any of which might add to persuasive effectiveness. It is perhaps not surprising that Hovland et al. (1953) developed their work in this way as, during World War II (when much of their research was conducted), the government wanted usable findings of this nature – they wanted a list of what makes for effective propaganda. During the 1980s, an approach to persuasion was developed that attempted to systematise these findings to some extent, moving from a simple list of the 'ingredients of persuasion' to a schematic map which attempted to identify how these factors relate to each other. One particularly important idea to emerge was that the audience's level of engagement with the topic led to different ways of thinking about – or processing – the persuasive message (see Box 6.6 to think through this idea).

Dual processing models Models that describe two different processes for responding to a persuasive attempt, one of which (such as the central or systematic route) typically entails greater involvement with the message itself and the other (such as the peripheral or heuristic route) more attention to the source.

Box 6.6 Try it Out

Topic importance and focus on source or message

Try and identify a time when you were planning to buy something important, such as a mobile phone or a Victorian egg timer. How did you deal with information and advertisements about the product? Can you see evidence that caring about a purchase makes it

(Continued)

more likely that we will pay attention to the message – in this case information concerning what we will get if we make the purchase?

Do you think the same holds true when we encounter a persuasive attempt that relates to our deeply held beliefs? If someone tried to convince us to change our political or religious convictions would we still be focused on the message and potentially persuaded if that was 'strong'? If this is different to the consumer information we considered above, can you think why?

Keep these thoughts in mind as we examine the following dual process models.

The **dual processing models** suggested that if the message topic is important or relevant to us, then we are motivated to hold the 'correct' attitude and, thus, more likely to think about the message. If the arguments in the message give rise to more pro-persuasion message thoughts when we engage with them, then we will be persuaded. Petty et al.'s (1981) Elaboration Likelihood Model depicts precisely this sort of dual processing (see Figure 6.4). For Petty et al. (1981), the variables of message, source and audience formed part of a dual process model – audiences might process a communication using the central route (paying attention to the message content, such as how convincing the arguments are) or they might process rather less carefully using the peripheral route (where surface-level features, such as the perceived source characteristics, become the important determiner of persuasion).

For Petty et al., the crucial determinant is *the message audience's involvement in the message topic*. Where the topic is important to an audience (high topic involvement) they will be persuaded on the basis of the quality of what is said. Where the topic is not personally relevant to an audience, then they engage in more superficial processing, focusing on features of the source, such as whether or not the source is intrinsically expert (or, in other research, credible, trustworthy, likeable or attractive).

Petty et al.'s research involved college students being presented with arguments concerning a major new exam for college students. They were told either that they themselves would have to sit the exam (of high personal relevance) or it would only come into effect in 10 years' time (of low personal relevance). The quality of the message arguments was either high (logically coherent, drawing on relevant evidence to support them) or low (unsupported by evidence) and the message was attributed to a source that was either highly expert (the prestigious Carnegie Commission on Education) or low in expertise (schoolchildren).

Petty et al.'s research found that, when students were told that they would have to sit the exam themselves (of high personal relevance), the source's expertise did not have any significant impact on the extent of their attitude change, but the quality of the message condition did: this increased the thinking about – or cognitive elaboration of – the message with greater attitude change occurring when the message quality was

high. Where students were told that the exam would be introduced in 10 years' time (of low personal relevance), it was the source's expertise that appeared to become the important determinant of the extent of the attitude change, not the message quality. Whilst this distinction – between focusing primarily on the source of a message when we do not perceive the message topic as relevant and on the message when we do – is important, Wagner and Petty (2022) argue that these different facets of persuasion can still interact. Wagner and Petty (2022) observe for example that highly credible sources are likely to receive more processing per se and that being informed that a message is from a highly credible source may lead to a more favourable processing of that message in cases where the central route is activated.

Consistent with this emphasis on cognitive engagement, Wagner and Petty (2022) argue that where people think a great deal about issues on which they hold attitudes – for example animal rights, recycling, sustainability issues – these attitudes are likely to be more accessible, and people are also more likely to feel confident in these attitudes. These attitudes about which people have high confidence – often predicated on perceiving that they have thought a great deal about the issue – typically, as Wagner and Petty (2022) suggest, 'become more persistent over time, resistant to attack, and likely to impact behaviour' (p. 131).

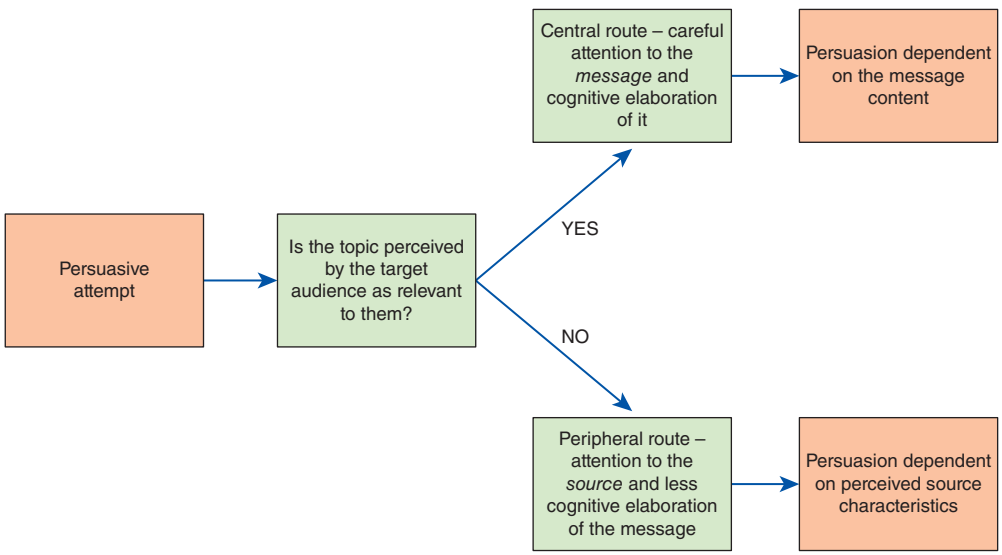

Figure 6.4 Petty et al.'s (1981) Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion

To a large extent Petty et al.'s (1981) work echoed that of Chaiken (1980), who had argued that where the target audience had high involvement with the focal issue of the persuasive message then they would engage systematically with the content of the message –

for Chaiken (1980) content was conceptualised in terms of the numbers of arguments presented – and their message-based cognitions would impact their response to the persuasive attempt. By contrast, when the target audience felt little involvement with the topic they would rely on heuristics – or shortcuts involving simple decision rules – such as the idea that arguments from likeable sources should be given more credence than arguments from unlikeable sources. This understanding of persuasion became known as the *Heuristic-Systematic Model.*

In discussing the development of the Heuristic-Systematic Model, Chaiken and Ledgerwood (2012) note that whilst it shares with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) a distinction between deeper and more superficial levels of processing of persuasive communications, some important points of divergence should be acknowledged. Crucially, Chaiken and Ledgerwood (2012) argue that whilst the ELM treats the peripheral and central routes to persuasion as 'mutually exclusive' the Heuristic-Systematic Model argues that this is just one possibility – the two routes may also occur simultaneously and even interact. This perspective suggests that where systematic processing is *congruent* with heuristic processing (for example both indicating agreement with the persuasive communication) then it can add to the impact of heuristic processing (*additivity hypothesis*). By contrast, where systematic processing is *incongruent* with heuristic processing then it can reduce the impact of heuristic processing (*attenuation hypothesis*). The influence can also work the other way with heuristic processing biasing subsequent systematic processing by leading to positive or negative *expectations* about the validity of the arguments used in a persuasive appeal.

Petty et al.'s (1981) research suggests that, when the persuasive message is highly relevant, the message becomes relatively more important than the source, whereas in cases of low personal relevance, the reverse is true. It is possible to question, however, whether this means that we are actually motivated to 'find the truth' when things are highly relevant for us. Indeed, it may be that when things are particularly important or relevant for us, that our cognitive engagement is shaped by our strong vested interests in the issue. If your university proposed to close the library and, instead, share a library facility with another institution many miles away, or double all of its fees, or convert all student accommodation to a conference-only facility, you might be motivated to find out the truth about whether the change is an improvement or not, but you might also be inclined to forcefully oppose these proposals.

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) and Jain and Maheswaran (2000) develop this line of criticism, suggesting that, in some cases, we may be motivated to hold or arrive at certain conclusions rather than objectively evaluate the information we are exposed to. Far from adopting a detached, rational processing of the evidence, we might be more inclined to justify our stance and argue against alternative positions where issues really do matter to us.

However, before seeing this as a serious blow to the ELM, it is important to take note – as Wagner and Petty (2022) argue – that 'thinking a great deal about a persuasive communication' does not necessarily mean 'processing the message in an even-handed, objective manner' (p. 127). For Wagner and Petty (2022), objective, rational thinking about the message is but one strategy adopted when the central route is activated. In many cases the interpretation of message arguments is likely to be biased rather than objective; for example we may well evaluate message arguments that conform to our existing attitudes as being stronger than those that do not.

Fear appeals

A particularly important form of persuasive messages – found since some of the earliest recorded persuasive communications (Lee, 2021) – are those which outline the risks and dangers of not taking heed of the message. This use of fear in persuasive messages was, as Olson (2021) and Konstan (2020) observe, so prevalent in the time of Aristotle that he categorised it as one example of *pathos* – the emotional dimension of persuasive talk – contrasting it with *logos* (rational or logical arguments) and *ethos* (talk concerned with the good character of the speaker themselves).

Social psychological research has largely focused on trying to identify how 'effective' messages that include 'fear-arousing material' – or 'fear appeals' as they came to be known – actually are. One of the most prominent early contributions to this was Janis and Feschbach's (1953) research into the impact of different levels of fear arousal messages concerning the importance of the type of toothbrush used. Janis and Feschbach (1953) argued that including fear-arousing material in a communication 'actually interfered with its over-all success' (p. 87) – but acknowledged that under 'certain conditions' it *could* be beneficial.

Witte (1992) similarly identified that whilst a 'fear appeal' can lead to changes in attitudes, beliefs and/or behaviours, it does not always do so. For Witte (1992) a key issue is whether the recipients of the message focus on addressing the danger ('danger control') or the feelings of fear ('fear control'). Demirtas-Madran (2021) draws on Witte's (1992) Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM), to argue that features of the message *and* the recipient's engagement will help to determine whether they are primarily concerned with reducing the danger or their sense of fear. This distinction might not sound significant, but the implications are very significant. If recipients of an important health message are mainly concerned with danger control, they are more likely to undergo changes in beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, whereas if they are focused on 'fear control' they could disbelieve the message, avoid future messages on that topic and/or seek alternative 'danger denying' versions of reality. A simplified representation of this is found in Figure 6.5.

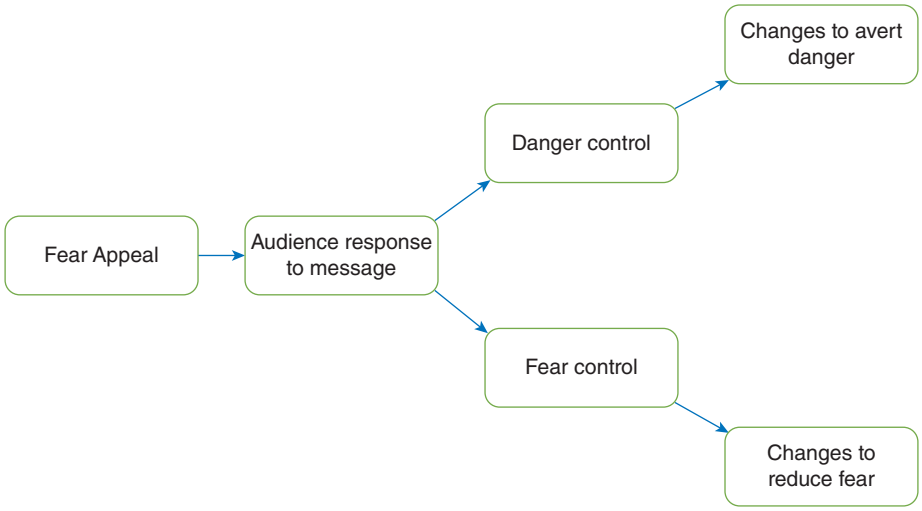

Figure 6.5 Danger control and fear control responses to fear appeal messages

Writing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stolow et al. (2020) argued that fear appeals – such as those used by various governments to reduce the spread and impact of COVID-19 – can have unintended negative effects. As Stolow et al. (2020) point out, the intended audience may avoid government information concerning COVID-19 altogether so as to avoid confronting the frightening version of reality that they associate with government messages. Audiences may turn to other sources – perhaps those that deny or minimise the potential threat of COVID-19 – so as to find, albeit ill-founded, reassurance.

Stolow et al. (2020) further argue that even when audiences do engage with fear appeal messages they may experience a reduced sense of agency or efficacy; the message may give rise to a debilitating sense of hopeless inevitability about the negative outcomes referred to in the message. These possible outcomes of avoidance and hopelessness make it less likely that the message will have any positive impact and may indeed result in a worsened situation where members of the public are less likely – rather than more likely – to follow the advice that could help reduce health risks.

This emphasis on efficacy has been one important aspect of understanding why fear appeals *sometimes* appear to work – and at other times do not. Demirtas-Madran (2021) addressed the importance of efficacy, noting that audiences are much more likely to change their behaviour if they believe that this change will be effective in avoiding the threatened danger. However convincing a fear appeal may be, if it does not give rise to a sense of efficacy on the part of the recipient it is likely to lead to either avoidance or fatalistic acceptance on the part of the recipient – rather than the behaviour change that was intended.

In a further investigation of fear and behaviour change within the context of COVID-19 – health warnings concerning the heightened risk that smokers faced during the pandemic – Brown (2021) examined the impact of participants' fear on their motivation to stop smoking.

Brown (2021) found that whilst fear of COVID-19 did not in itself have a significant relationship with motivation to quit smoking, it had a relationship *mediated by participants' beliefs*. For participants scoring higher on a scale measuring likelihood/probability of getting COVID-19, fear of COVID was positively correlated with motivation to stop smoking. In other words, fear of COVID was most likely to lead to heightened motivation to quit for those participants who judged that they themselves were likely to get COVID-19.

Much of the research into fear appeals has the laudable aim of avoiding risks and encouraging safer and healthier behaviour. However, along with much of the research into attitudes and persuasion, the rhetorical basis of this form of persuasion is relatively underexplored. This return to rhetoric and discourse is addressed in the next section.

Critical Recap

Attitude change and persuasion

1. Some of the initial research on persuasion seemed orientated to governmental concerns with usability. This may not only raise questions about the appropriation of psychological research as a tool for social influence, it also raises the possibility that much of the focus of research has been on 'getting an effect' rather than acquiring an understanding.
2. Dual process models of persuasion attempted to bring the list of 'potentially persuasive' variables (including characteristics of the source and the message) into a coherent structure.
3. Some criticisms of dual process thinking question the separation of source and message factors – suggesting that both factors could work together and independently to influence us. Furthermore, criticisms have been raised concerning the idea that the more important a topic is to us the more we will pay attention to and think about the message itself.
4. Wagner and Petty (2022) suggest that the Elaboration Likelihood Model can allow for both source and message factors operating – rather than being 'either/or'. Wagner and Petty (2022) further suggest that when a message topic is important to us we will 'think a great deal' but that does not mean that our thinking is entirely rational, objective or impartial.
5. Research on persuasion has relied on unproblematic conceptions of the independent variables. Thus, source and message characteristics have been emphasised in the work of Hovland et al. (1953) and integrated into Petty et al.'s (1981) work. By investigating real-world persuasive attempts, however, it is possible to see that some features, such as source characteristics, are constructed in the talk. That is, rather than being static, unproblematic givens – as they are in social psychological experiments – in 'real-world' persuasion attempts, these source features become *part of what is constructed and argued about*. In other words, the separation between source and message that has been so important in traditional social psychology may prevent us from understanding how it is often within the messages themselves that source characteristics are constructed and disputed – an issue that is touched on in the following section.

Reflective Questions

1 Can you think of a time when someone (directly or via some form of media) attempted to persuade you regarding an issue that you felt was important? Do you think that you paid particular attention to either the source or the message? Were you open to persuasion?
2 Watch or listen to politicians talking – perhaps in the context of a debate, or interview – what means of persuasion do they seem to employ?

RHETORICAL, DISCURSIVE AND CONVERSATION ANALYTIC APPROACHES TO ATTITUDES AND PERSUASION

Much of the research considered above conceptualises attitudes as essentially cognitive phenomena within the minds of individuals and pays relatively little attention to persuasive talk itself or the interaction through which persuasion may take place. The alternative framings of attitudes and persuasion considered here challenge prevailing assumptions about how we conceptualise both attitudes and persuasion. From the different perspectives discussed in this section we can question whether we should think of attitudes as individually held cognitive-affective mental objects associated with evaluative stances and behavioural intentions. Instead alternative framings which emphasise the importance of shared ways of thinking (or social representations) will be considered along with discursive attention to how attitudes are produced in interaction *to do interactional work*.

Likewise with persuasion, the emphasis on experimental investigations which build knowledge by manipulating the 'ingredients of persuasion' and measuring their subsequent impact on the cognitive and affective 'attitudes' of recipients is challenged by attention to *how persuasion is accomplished*, focusing on aspects often neglected in social psychology such as the rhetorical features of persuasive talk and the interactional context. By moving away from a conception of attitudes as cognitive-affective objects within individual minds, we can better understand something of the social, linguistic and interactional dimensions of attitudes and pay attention to *how* people go about the business of adopting 'attitudinal stances' and undertaking persuasion in real-world settings.

Attitudes as socially shared stances

As mentioned earlier, Billig's rhetorical approach laid great emphasis on the social context of attitudes, underscoring that we actually have attitudes about what are, *in our time and social context*, controversial issues. Billig (1996, p. 206) argued that, 'all attitudes are

situated in a **wider argumentative context**. This becomes apparent if we ask what it is that individuals have attitudes about ... people hold attitudes about controversial issues'.

Wider argumentative context The idea that attitudes can be considered in terms of their relation to the sorts of things that are argued about or debated at a given place and time. This is suggestive of a move from attitudes as simply the cognitive and/or affective products of individual minds operating in isolation from one another.

This emphasis on the social dimension of what might be termed 'attitudes' is found in a number of quite distinct 'critical' research traditions. For example, in developing his theory of social representations, Moscovici (1984) drew on Durkheim's (1898) idea of a 'representation collective' partly to challenge the markedly individualistic focus in psychology. Moscovici's theory of social representations sought to emphasise – with relevance to many areas of psychology – the importance of shared, or social, understandings of the social world. Thus, what we might take to be 'our' individual attitudes can be thought of in terms of the extent to which they arise from, reflect and are sustained and challenged by *shared* or *social* understandings or *representations* of the social world. When we report 'our attitude' on a given topic, then we are reporting something that is fundamentally *social* rather than fundamentally individualistic. Once formed, our representations of the social world are *talked about*, they are agreed with – and challenged by – others. Thus, our social encounters will help to shape whether we maintain, modify or change our representations. The illustrations of attitudinal positions here do differ from each other quite markedly – yet all at some level are sensitive to the *shared* or *collective* dimension of attitudes, rather than seeing them solely or principally in terms of individual phenomena.

Van Dijk (2019), in reviewing analyses of the talk of leading politicians in seven EU countries, argues that an important component of racism is *ideologically informed social representations*. It is worth noting that Van Dijk's (2019) definition of ideologies – as 'fairly general and abstract mental representations which govern the shared mental representations (knowledge and attitudes) of social groups' (p. 93) – has a stronger cognitive dimension than some other approaches detailed elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 13). Key to Van Dijk's (2019) thinking is the ways in which knowledge, attitudes and ideologies shared within a social group are in a mutual relationship with the cultural knowledge and norms that form 'common ground' for that group.

Van Dijk (2019) remarks on the way in which political talk about asylum seekers often mobilises the idea of a contrast between genuine and bogus asylum seekers. In one case a politician argues that 'Genuine applicants ... are frustrated and suffer from delayed applications because of those who are not genuine' (2019, p. 82). As Van Dijk (2019) points out, this mobilises an accusation that some asylum seekers are 'not genuine' – but does so in a way that preserves the speaker from seeming to be indiscriminately opposed

to *all* asylum seekers. Indeed, the speaker's opposition to the 'not genuine' asylum seekers is constructed as arising from a concern for the 'genuine' asylum seeker. It is easy to see how the common ground ideals of fairness and justice are mobilised in this talk. There is also something of the shared idea of the 'not genuine' help-seeker and the perennial distinction between the 'good and deserving' (genuine asylum seeker) versus the 'bad and undeserving' (not genuine asylum seeker).

Van Dijk's emphasis on how the common ground is mobilised in political talk echoes the concept of rhetorical *commonplaces* (Billig, 1987; Billig & MacMillan, 2005). Billig's work conceptualises an *arguing* rather than *thinking* society and thus has a less cognitive emphasis than Moscovici or Van Dijk. As noted above, in Billig's *arguing society* it is those very issues about which we can have 'attitudes' that are the matters which are up for debate – or argument – and it is not necessary or helpful to locate a cognitive component of (or corollary to) this. It is within this field of *contestable positions* that any persuasive attempt to 'change attitudes' is situated. Mobilising the idea of common ground – or in Billig's terms *commonplaces* – is a particularly potent and present feature of persuasive talk in contestable contexts.

One recurrent example of a rhetorical commonplace in political talk is, as Condor et al. (2013) highlight, the idea of the '*national interest*' (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of 'national interest' in political talk). Across the contexts of different politicians, countries and issues being argued, politicians have been found to advocate their positions and undermine those of opponents by an appeal to the 'national interest'. As Dickerson (1998), Kurz et al. (2010) and Figgou and Anagnostopoulou (2021) suggest, advocated positions are frequently found to be justified in terms of serving the 'national interest' and opposing arguments decried as going against it and merely serving some lesser purpose, such as 'self' or 'party' interest.

Miller-Idriss (2019) discusses the ways in which an appeal to the 'national interest' has been particularly important in populist nationalism. Miller-Idriss (2019) notes that opposition to international accords – such as agreements to cut emissions – are argued against by being characterised as reflecting a 'global interest' which is in opposition to the 'national interest'. Miller-Idriss points out that populist nationalists construct 'the pure people's national interests' as being 'opposed to interference from transnational groups or policies like the EU, NATO, NAFTA, the Paris climate accord, and others' (2019, p. 24).

Box 6.7 Focus

A science of democracy (Rose, 1998)

Nikolas Rose (1998) provides a compelling account of the ways in which the development of the social psychology of attitudes and persuasion has been intricately interconnected with government (particularly government in the USA) concerns regarding an accountable

basis for the exercise of power. For example, in the USA in 1929, Herbert Hoover established 'The President's Research Committee on Social Trends', which commissioned major attitude studies in order to undertake 'a complete impartial examination of the facts ... to help all of us see where social stresses are occurring and where major efforts should be undertaken to deal with them constructively. ... The means of social control is social discovery and the wider adoption of new knowledge' (Cina, 1976, p. 36, cited in Rose, 1998, p. 127). This description of the committee's remit reveals, more generally, the different facets of governmental concern with a 'scientific democracy'. Citizens had their individual attitudes measured and recorded and the aggregate of these scores, on the one hand, informs attempts to exert social control by government and, on the other, provides a means of justifying the decisions taken *in terms of democracy*.

This second point is worth dwelling on for a moment. First, the mere act (or even promise) of measuring and aggregating 'individual opinions', or attitudes, in and of itself can be a means by which governments appear to be 'listening to the will of the people' – a stance almost synonymous with being a democracy. Second, framing decisions that have been made, or are to be made, in terms of such surveys of public attitudes, such as 'we did X because of public opinion', appears to be exercising power in a way that reflects the will of the people – enabling a government to be seen as *doing democracy* and, thus, having those decisions insulated from question and challenge. The scales of Thurstone and, subsequently, Likert (who, as Rose notes, in 1939 worked in a research organisation funded by the government in the USA) became vital 'scientific' means by which individual people could be turned into measurable aggregates of opinion, against which decisions could be made and justified.

The 'attitude'-related research became still more intensive during World War II, with extremely influential programmes of research (see Hovland et al., 1953, in the previous section) being funded so as to develop better propaganda. For now, however, it can be noted that, in helping to serve up a 'science of democracy', social psychologists, such as Allport (1937, cited in Rose, 1998), argued against the 'fallacies and blind alleys' of research concerned with the 'collective mind' and approaches that emphasised the group (rather than the individual) more generally. The technology of measuring and aggregating individual attitudes delivered something serviceable for democratic governments – and resulted in some form of breaking up of the concept of the importance of the collective or group. People were understood, and investigated, via a highly individualistic 'social' psychological lens, where their individual attitudes were measured and society was understood as a statistical aggregate of individual positions on various issues.

Attitudes as action-orientated rather than purely expressive

In addition to providing a critique of highly individualistic conceptions of attitudes, some critical work has challenged the idea that 'attitudes' are singular, underlying, cognitive entities. Much of this currently predominant emphasis on underlying cognitions developed alongside governmental concerns with public opinion (see Box 6.7).

Discursive psychology has developed a particularly sustained critique of these ideas, challenging the notion that there are mental entities, 'attitudes', that are 'really' or 'fundamentally' mental objects 'beneath' or 'behind' our talk and need to be measured (using various 'reliable and valid' attitude scales). Potter (1998) provides a neat contrast between attitudes as *'preformed'* and attitudes as *'performed'*. While traditional conceptions of attitudes cast them as pre-existing, *'preformed'*, mental formations that are sometimes articulated in talk, discursive psychology is interested in how they are *'performed'*, or *done*, in talk – that is, attitudes as *action-orientated* versus *expressive*. Rather than looking for some central, underlying cognitive core attitude that is relatively stable over time, from a discursive point of view, we can examine the actions orientated to, made relevant and accomplished *in the very moment of articulating 'attitudes'*.

An enormous amount of discursive psychological research has outlined the ways in which constructions produced in talk can be understood as *performing* or *doing* action. As Potter (2010) notes, this concern with what is being done in talk has been one of the core arguments of discourse analytic and, subsequently, discursive psychological research. An important strand of early, often interview-based, discourse analytic research was the repertoires, or ways of constructing social reality, that were drawn on in talk. This work enabled examination of many ideologically relevant issues, such as the subtle forms that racism may take (by 'sympathetic', but depowering and excluding, descriptions of other ethnic groups; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), and the justification of sexist practices (by constructing differences between men and women; Gill, 1993).

As Potter (2010) discusses, more recent engagement with 'real-world' data brought renewed focus to the ways in which talk (including 'attitude talk') can be examined in terms of what is being done interactionally. This concern itself has broadened from an emphasis on how people deal with issues of accountability in their talk (see Chapter 5) to encompassing a vast range of actions in interactions, much of which is inspired by conversation analytic research (Potter, 2010, provides a brief but effective summary of this).

Here, the discursive psychological emphasis on what talk does is illustrated by brief reference to Wiggins and Potter (2003) – several of the issues identified here are also developed in Potter et al. (2020). This paper is particularly relevant to our consideration of attitude talk because it pays special attention to when and where, and with what action relevance, participants themselves treat talk as being a 'subjective' 'attitude' rather than an observation of 'objective' fact. It should be noted that the data were collected by an audio recording of 'real' (which, in this case, means it would have occurred even if the researcher had not been carrying out this research) mealtime interaction (see Extract 6.1).

Extract 6.1

1	Doris	that was lovely Lau: ↓ra [thank ↓yo:u
2	Bill	[because eh-

3	Beth	it is [love↓ly
4	Laura	[>did you enjoy that< there is
5		[some >d'you want<
6	Bill	[she T said-
7	Laura	there's a bit mo:reif you ↓want (0.6) >there's
8		a bit< more [↑sauce?

Source: Wiggins and Potter (2003, p. 522)

In Extract 6.1, Beth, Bill and Doris have just eaten a meal that Laura has cooked. As Wiggins and Potter (2003) note, the praise for the meal from Doris – 'that was lovely' (line 1) – and Beth – 'it is [love↓ly' (line 3) – is framed not so much in terms of a subjective evaluation, such as 'I enjoyed that', but, rather, as an objective report on how the meal was. By contrast, the person in receipt of the compliment (Laura) recasts the 'objective' descriptions of Doris and Beth as 'subjective' – '>did you enjoy that<' (line 4). Framing compliments as reflecting things as they are could make them appear somewhat more wholehearted than framing them more explicitly as attitudinal stances. Thus, while 'that was lovely' and 'I enjoyed that' are both compliments, arguably the former gives Laura more praise than the second, in which the appreciation of the food is implicitly at least partly to do with the particular tastes of the individual speaker. For those consuming the food, then, there is some benefit in constructing appreciation as an objective description rather than a subjective, attitudinal evaluation. By contrast, the recipient of the praise (Laura in Extract 6.1) might avoid the potentially boastful actions of confirming an objective description – 'yes it was' – or offering an assessment upgrade – 'it was stunning' – and, instead, recast the praise as the subjective, attitudinal stance of the individuals 'did you enjoy that'. Extract 6.1, then, suggests that constructing praise as a subjective, evaluative, attitudinal stance on the one hand or an objective description of the world on the other is not a neutral reflection of the praise's ontological status (that is, what it is), but, rather, a discursive move – a construction of reality that performs some specific sequentially sensitive action.

In the News

Direct action and persuasion

During 2022 several direct action approaches to persuasion rose to prominence in the news including the *Insulate Now, Animal Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil* protests. The *Just Stop Oil* activists developed a range of direct actions designed to draw attention to environmental issues and specifically our overreliance on oil by actions involving iconic art work.

(Continued)

Figure 6.6 *Just Stop Oil* protesters cover the outer casing of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* with tomato soup.

Source: Courtesy of *Just Stop Oil*

These included: gluing themselves to the frames of famous paintings, covering pastoral painting scenes with a poster depicting a more polluted landscape and throwing tomato soup at (glass protected) works of art. *Animal Rebellion* activists sought to promote the importance of animal and climate justice and a switch to plant-based alternative to dairy and meat products by 'milk pours' – protests which involved pouring milk on floors and displays in a range of supermarkets and other large stores. In one incident one of the activists whilst participating in a 'milk pour' identified the persuasive intent of the action arguing that: 'we've found that every means, other democratic means, they don't work. We've tried voting, we've tried writing petitions …'.

From the perspective of social psychology these and other examples of direct action protests do not necessarily fit neatly into a specific social psychological theory – particularly since the *verbal message* has been a crucial focus for dominant perspectives on persuasion. However, another perspective is that these instances of a relatively *civil* (rather than aggressive) demeanour being combined with *civil disobedience* actions are in some ways unsettling. Whereas overt acts of aggression might simply invite criticism, non-violent civil disobedience may be better situated to promote not only condemnation but also discussion. It could be argued that many instances of non-violent civil disobedience – such as Ghandi's Salt March and Rosa Parks' defiant refusal to give up her bus seat for standing passengers who happened to be White – helped to reframe the taken for granted as debatable. That is, they arguably recast previously relatively unquestioned and/or unthought of features of life – such as British rule over India and privileges for White Americans – as matters of opinion and debate. In this way it may be that the recent *Insulate Now*, *Animal Rebellion* and *Just Stop Oil* protests provide an illustration of Billig's (1996) identification of the ways in which seemingly stable points of consensual belief and practice can move to the more unsettled ground of debate and argumentation.

Constructing persuasive talk as reflecting 'the truth' or 'mere opinion'

Wiggins and Potter's (2003) analysis suggests that there can be an elasticity about statements – they can sometimes be constructed as being 'facts' and at other times as representing 'mere opinions'. Constructing one's own persuasive talk as being objective, beyond mere self-interest and as reflecting 'out there' reality is a key feature of multiple instances of persuasive talk. So too is decrying opposing persuasive messages as being subjective, self-serving or as reflecting mere opinion rather than facts. Several aspects of this are touched on here.

Pettersson's (2020) analysis of anti-Muslim hate speech by right wing Finnish politicians identifies some of the ways in which their contentious racist claims are positioned as merely reflecting 'out-there' realities.

Extract 6.2

1 Next Thursday the District Court will give its view on whether this text
2 is criminal hate-speech. If the District Court sees that it is, I will take
3 the matter to the Court of Appeal. During these current times, each of
4 you can think about: can the truth be condemned?

In Extract 6.2 Pettersson (2020) notes that a politician facing a charge of 'hate-speech' challenges the accusation not by arguing about the details of what was said, but rather by constructing the talk in question as being not a matter of opinion, but rather a statement of truth.

In his analysis of a broadcast political debate aired during the 2015 UK General Election, Gibson (2022) similarly notes that potential accusations of racism are often resisted by framing criticised statements as 'being based on rational, objective criteria' (p. 289) or as being 'common sense' (p. 290). Brown et al. (2021) conceptualise the widespread 'normalisation' of nationalistic and prejudice stances as examples of 'mainstreaming' of the far right, which may be accomplished not only by the far right themselves (who might 'soften' their message) but often by media and political opponents (seeking to appeal to 'popular' demands) as well.

One way in which politicians and others position their talk as rational, objective and mainstream is – as Dickerson (1997), LeCouteur et al. (2001) and Rooyackers and Verkuyten (2012) have noted – by *citing others who endorse what they are saying*. Dickerson (1997) observed the way in which Bill Clinton cited others when running as the Democrat candidate for US president. Clinton cited the endorsement of his economic plan by: 'nine Nobel prize winners and over five hundred economists and hundreds of business-people – including a lot of Republicans' (Dickerson, 1997, p. 41, transcription simplified).

In this short phrase we can clearly see how *expertise* (Nobel prize winners) and *consensus of opinion* (hundreds of economists) are mobilised. Clinton's advocacy of his economic plans is positioned as *rational* and *objective* – being corroborated by both consensus and expert opinion. But there is also the reference to endorsement by political opponents: 'including a lot of Republicans'. If Clinton had merely cited 'fellow Democrats' as endorsing the economic plan that he is arguing for then the audience could easily dismiss that endorsement as merely reflecting some sort of party allegiance on the part of those Democrats. By citing 'Republicans' as offering endorsement, Clinton is producing an endorsement that is less easily dismissed as merely reflecting the vested party political interests. A further point to note is the constructed nature of these cited others – specifically if these 'Republicans' really support him now, then should they perhaps be described as 'former Republicans'? The construction that is used – 'Republicans' – emphasises a support that transcends party political allegiance far more than 'former Republicans' would.

Persuasive talk can also involve constructing opposing arguments as reflecting subjectivity, self-interest or mere opinion. Jacques and Knox (2016) report on the ways in which statements concerning climate change – though treated as factual by scientific consensus – are often constructed as being extremely *contestable stances* (Billig, 2002). Jacques and Knox (2016) conducted an investigation of tweets referring to 'climate change' or 'global warming' in the context of Hurricane Sandy and identified multiple instances of 'denial discourses' which *delegitimise* arguments that climate change is an objective reality. This delegitimisation entailed reconstruing 'climate science' as 'climate politics'. Thus, Jacques and Knox (2016) found many instances in which arguments identifying the reality of climate change and global warming were dismissed as contestable, politically driven perspectives – and in some cases construed as being part of a wider conspiracy favouring the growth of government.

Whilst many studies have illustrated the ways in which climate change science has been positioned as contestable, it is worth remembering – as Treen et al. (2022) suggest – that in the context of research focused on social media, attention should be paid to the specific platforms that are studied. Treen et al. (2022) argue for example that the architecture of social media platforms has an impact on the quality of the climate change debate. Treen et al. (2022) point out that – at the time of writing – Reddit allowed contributions of 40,000 characters as compared to Twitter's limit of 180 characters; furthermore, Reddit is structured around themed topics – rather than followers. These features of social media platform architecture may – according to Treen et al. (2022) – lead to more deliberative debate on climate change issues that contrasts with the misinformation that is more characteristic of Twitter postings on these issues.

Treen et al. (2022) don't deny or undermine the idea that there are discourses that seek to delegitimise scientific findings on for example climate change issues as being *contestable* but do illustrate that the picture may be complex. Rather than seeing social media in monolithic terms it is arguably important to consider how the universe of media platforms may form a very varied, complex and changing landscape for the constructions of 'facts'

and 'opinions'. From this perspective attention to the specific, detailed rhetorical practices that serve to construct specific arguments – whatever platform they appear on – as based on 'mere opinion' versus 'established facts' becomes even more important.

Critical Recap

Rhetorical, discursive and conversation analytic approaches to 'persuasive talk'

1. The ideas considered in this section provide perspectives on attitudes that question the taken for granted view that they are principally cognitive-affective phenomena 'within the minds' of individuals. Instead, the perspectives examined here, in different ways, consider how 'attitude talk' can be understood as *action-orientated* and interactionally and ideologically situated.
2. These different perspectives enable both the shared and ideologically informed dimensions of attitudes to be considered. This was found to be important for considering some of the ways in which persuasion may work – for example by appealing to rhetorical *commonplaces*, or 'common ground'.
3. Similarly, seeing attitudes as stances that are interactionally located enables insights into the way in which constructing something as being a matter of 'fact' or 'attitude'/'opinion' can be important in everyday interaction (such as giving and receiving compliments).
4. The 'talk as action-orientated' perspectives examined here have focused on different aspects of the rhetorical features of persuasive talk. This has highlighted *how* advocated arguments may in different ways be constructed as objective, well-informed factual statements – with opposing views being dismissed as self-serving, subjective and ill-informed opinions.
5. Some of the theoretical bases of the ideas touched on in this section have been questioned. For example, from a discursive perspective (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), social representations can seem a blunt and heavy instrument for the moment-by-moment interactional contingencies that participants in an interaction attend to. That is, rather than invoking large, monolithic representations, people in interaction appear to construct in the moment, for the moment, versions of the world that *do* interactional work (for example, doing a compliment or complaint, agreement or disagreement, starting or ending an interaction).
6. Some of the empirical basis for certain claims have also been challenged. One example of this concerns the danger of generalising claims about discourses found on social media based on an analysis of a narrow range of platforms (specifically Twitter) – which may differ from what is found on other social media platforms.

(Continued)

7 Those working within more traditional attitude and persuasion paradigms may find that discursive and rhetorical approaches do not address key applied questions associated with the field – such as how attitudes relate to behaviour and what persuasive messages are most effective. From this perspective, discursive and rhetorical psychology may be thought of as having a somewhat deconstructionist agenda, providing criticism, but not a better method to address the questions that are important, for the traditional concerns of social psychology. For those within a discursive and rhetorical paradigm their work opens alternative questions about how attitudes are actually used and how persuasion is really done. These questions, they would argue, far from being trivial, reflect a concern with the reality of attitudes and persuasion in everyday life.

Reflective Questions

1 Think of any recent non-violent, direct-action protests. Do you think they have had an impact on attitudes towards the focal issue of the protest? Why do you think that they have or have not had an impact?

2 In this section issues were raised about how different social media vary considerably in terms of the extent to which climate change facts are treated as politically driven opinions. Try searching for 'climate change' via Twitter, TikTok and/or Reddit and via the BBC. Are there different stances towards climate change present in your top results for each search?

In a Nutshell

- This chapter has addressed the topics of attitudes and persuasion from 'traditional' – particularly cognitive-affective – as well as 'critical' – mainly rhetorical and discursive – perspectives.
- Whilst questions about 'what is an attitude' are approached from both broad perspectives, the issues raised were quite distinct.
- For cognitive-affective perspectives this was a much more focused concern with specific localised issues such as: 'how many components do attitudes have?'
- By contrast, for rhetorical and discursive perspectives more fundamental questions were raised about whether attitudes could be understood without reference to 'underlying' cognitive-affective structures.
- The 'traditional' concern with the relationship between attitudes and behaviour illustrates this difference, with 'critical' perspectives suggesting that attitudes are

'done', 'constructed' or 'performed' and in that sense are not *causally related to behaviour* – but *are* behaviour (located within interactional and ideological contexts).

- Finally, in regard to persuasion, whilst 'traditional' attitude researchers often seek to measure the impact of persuasive attempts on the 'underlying attitudes', rhetorical and discursive perspectives focus on talk itself, examining *the talk features* that orientate to 'being persuasive' and/or *the talk context* in which apparently 'persuasive talk' is situated. Keeping these different perspectives in mind can enliven the discipline with debate and lead to a deeper appreciation of how crucial, consequential and contentious our definitions may be.

SUMMARY

- This chapter first outlined some different ways of thinking about attitudes. The idea of attitudes as measurable, quantifiable, individual stances towards an attitude target was contrasted with rhetorical and discursive approaches (Billig, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). It was noted that rhetorical and discursive approaches criticised the individualistic and cognitive focus of traditional attitude research, suggesting instead a sensitivity to argumentative context and attention to what attitudes do in interaction.
- The chapter then considered different positions regarding how many components attitudes comprised and how attitudes (and attitude-related behaviour) might best be measured. Here, consideration was given to both attitude scales and implicit tests of attitudes. One important issue of debate that emerged is whether Implicit Association Tests (IATs) are helpful as they get at attitudes that people might otherwise seek to conceal (Greenwald et al., 1998). Challenges to this positive view of IATs were considered, including the work of Forscher et al. (2019), Payne and Hannay (2021) and Schimmack (2021) who question how much IAT data actually tell us about the attitudes and behaviour of individuals.
- The issue of the extent to which attitudes relate to behaviour was addressed, starting with Wicker's (1969) review casting doubt on the utility of the attitude concept. Two prominent responses to this challenge were provided in Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action and Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behaviour – both of which addressed the issue of attitude specificity (specific attitudes predict those specific behaviours) and introduced additional variables to better understand how and when attitudes may predict behaviour. Geiger's et al. (2019) meta-analysis pointed out the importance of paying attention to contextual factors when considering the relationship between attitudes and behaviour.

- The chapter then moved from a focus on attitudes to persuasion. Work on the ingredients of persuasion by Hovland et al. (1953) was outlined as was Petty et al.'s (1981) Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (ELM), which attempted to describe under what circumstances an audience would pay particular attention to either the source of a message or the message itself. Petty et al.'s ELM was considered in the light of the Heuristic-Systematic Model of Persuasion. Potential criticisms of the ELM were outlined, including the apparent focus on *either* the source *or* the message being an influence and the impression that message recipients would be thorough and objective in thinking about messages on topics that were important to them. Wagner and Petty's (2022) contribution was considered which identified that source and message factors frequently interacted with each other and that whilst the ELM suggests that people engage with more thinking on topics that are relevant to them, this does not mean that their thinking is entirely rational, unbiased or objective. Debates concerning the possible positive impact of fear appeals and their drawbacks were considered with particular attention to Demirtas-Madran's (2021) emphasis on the importance of recipients of fear appeals perceiving that they have efficacy such that they can avoid the threatened consequences if they adopt the advocated course of action.
- Rhetorical, discursive and conversation analytic research, which raises problems for traditional approaches to both attitudes and persuasion, was addressed. Attention was given to the ways in which attitudes are socially shared (for example we have attitudes on socially contested issues) and interactionally situated (we express or 'do' attitudes in interactions). The chapter considered how common-ground – or rhetorical commonplaces (Billig, 2002) – can be an important feature of persuasive talk, including as Miller-Idriss (2019) notes the appeal to 'the national interest' that is often found in right wing populist talk.
- Finally, the chapter examined the ways in which constructing things as attitudinal or objective assessments can do important work both in interactions (including the giving and receiving of compliments; Wiggins & Potter, 2003) and wider political debate. This tension between constructing a position as 'objective fact' or as reflecting 'an attitudinal stance' was also considered, one example of this being the ways in which scientific consensus around climate change was treated as a contestable political position rather than as a factual stance (Billig, 2002; Jacques & Knox, 2016). Similarly racist claims were found to be constructed by politicians adopting them as mere expressions of the out-there reality (Pettersson, 2020). Some attention was also given to how – by for example citing others who supported what was being argued – advocated positions were constructed as objective and well-informed, whilst opposing views were dismissed as subjective and self-serving (Dickerson, 1997; Gibson, 2022; LeCouteur et al., 2001; Rooyackers & Verkuyten, 2012).

Review Questions

1. How have attitudes been defined and what are the problems with these definitions?
2. Should attitudes be understood as individual cognitive evaluations or as wider social phenomena?
3. What issues do Implicit Association Tests (IATs) seek to address and what are the potential problems with IATs?
4. What does research suggest about the importance of context for understanding the relationship between attitudes and behaviour?
5. What did Hovland et al. (1953) identify as the key variables in determining the effectiveness of persuasion?
6. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, what factors will make a persuasive attempt successful?
7. Identify one potential benefit and one potential problem with using 'fear appeals'?
8. What does it mean to say that attitudes are action-orientated or that they do things in interaction?
9. What does it mean to say that source characteristics are constructed in the persuasive talk itself and what consequences might this have for thinking about persuasion?
10. When might the 'out-there reality' versus 'attitude' status of something be debated?

RECOMMENDED READING

Billig, M. (2012). Undisciplined beginnings, academic success, and discursive psychology. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *51*(3), 413–424.

Insightful reflections on the emergence and growth of rhetorical and discursive approaches including reference to Billig's classic *Arguing and Thinking*.

Brown, K., Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2023). The far right, the mainstream and mainstreaming: Towards a heuristic framework. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *28*(3), 162–179.

This paper identifies a key issue concerning how certain views at the extreme right can be normalised or mainstreamed by both advocates and their opponents.

Geiger, J. L., Steg, L., Van Der Werff, E., & Ünal, A. B. (2019). A meta-analysis of factors related to recycling. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *64*, 78–97.

An interesting meta-analysis that emphasises the importance of context in examining the relationship between attitudes and behaviour.

Potter, J., Hepburn, A., & Edwards, D. (2020). Rethinking attitudes and social psychology: Issues of function, order, and combination in subject-side and object-side assessments in natural settings. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *17*(3), 336–356.

An important overview of how attitudes have been conceptualised with an emphasis on the ways in which 'object-side' ('I think') versus 'subject-side' ('this is') assessments are used in everyday talk.