

## Unit 6

# ATTITUDE AND SOCIAL COGNITION

### Outline of the Chapter

#### Attitude

- Nature and Components of attitude
- Attitude formation
- Attitude change
- Prejudice
- Stereotype
- Discrimination

#### Social Cognition

- Meaning
- Impression formation
- Pro-social behavior

#### Introduction

Man is born in a society and from childhood itself he begins to understand the society. Through the process of socialization, he learns to modify his behaviour according to social norms. Social psychology tries to understand how society influences the behavior of a person. Man and society influence each other through

continuous interactions. On the basis of his experiences, an individual develops some beliefs about various people, institutions and situations. These beliefs are called attitude and exist within an individual in the form of behavioural tendencies.

The social cognition of an individual is a complex and a multidimensional phenomenon. Apart from attitude, attribution and impression formation are also important aspects of social cognition.

When an individual meets others in society, he frames an idea about them, on the basis of their individual qualities and characteristics, which is known as impression formation. Not only this, he also attributes their behavior to certain hidden causes, which is known as attribution. The fore mentioned behavior occurs at the cognitive level and its study is a complex job.

On the other hand, some social behaviour are simple and overt, like pro-social behavior. A detailed discussion of all these aspects of social behavior, shall be done in the present chapter.

## **Attitude**

A lot of studies have been done on this subject area of social psychology. In simple terms it can be understood that attitude is that organization of relatively permanent ideas, feelings and behavioural tendencies that are expressed towards any socially meaningful object, situation or symbol. Different psychologists have made numerous efforts to study the nature of attitude. If we talk about the nature of attitude, it can be understood three-dimensionally. Cognition, affect and behavioural tendency are its three dimensions.

The cognitive component, expresses the thoughts and beliefs of the individual towards the stimulus. This can be understood with the help of an example. Suppose we study the music related attitude of an individual. Regarding music, the individual thinks that it is a great art and everyone should learn it. This thought, reflects the cognition of the individual towards the attitude object, music. The affective (emotional) component expresses the feelings or experiences, their direction and intensity, towards the attitude object.

While talking about music or participating in a related activity, the individual experiences happiness and great joy, this is the affect related to the attitude object.

The behavioural component expresses the behavior or behavioural tendency of the individual towards the attitude object. Individual practices music daily and also performs before his friends, this reflects his behavior towards the attitude object, music. As a person thinks about the attitude object, so he feels. As he thinks and feels, so he behaves towards the attitude object. All the three components are related to each

other and there exists a consistency between them.

## **Attitude Formation**

Attitudes are mostly acquired. Many psychological phenomena are involved in attitude formation. Soon after birth, the child starts interacting with various stimuli in the environment. He develops beliefs and values towards various stimuli like objects, individuals and issues on the basis of the knowledge that he acquires about them from his parents, other family members, sources of communication, friends, teachers, etc. A child develops positive attitude towards some stimuli and negative attitude towards some others. In this way, the role of socialisation is important in attitude formation. Attitudes are learnt in a number of ways. Some of the processes involved are :

### **Association**

An individual develops attitudes towards other individuals and objects in the society. Many times, an individual develops positive or negative attitudes towards some objects or individuals as a result of their association with the positive or negative characteristics of some other object or individual. For eg. If a child always gets his favourite chocolate at a particular shop, then, along with the chocolate he also tends to develop a positive attitude towards that shopkeeper.

### **Reward and Punishment**

If a person is rewarded for exhibiting a particular attitude, then, the possibility of his exhibiting the same attitude in future increases. For eg. If a child studies for two hours daily he will definitely be praised by his parents. Praise acts like a reward for him and his attitude

towards regular studies will be further strengthened.

### **Modeling**

It is not necessary that a person learns attitudes only through the rewards and punishment that he gets. Rather, he also learns by evaluating and following the behavior of others in his social environment. This is known as social learning. A person develops his own attitude by observing whether others are rewarded or punished for showing a particular attitude or behavior. For eg. Two brothers stay in a house, where the elder one is engaged in a lot of studies and is also highly praised by his parents for the same. In such a situation, the younger brother will naturally develop a positive attitude towards studies and will start studying regularly and sincerely. He understands that if he will show such a behaviour, his parents will praise him, just like his elder brother. In this way, the younger brother develops positive attitude towards studies by observing his elder brother's behavior. This is social learning.

### **Attitude change**

Attitude change has been an important matter for study and research among psychologists. It has been a subject of interest not only for social psychologists, rather, also for politicians, leaders, goods manufacturers, advertisers etc. A survey of the entire research literature reveals that persuasive communication is useful in attitude change. A person should be verbally presented with such logical arguments which are directly contradictory to his present attitude, but listening to which he gathers new information and himself brings about a change in his attitude. Another way is that the person should be placed in a situation where he is forced to

respond or behave in a manner that is contradictory to his present attitude. Consequently, in order to logically support his behavior, he will have to change his attitude. In this way, inconsistency should be developed at the cognitive and behavioural levels, so that a person is forced to change his attitude.

### **Persuasive Communication**

The persuasion theory was propounded by Hoveland and his associates. The theory states that persuasive communication is successful in bringing about attitude change only if it produces two distinct reactions in an individual. First, it puts the person's belief or opinion into doubt and second provides answer to the question asked. In this way, when new information produces a doubt in a person with regard to his attitude and forces him to think, attitude change takes place. According to this theory, persuasive communication has four aspects. Communication source, message, target person and medium of communication.

The source of communication is effective for attitude change only if it is reliable. Reliability simply means that it can be readily believed that the communicator has complete knowledge about the subject and is thereby reliable. Other studies show that qualities of attraction, similarity and likability make the communication source more effective.

The power of the communicator is also an important factor in attitude change. The term power refers to three things. Firstly, how far the communicator can reward or punish the listener, secondly, how far the communicator expects the listener to abide by his instructions, thirdly, how much the listener believes, his compliance or defiance will get known to the communicator.

Apart from this, the style of communication also plays an important role in attitude change. Although persuasive communication is a wide subject area, a short description of the same, shall suffice here. In many situations, attitude change comes about as a result of forced compliance on the part of the individual. Many times a person has to behave in a manner that is contradictory to his attitude. For eg. A girl prefers to wear jeans and does that till her marriage. After marriage, she has to wear saree because of social pressure. Though she dislikes wearing saree, after doing so a number of times, her attitude changes and she doesn't dislike wearing it as much as she did earlier. In fact, she may start liking wearing it.

### **Theory of cognitive dissonance**

Leon Festinger emphasizes upon cognitive components in his theory of cognitive dissonance. The basic fundamental here is that the cognitive components of an attitude should be consistent with each other, i.e., they should be logically in tune with each other. If an individual experiences logically inconsistent thoughts with regard to an attitude object, then he needs to convert one of them, in order to made the two components consistent with each other. For eg.

Cognition 1. Eating fast food increases weight.

Cognition 2. I eat fast food.

In order to remove inconsistency in the above example, the person will start eating less fast food (change in Cognition 2). This will be a healthy, logical and meaningful way to remove the inconsistency. As the inconsistency gets resolved, change in attitude comes about.

### **Prejudice**

According to Feldman, "Prejudice refers to positive or negative evaluations or judgements of members of a particular group which are based primarily on the fact of their membership in the group and not necessarily because of particular characteristics of individual members." Prejudice can be understood with the help of the following example. There was a time when female prejudice was quite prevalent in our society. Females were considered physically and intellectually inferior to males. As a result, they were sympathised with or suppressed under male authority. Objectively speaking, females are physically strong and intellect is not connected to gender in any way. In this way, prejudice is an attitude that is not based on facts. Some psychologists define prejudice only in terms of a negative attitude. Whether prejudice is negative or positive in nature, it has three components, just like attitude. The cognitive component constitutes stereotypes, the affective component, prejudice and the behavioural component, discrimination. Prejudices are harmful for society and social psychologists have devised many techniques to control them. Appropriate socialization and interaction with prejudice object or person are some of the primary ways to control prejudice.

### **Stereotypes**

The cognitive component of prejudice is expressed in the form of stereotypes which are a kind of over-generalization. According to Baron and Byrne, "Stereotype is a cluster of beliefs, usually lacking a rational basis, regarding the members of some group." According to Secord

& Backman, “Stereotyping is an exaggerated form of typification that has three characteristics. 1. People identify a category of persons according to certain characteristics. 2. People agree in attributing sets of traits or characteristics to the category of persons. 3. People attribute the characteristics to any person belonging to the category.” This can be understood with the help of an example. In the Indian society, people belonging to a particular caste or clan are considered to be more intelligent or sharp. Whereas, it is not necessary that every person belonging to that caste or clan will be sharp. However, it should be noted here that stereotyping is far from common sense and wisdom.

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination is the result of prejudice. Behaviour resulting from unfair and inappropriate attitudes held towards an individual because of his membership to a particular group (based on caste, creed, gender, geographical region, etc.) is called discrimination. Discriminatory behaviour towards females and people belonging to minority groups is a commonplace thing in India, and this situation demands serious thought. Any kind of discrimination poses a threat to national progress. Discrimination never lets a society move forward on the way of progress, in fact it only makes the journey difficult.

### **Social Cognition**

Social cognition has become an important aspect of social psychology in the last few years. Under Social cognition, one studies how social environment, especially information received

from others is evaluated and used. How it is thought upon and how it is remembered and represented in memory. Studies done by social psychologists show that individuals use previous cognitive structures to organise and store new information. One such cognitive structure is schema. Whenever a person receives information from a new stimulus, he compares it with some abstract symbols (schemas) already stored in the brain and gives his responses accordingly.

Schemas help a person in giving meaning to stimuli and thereafter, in organizing them. In simple words, schemas relate to the organized system of beliefs or ideas, emotions and information about an object, that are stored in memory. Schemas can be formed for various objects and subjects. They may be too wide or too specific. Some schemas may be related to a specific person, like Mahatma Gandhi while some may be related to a specific group, like the Indian Army. In this way, Schemas are cognitive representations of abstract classes which are then projected onto people, situations or objects.

### **Impression Formation**

Every social interaction begins with the forming of impression of the people we meet. The process of knowing or understanding a person can be chiefly divided into two parts – (a) Impression formation (b) attribution.

Person who forms the impression is known as perceiver. Person about whom the impression is made is known as target. The perceiver collects information about the target, organises it and reaches conclusion about the target. In attribution, the perceiver moves ahead and deciphers why the target behaved in a particular manner.

To give reason for the behaviour of the target is the main component of attribution. Initially, the perceiver only forms an impression about the target, but, if the situation demands, he may also provide attribution for the same.

Impression formation involves the following aspects :

- (a) Selection – Only relevant and limited information about the target is focused upon.
- (b) Organisation – Selected information is added up in an organized manner.
- (c) Prediction – Predictions are made regarding the type of person, target is.

### **Pro-social Behaviour**

On the basis of their evaluation, social psychologists have classified behaviour into three types, viz. pro-social, anti-social and neutral. Pro-social behavior is considered to be the best. That behaviour of an individual, which is beneficial to others and which is considered desirable and useful in society, is known as pro-social behaviour.

Helping people with disability, establishing institutions for social service, donating blood, making arrangements for scholarship of poor meritorious students are some of the examples of pro-social behavior. Only those behaviours of an individual are considered pro-social, in which he engages without the objective of his personal benefits, rather keeping in perspective, the benefit of society at large. It is the objective of behavior that makes it pro-social or anti-social. Helping behavior is a sub-category of pro-social behavior. There are three characteristics of helping behaviour –

- (i) Person engages in it with his choice.

- (ii) Its objective is to benefit others.
- (iii) While engaging in a helping behavior, individual does not think about his personal benefits or losses from it.

### **Important Points**

- Attitude is a relatively stable organization of beliefs, feeling and behaviour tendencies.
- Cognition, feelings and behavioural tendency are three dimensions of attitude.
- Attitudes are formed as a result of association, reward and punishment and modeling.
- Prejudice is a kind of an attitude, that is not based upon an individual, rather, based upon his membership to some specific group.
- Stereotypes are an expression of the cognitive component of prejudice.
- The behavioural expression of prejudice is known as discrimination.
- The phenomenon related to the gathering of information about others in the society, its evaluation, use and representation in memory is known as social cognition.
- How the observer draws conclusion about the target on the basis of information received from the target is known as impression formation.
- In attribution an individual tries to decipher why an individual indulged in a particular behaviour.
- That behaviour of an individual, which is beneficial to others and at the same time, is also considered desirable by the



society, is known as pro-social behaviour.

## Practice Questions

### Multiple Choice Questions

- (i) Prejudice is a type of
- (a) attitude
  - (b) emotion
  - (c) thought
  - (d) behaviour
- (ii) Person who forms the impression in the process of impression formation is known as
- (a) target
  - (b) observer
  - (c) impression producer
  - (d) social psychologist
- (iii) Number of components attitude has is
- (a) 5                      (b) 2
  - (c) 1                      (d) 3
- (iv) The theory of cognitive dissonance is related to
- (a) Stereotype
  - (b) attitude
  - (c) attitude change
  - (d) pro-social behaviour
- (v) Giving reason behind some behaviour of the target, is a part of the psychological process called
- (a) stereotyping
  - (b) attribution
  - (c) Prejudice
  - (d) impression formation
- (vi) The behavioural manifestation of prejudice is known as
- (a) attitude
  - (b) maladjustment
  - (c) social distance
  - (d) discrimination
- (vii) Important for attitude change is
- (a) communication
  - (b) friendship
  - (c) discussion
  - (d) persuasive communication

### Short – answer questions

1. What do you understand by prejudice ?
2. What is attribution ?
3. Name the components of attitude
4. Briefly explain pro-social behaviour
5. Define stereotype
6. What is social cognition ?

### Long – answer questions

1. How are attitudes formed ?
2. Explain the process of impression formation in detail.
3. Discuss attitude change.
4. Why is pro-social behaviour important ?

### Answers to multiple-choice questions

- (1) a (2) b (3) d (4) c (5) b (6) d (7) d