Chapter 6: Attitude and Social Cognition

Review Questions — Review Questions

Q1 Define attitude. Discuss the components of an attitude.

An attitude is a state of mind, a set of views or thoughts about some topic (the attitude object), which has an evaluative feature (positive, negative or neutral), is accompanied by an emotional component, and carries a tendency to act in a particular way towards that object. Attitudes are not behaviour itself but a tendency to behave; they are part of cognition and cannot be observed from outside.

An attitude has three components, called the A-B-C components. The cognitive component is the thought or belief part, including the evaluation of the object. The affective component is the emotional part, i.e. the feelings of liking or disliking. The behavioural (conative) component is the tendency to act in a particular way towards the object. For example, in a 'green environment' attitude, knowing and valuing greenery is cognitive, feeling happy at greenery and sad at tree-felling is affective, and joining a tree plantation campaign is behavioural. The three components are usually consistent, but not always, so one component cannot always be predicted from the other two.

Q2 Are attitudes learnt? Explain how?

Yes, attitudes are mostly learnt through one's own experiences and through interaction with others. A few studies suggest an inborn element, but genetic factors act only indirectly along with learning. Attitudes are learnt in these ways:

1. Association: positive qualities seen in a teacher get linked to the subject taught, producing a liking for the subject.
2. Reward and punishment: praise for an attitude strengthens it (a girl honoured for regular yogasanas develops a positive attitude to yoga), while a child who repeatedly falls ill from junk food develops a negative attitude towards it.
3. Modelling: children learn respect for elders by observing parents being appreciated for showing it.
4. Group or cultural norms: unwritten rules of behaviour gradually become attitudes, such as offering flowers or fruit in a place of worship.
5. Exposure to information: media and reading, such as biographies of self-actualised persons, can create attitudes like valuing hard work.

Q3 What are the factors that influence the formation of an attitude?

The following factors provide the context in which attitudes are learnt:

1. Family and school environment: in early years parents and family members play a major role, and later the school becomes important. Learning here takes place by association, rewards and punishments, and modelling.
2. Reference groups: they indicate the norms of acceptable behaviour and ways of thinking, and shape attitudes towards political, religious and social groups, occupations and national issues. Their influence is strongest at the beginning of adolescence, when the need to belong is high.
3. Personal experiences: direct experiences can change attitudes drastically. An army driver who narrowly escaped death while his companions were killed left the army, returned to his village in Maharashtra and became a community leader, developing a strong positive attitude to community upliftment.
4. Media-related influences: audio-visual media, the Internet and school textbooks strengthen the cognitive and affective components, and later the behavioural one. The media can inform people better, but with no check on information they can also create consumerist attitudes, or be used to promote social harmony.

Q4 Is behaviour always a reflection of one's attitude? Explain with a relevant example.

No, behaviour is not always a reflection of attitude. An attitude may not be shown in behaviour, and actual behaviour may even run contrary to the attitude.

Richard LaPiere's study illustrates this. A Chinese couple travelled across the United States and stayed in many hotels, and only once were they refused service. Later, questionnaires were sent to managers of hotels and tourist homes in the same areas asking if they would accommodate Chinese guests, and a very large percentage said they would not. The negative attitude expressed was inconsistent with the positive behaviour actually shown.

Attitude and behaviour tend to be consistent when the attitude is strong and central, the person is aware of it, there is little external pressure, the behaviour is not being watched or evaluated, and the person expects a positive consequence. Sometimes the direction is reversed: behaviour decides the attitude, as in the Festinger-Carlsmith experiment.

Q5 Differentiate between prejudice and stereotype.

A stereotype is a cluster of ideas about the characteristics of a specific group, and all members of the group are assumed to possess these characteristics. It forms the cognitive component, and often consists of undesirable characteristics.

Prejudice is an attitude towards a particular group, usually negative, and often based on stereotypes. Its cognitive component is the stereotype, frequently accompanied by dislike or hatred (the affective component), and it may be translated into discrimination (the behavioural component).

Thus a stereotype is only the belief or idea about a group, while prejudice is the complete attitude, with thought, feeling and a tendency to act. Stereotypes lead to prejudices, but a stereotype by itself is just one component of prejudice.

Q6 Prejudice can exist without discrimination and vice versa. Comment.

Prejudice is an attitude (with cognitive and affective components) towards a group, whereas discrimination is the behavioural component, in which people behave in a less positive way towards a target group compared to another group they favour. The two are separate, so one can exist without the other.

Prejudice can exist without discrimination when a person holds negative views or feelings about a group but does not act on them, for instance because of law or social pressure. Discrimination can exist without prejudice when a person behaves unfairly towards a group not out of dislike but because of rules, customs or pressure from others. The text notes that our society has seen instances of discrimination with and without prejudice, based on gender, religion, community, caste, physical handicap and illnesses such as AIDS.

Yet the two very often go together, and then conflict between groups is likely. Discriminatory behaviour can be curbed by law, but the cognitive and emotional components of prejudice are harder to change.

Q7 Your friend eats too much junk food, how would you be able to bring about a change in her/his attitude towards food?

I would first try to understand what keeps my friend's attitude going and then use the factors known to bring about attitude change.

1. Source: I would act as a credible, liked source with whom my friend identifies. Following Mohsin's two-step idea, I would show regard for my friend and then change my own habits visibly, by eating healthy food myself, so that my friend imitates me.
2. Message: I would give enough information, neither too little nor too much, using a rational appeal (junk food makes one unfit and costs money) and an emotional appeal (caring for health and family). Frightening pictures should not be overdone, since too much fear turns the receiver off.
3. Cognitive dissonance: I would help my friend notice the clash between 'junk food harms health' and 'I eat it daily', so that the friend changes the eating habit to restore consonance.
4. Mode: I would talk face to face, as it is more effective than indirect messages.
5. Rewards: I would praise every healthy choice, since rewarded attitudes grow stronger.

Since a mild, still-forming attitude changes more easily than a strong, central one, patient, friendly effort should work.