BELIEF AND ATTITUDE CHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

Over the centuries, the primary cause of change has been attributed to extra-human factors. Only when social analysts moved away from historicism or developmentalism towards a view that considered individuals as actors in their own right, albeit within a given context, did it become possible to consider beliefs, values, and attitudes as integral to the processes of social change. The effort to understand how values, beliefs and attitudes are related to behavior or action led to the development of the field of social psychology. The predominance of American theorists in this field has resulted in theoretical and methodological individualism inadequate to the task of explaining belief and attitude formation and change in cultures that conceptualize the self in relationship to others -- i.e. as interdependent -- rather than as independent of others. Recent cross-national studies have provided an important corrective to the standard approach. Individuals are born into a given culture and quickly assimilate the mental constructs of that culture; most will accept and reproduce cultural meanings, practices, and social institutions, but some will seek to transform cultural ideas and practices. Culture and the psyche, it is now recognized, are mutually constitutive.

Although belief and attitude changes often follow technological innovation, environmental or economic changes, theories regarding attitude change tend to focus on intentional efforts to change attitudes with the anticipation that attitudinal change will translate into behavioral change or action. With widespread access to mass media, efforts to influence and change beliefs and attitudes rose to a higher level of intensity. Beliefs and attitudes must be communicated if they are to become known to others or influence the behaviors or actions of others. Theory-informed communication programs have evolved from a monologic, prescriptive focus on individual behavioral change to dialogic, participatory involvement in social change. Beliefs and attitudes do change, a fact which allows us to hold out hope that the world community will embrace a new attitude, the attitude that G.H. Mead termed the "social attitude," which would allow us to cherish cultural diversity even as we nourish the moral imperative of our shared humanity.

1. Introduction

Belief and attitude change cannot be studied fruitfully in isolation from the constellation of factors that contribute to their formation, maintenance and reformation. While individually held, beliefs and attitudes are, with few exceptions, collectively shared. Eras, cultures, societies, communities and individuals are, in part, defined by the beliefs they espouse and the attitudes they hold. Beliefs and attitudes are neither static nor immutable, but are spatially and temporally variable. Theological, philosophical, phenomenological and empirical interpretations all attest to the variability of beliefs and attitudes, and contribute to our understanding of those concepts. Given that beliefs and attitudes are subject to modification, permutation, even transformation, it is important to explore both the roots and the ramifications of belief and attitude change.

Perhaps since the dawning of human self-consciousness, individuals and collectivities have sought to identify and understand the ultimate causes of events, the forces that constrain or enable processes that lead to change. Over the centuries, the primary cause of change has been attributed to metaphysical providence, natural determination or the inner logic of history. Even when exceptional individuals were considered agents of change, it was their genetic endowment or accidental propensities that were cited as the cause of their contributions. In these instances, uniqueness rather than shared human characteristics was considered primary. The predominant view, however, held extra-human factors to cause change.

There have been, however, some notable exceptions. The fourteenth-century Muslim scholar, Ibn Khaldun (1336 – 1406 AD), the original founder of the "science of culture," stated clearly that the rise and decline of cultures is caused by the interaction of external conditions together with humankind's faculties, desires and habits of character. Karl Marx also alluded to the role of the individual or community when he wrote that men make their own history, but not in conditions of their own choosing, thus emphasizing the need for a science of society (sociology) and also a link to the science of personality (psychology). Early efforts to identify the role of social factors were, in part, an attempt to disassociate the study of social change from the dominance of psychology or the science of personality and mental phenomena. The efforts of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Karl Marx (1818-83) and, more significantly, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and

Max Weber (1864-1920) led to the development of sociology as the study of social processes. They criticized psychological theories for reducing social phenomena to psychological phenomena, and argued that individual consciousness has its origin in social existence. Yet it was not until the twentieth century, when Max Weber turned the focus away from systems and towards human agents and their actions, that Western social thinkers seriously began to study the role of individuals as social actors in theorizing about the course of human history. For Weber, sociology is the study of social actions and, importantly, the meanings with which actors imbue their actions.

Only when social analysts moved away from the holistic perspectives of historicism or developmentalism towards a view that considered individuals as actors in their own right, albeit within a given context, did it become possible to consider abstract human factors -- such as beliefs, values, and attitudes -- as integral to the processes of social change. Once the role of the individual in human history was taken seriously, social analysts recognized the importance of understanding the intangible factors that influence action. The effort to understand how values, beliefs and attitudes are related to behavior or action left the door open to investigate the link between psychological and social phenomena in the context of a new discipline -- social psychology -- a historically American profession. By the 1920s, social psychology was an established discipline as attested by an impressive list of journals and textbooks.

The aim of psychology and its sister discipline, social psychology, is to explain and predict behavior. Therefore, the study of beliefs and attitudes quickly assumed a central role in the social psychology literature since those factors were postulated to influence behavior. Allport's statement to the effect that attitude is the most distinctive and indispensable concept in social psychology, first asserted in 1954, is widely quoted in the literature. Attitudes, however, are grounded in higher order concepts, specifically values and beliefs, which warrant a separate discussion.

2. The Belief Construct

Beliefs, or what is held to be true or real by an individual, refer to a person's subjective judgments concerning some aspect of self or of the world. Therefore, the potential contents of beliefs are unlimited in scope. A belief associates an object with some attribute and, thus, involves cognition. Indeed, many social psychologists prefer the term "cognition", which encompasses knowledge, opinions, beliefs and thoughts in general, because beliefs express thoughts formed by human beings. For purposes of this article, however, the term "beliefs" will be used as it allows us to retain the distinction between knowledge, which Aristotle defined as "justified true belief," and beliefs, which can be true or false even though held to be true by the subject. Moreover, the term "beliefs" has gained acceptance by some prominent social psychologists (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, among others). The term "beliefs" also allows us to skirt the difficult epistemological issues that arise in any discussion of knowledge. Parenthetically, we must concede that the question "what is knowledge?" has yet to be given a final answer.

Beliefs are grounded in values, defined as that which is considered good or right. The sense of what is right or good begs the teleological question: namely, what is to be taken

as the end of our pursuit? For some philosophers, values include that which is considered obligatory, virtuous, beautiful, or true. It is common to distinguish between material, cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual values. To clarify the difference between values and beliefs, an example of each is in order. A value is reflected in the statement: "Justice is fundamental to society." An accompanying belief might be: "The society in which I live is just."

There are two types of beliefs -- personal beliefs and commonly held beliefs. When formed by individuals, uniquely stored in their minds and not shared with other people, a belief is considered personal. In the study of beliefs, the micro-perspective focuses on the individual's mental processes, structures and products (Taylor, 1998). This orientation is based on the assumption that mental or cognitive processes are essential to our understanding of human responses, whether those responses are categorized as behavior or actions, and whether those responses are social or non-social in nature (Ostrom, 1994). But, as mentioned earlier, truly personal beliefs are rare, as individuals tend to express their personal beliefs via interpersonal or mediated communication channels and, if taken up by others as is often the case, the erstwhile personal belief becomes a shared, commonly held or social belief.

Common beliefs may be held by a few individuals, a small group, a community, a society, a culture or by most of humanity. The macro, or sociological, approach to social psychology focuses on beliefs shared by members of groups, societies, or cultures. It is through the communication of shared beliefs that the social functions of planning, coordination, regulation, implementation and so forth are possible. Shared beliefs play a determining role in the explanation of social structure and social action. At the same time, the existing social structure also influences beliefs. This is attested by evidence that beliefs common in one era are often rejected in a later period.

The fact that beliefs change and are often specific to groups or cultures gives rise to the question of how beliefs are formed. Fishbein and Ajzen discuss three bases for belief formation: descriptive beliefs, inferential beliefs and informational beliefs. Descriptive beliefs arise from direct experiences.   While individuals may vary in their interpretations of what seem to be very similar experiences, people rarely doubt the authenticity of their own senses. Many of our beliefs, however, are not based on direct experiences or personal observations.

Interactions with others often lead to assumptions or formation of beliefs about unobservable or unobserved relationships, which are known as inferential beliefs. Bruner (1957) argued that there are two ways in which an individual may form beliefs not based on the observable. First, he noted that the individual may rely on commonly held assumptions about relationships between two attributes. For example, a person who is crying is assumed to be sad. The second way in which unobserved relationships are inferred is through the application of the rules of logic; e.g., if Henry runs faster than Jerry and Jerry runs faster than Barry, then (one infers) Henry runs faster than Barry.

Beliefs may also be formed on the basis of information provided by an outside source. Informational beliefs may arise from interpersonal or mediated communication. Beliefs may be the product of descriptive, inferential and informational assumptions. Typically,

whether beliefs are formed on the basis of inference or an information source, the belief will lead to the formation of a descriptive belief because the individual will come to associate an object with some attribute.

Beliefs are complex and rarely one-dimensional. Indeed, multifaceted dimensions or attributes are typically associated with any given object. For that reason, theorists have long recognized that there is no one-to-one correspondence between beliefs and other mental constructs.

3. The Attitude Construct

An attitude is a psychological tendency or mental predisposition that is expressed by evaluating an object or entity with some degree of like or dislike, favor or disfavor. Attitudes are affective, reflecting emotions or feelings attached to categories or objects (people, things, places, issues, ideas, etc.). At one time it was common to find a tripartite division of attitudes into cognition, affect, and conation. Cognition was discussed in the preceding section. Conation denotes a person's behavioral or action-oriented intentions with respect to or in the presence of an object; that is, the desire or volition to achieve an end. Affect refers to a person's feelings toward and evaluation of a given object. While cognition, affect and conation are all subsumed under the rubric 'attitude' by some social psychologists, in this paper attitude will be used to refer exclusively to the affective dimension of mental constructs. As defined above, the statement "This law is unjust" reflects a belief. An accompanying attitude could be "I am neither in favor of nor in agreement with this law."

Consonant with the notion that attitudes are of a tripartite nature is the idea that attitudes have three different types of antecedents -- cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Theorists who favor a cognitive base for attitude formation assume that beliefs are formed about the attitude object through a cognitive learning process. As people gain information about the attitude object, new or altered beliefs may result as a result of that exposure. If altered or new beliefs develop, they will be followed by changed attitudes. The cognitive basis for attitude change implies that beliefs and attitudes are formulated through the process of reasoning. In contrast, theories that postulate either affective or behavioral antecedents to attitude formation give precedence to stimuli-response mechanisms over cognitive mechanisms in explaining this process.

For theorists who postulate an affective or emotional experience as the formative base for attitudes, as was true of early theoretical accounts of classical conditioning, attitude is a result of the pairing of an attitude object with a stimulus that elicits an emotional response. The third alternative is to posit consistency between prior behavior and attitudes, arguing that individuals will express attitudes consistent with their memory of past behavior. This approach contends that individuals are reluctant to report attitudes inconsistent with their own behavior, unless behavior is thought to have been compelled by forces beyond the individual's control, in which case attitudes are less likely to change. Increasingly, theorists recognize that different - even multiple - mechanisms influence the wide range of beliefs and attitudes that individuals or collectivities hold, though cognitive theories have been in the ascendancy since the 1970s among social psychologists.

Attitudes serve a range of purposes. Attitudes may have an ego-defensive function in that they can protect one from unflattering or negative feelings towards oneself or towards one's consociates. By demeaning wealthy foreigners, for example, some economically insecure individuals may enhance their sense of self-worth. A recent variant of the ego-defensive function is referred to as terror management theory. Solomon and colleagues (1991) found that research participants who were reminded of their own mortality were less tolerant of those who threatened their beliefs and more attracted to those who confirmed their beliefs. This is highly suggestive with respect to our understanding of why attitudes become particularly entrenched during wartime. Attitudes may also serve a value-expressive function. For example, an individual who is drawn to Renaissance sculpture or classical Chinese paintings or Islamic architecture demonstrates an aesthetic sensibility that values the beautiful, if variously conceived. Quattrocento sculpture gives form to an understanding of the beautiful that is decidedly anthropocentric, while the Islamic arabesque is quintessentially theocentric. Thus, one who is captivated by a given work of art signifies underlying values. When one expresses a positive attitude towards attitude objects that satisfy personal needs and negative attitudes towards objects that thwart their goals, the attitude is considered to have an instrumental or utilitarian function. Finally, attitudes may serve a knowledge function by providing a frame of reference for interpreting the world that helps us organize or structure incoming information.

Any given attitude is typically linked to other attitudes in one's mind to form inter-attitudinal networks or structures. Social psychologists have developed multiple approaches to understanding the interconnections of attitudes; two of the most cited and studied are balance theory and ideologies. Balance theory, originated by Heider, focuses on cognitive consistency among attitudes. For example, people typically agree with those they like and disagree with those they dislike. If an individual "knows" that a respected local leader favors a new law, the individual is likely to be positively predisposed toward that law. Attitude inconsistencies, also referred to as cognitive dissonance, do occur and, according to Heider, result in unbalanced states that are unstable. He argues that unbalanced states tend to evolve into balanced states.

Mannheim defined ideology as the "total structure of the mind" of an epoch or group. In this Mannheimian usage, ideology is understood to be socially and historically determined, and not equated with false consciousness (following Marx) as it has no denunciatory intent. Instead, ideology comprises the complex network of values, attitudes and beliefs that, taken as a whole, constitute an interpretive framework through which to view the world. Revolutionary ideologies also provide guidelines to change social reality to conform to an ideal vision. A case in point is the ideological transformation that preceded the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979), when the worldview long espoused by the Shi'ite clergy was transformed from oppositional discourse into hegemonic discourse. Beliefs and attitudes among large segments of the population changed as the revolution unfolded, bringing dramatic social change in its wake.

4. Belief and Attitude Formation

As higher order constructs than attitudes, beliefs are considered antecedent to attitudes, as discussed above. While attitudes often emanate from beliefs (some attitudes have

non-cognitive bases), theorists have long realized that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between beliefs and attitudes. Complex beliefs, by definition, encompass multiple dimensions and, therefore, typically engender a range of attitudes. For example, two individuals may hold equally positive attitudes about their local leader, but for one it may reflect only one attribute (e.g. effectiveness as a leader), while for the second individual it may comprise multiple attributes (e.g. effectiveness, vision, charisma, morality, articulateness, and generosity). Beliefs about a given object can encompass positive as well as negative beliefs. For example, a person may believe that physicians are knowledgeable or give good advice, yet also believe that physicians are emotionally distant or arrogant. Moreover, any given belief does not exist alone but is part of a constellation of beliefs -- that is, a belief system -- espoused by individuals or groups. For these reasons, statistical associations between expressed beliefs and attitudes are sometimes difficult to establish. Fishbein and Ajzen, among others, would argue that this is a result of inappropriate questions rather than evidence of a weak link. In studies that rely on respondents to set forth those beliefs that are salient to them personally, correlations between beliefs and attitudes are typically positive, although not necessarily highly positive.

One example of beliefs associated with attitudes is the concept of stereotypes, or a set of beliefs about the personal characteristics of a group of people. Stereotypes, thus, reflect a constellation of beliefs about social groups and are treated by social psychologists as determinants of prejudice, or a negative attitude toward a group. Though not always acted upon, the behavioral outcome of prejudice is discrimination.

Beliefs and attitudes alike can have rational, non-rational, extra-rational or even supra-rational bases as suggested above. Rational understanding relies on human cognition -- reason alone -- to grasp essential truths about the world. "Non-rational", then, implies a belief or "understanding" that is contrary to conclusions based on human cognition or thought processes. "Extra-rational" means that which has a basis in something qualitatively distinct from cognition, e.g. emotion. "Supra-rational" refers to beliefs, knowledge or understandings derived from that which is above human cognition, e.g. revelation or revealed texts. Rational beliefs about a particular person, for example, may be accompanied by non-rational emotions. Each of us can describe a person we like despite "knowing" that the person embodies attributes we find objectionable. In contrast, we can also recall meeting someone whom we immediately "liked" without being able to explain why. Subsequently, we were likely to associate that individual with positive attributes; that is, we came to believe that the individual personified admirable qualities. In short, affective and cognitive processes can function independently. The two mental constructs are qualitatively different, yet often related. It is useful to try to ascertain when and how the two constructs are related, even as we recognize that they have different functions. The relationships between affect and cognition are complex, at times obscure, and still in the initial stages of being understood.

4.1. The Psychology of Personality

Though social psychology came into its own in the early part of the twentieth century, it would remain closely linked to its two sister disciplines. While the issue of personality

formation falls more clearly within the purview of psychology than of social psychology, it is important to mention some of the factors in personality formation that have implications for belief and attitude formation. The great debate in personality formation has centered on the relative importance of disposition versus situation. While personality theories focus primarily on internal structures and processes, it is universally recognized that situational factors influence individual behaviors and actions, though the degree of that influence is vigorously contested. Advocates of the pre-eminence of internal factors -- including heredity, instinct or dispositions -- imply that personality is essentially self-contained and stable over time and space or place. Theorists who maintain that situational factors predominate over disposition were much heartened by a series of studies in the 1970s that demonstrated the tendency among observers -- in the United States, it should be noted -- to underestimate the power of situations in influencing individual behavior while exaggerating the congruity between behavior and psychological dispositions. This misinterpretation became known as the "fundamental attribution error" after Ross (1977). More recently, advances in neuroscience have hypothesized that the interaction of nerve cells in our brains enables language, memory, and emotions to occur, giving rise to our ability to analyze situations, make decisions, and associate past events. Neuroscientists also contend that analysis of parallel processing in computers has implications for unraveling the workings of the human brain. Yet, our understanding of consciousness remains elusive.

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