

## LESSON 15

### ATTITUDES, BELIEFS AND SOCIAL COGNITION

#### SUMMARY

You are likely to have a negative or positive feeling toward an object, person etc. Similarly, our family, grandparents, neighbours, friends, political leaders and others communicate their attitudes and beliefs towards us. Our attitudes and beliefs help to understand ourselves and the people who live around us.

#### 15.1 Nature of Attitudes

By 'thinking', 'feeling' and 'behaving' we come to form an attitude towards the people, events, objects etc.

**Attitudes** are defined as our favourable or unfavourable evaluations of people, objects, and situations. An attitude consists of three aspects i.e., cognitive, affective and behavioural:

1. **Cognitive part** – It refers to the thinking that brings about the development of a belief about the attitude object.
2. **Affective part** – It refers to the direction (positive or negative feeling), intensity of a person's evaluation or the emotion experienced towards the attitude object.
3. **Behavioural part** – It is the likelihood of acting in a certain manner towards the attitude object.

These three components, thinking, feeling and behaving, come together and we form an attitude towards a person or an object. At times these components may be inconsistent and leading to holding a negative attitude toward the focus object or person. If you hold a strong attitude, all the three components of attitude remain consistent and do not contradict each other.

Attitudes are held for a long period of time and change especially when an individual undergoes new experiences. Also, they are characteristics of a person, and differ in type and strength from person to person.

#### Functions of Attitude

1. Attitudes allow us to understand the world around us. Positive attitudes help to come closer to some people and make you agree to their requests. The negative attitudes make us stay away from such people or situations.
2. Attitudes help describe the social groups that each one of us belongs to.
3. Attitudes also help us to understand 'who we are' or our identity. Attitudes express an individual's values and self-concept.
4. Attitudes help us to get support, praise and acceptance from others. People who hold similar

attitudes are attracted toward each other.

## 15.2 Formation and Change of attitudes

Attitudes are basically learnt through interaction with others and personal experiences. They are the result of many different influences yet the common aspect is that it is acquired through different types of learning.

**Direct contact** - Repeated association with the stimuli evokes positive or negative feelings. The attitude object now comes to have the same feelings. This involves classical conditioning.

**Direct instruction** - Instructions given by parents, teachers, or leaders, lead to formation of specific attitudes.

**Interaction with others:** We are usually in the company of others and adopt attitudes similar to the group we belong to. By controlling rewards and punishments children are taught specific attitudes. The use of rewards involves instrumental learning.

**Observational learning:** Attitudes are often learnt through observation of other people's actions. In addition, the educational system, media particularly television, movies, magazines and newspapers all influence attitude formation.

### Attitude Change

Attitudes once formed are difficult to change. Yet, because attitudes

are learnt they can also change with new learning. Attitude change depends upon the following factors.

**Source:** The person who delivers the message is called the communicator. The probability, that you will change your attitude is higher if the message is conveyed by experts, who are considered to be trustworthy, attractive and similar to the person receiving the message.

**Message:** The nature of message is important because it provides the information for attitude change. The message should be clear and well organized. Messages that produce anxiety and fear are more effective.

**Person:** The characteristics of the person whose attitude is to be changed plays an important role in attitude change. Attitudes that are strong, personally important, complex and interconnected are difficult to change.

Thus 'who' (communicator) says 'what' (message) to 'whom' (person for whom the communication is meant for) will determine whether attitude change will take place or not. What other people say and do has an effect on us.

## 15.3 Relationship between attitudes and behaviour

The relationship between attitude and behaviour is complex and it is often difficult to predict one's attitude from his or her behaviour. Studies have shown that there are

certain special conditions under which attitudes can predict behaviour:

1. When attitudes are strong and consistent, that is when the three components of attitude are clear and stable, they better predict behaviour. Weak, unimportant and ambiguous attitudes are less likely to predict behaviour.
2. When one holds a strong attitude or when one is conscious of one's attitude, thereby it is also easily recalled and possible to predict behaviour.
3. When attitudes have been formed through direct experience prediction of behaviour is more accurate.
4. When one acts under social pressure attitude may be expressed in diverse ways. When external influences are minimal then attitude behaviour relationship becomes strong.

When we have time to think and it is personally relevant then the attitude-behaviour relationship will be strong.

#### 15.4 Beliefs and Behaviour

Beliefs refer to the acceptance of something as truth. In fact, when one has a strong belief, it often becomes unshakable. They help us to organize our experiences in the social world and predict our own behaviour as well as the occurrence of events.

#### 15.5 Social Cognition

Social cognition refers to information received from the social world which is interpreted, analysed and remembered, such that we come to think, feel and understand about the people who live around us.

We learn to organize information in the form of schemas. Schemas are a set of interconnected beliefs, information and examples about social objects, events and people. Once formed the schemas guide our thinking and behaviour.

#### Attribution: Understand the Causes of Behaviour

We also look for the causes of one's own and other people's behaviour. This is termed as attribution. It is of two types - attributing success or failure to **internal causes** pertaining to personal reasons, and the **external causes** include anything outside the person.

#### Sources of Errors or Biases in Social Cognition

The internal or external causes lead us to commit the **fundamental attribution error**. When we perceive others, we perceive their behaviour to be caused by internal causes and say she is 'that kind of a person'. When we try to explain our own behaviour, we do it in terms of situational or external causes.

The **optimistic bias** is the tendency to believe that we are more likely

than others to experience positive events.

**Negativity bias** is the tendency to be sensitive to negative information. We give more attention and assign greater importance to such types of information.

**Counterfactual thinking** is thinking in terms of “what might have been”.

Sometimes we have a tendency to notice and search for information that support one’s beliefs and ignore information that do not conform it. This is called **confirmatory bias**. People also tend to ignore basic information and get influenced by the distinctive features of the object.

It can be said that we make errors particularly when we use heuristics as shortcuts and when we do not put in efforts to think in detail. Also, for unimportant events we use heuristics and automatic processing, whereas, for important events we use conscious processing and thus make better decisions.

### **Evaluate yourself**

1. Discuss any four important factors that help us to bring about attitude change.
2. List the conditions under which attitudes can help in predicting behaviour.
3. Describe the three aspects of attitude.