

In Attitude Strengths, Abandonments and Consequences

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7



The Causes and Consequences of Attitude Importance

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In Herzog's (1993) in-depth interviews with animal rights activists, respondents were strikingly consistent in describing their involvement in the movement as the central focus of their lives. Said one respondent, "For my wife and me, [the movement] is the most important aspect of our lives" (p. 115). Another respondent, when asked how important the animal rights movement was in her life, replied, "It is my life" (p. 116). Clearly, these individuals' negative attitudes toward what they consider to be abuse of animals are tremendously psychologically significant and motivating. Herzog's interviews revealed that movement participants were constantly thinking and talking about animal rights, trying to convince others to adopt their own attitudes, and even losing close friends and divorcing spouses as the result of their personal investments in those attitudes.

Animal rights does not seem to be a unique issue in this regard. Activists on many other issues routinely exhibit dramatic behaviors expressing attitudes that they apparently consider extremely important personally. Antiabortionists bomb abortion clinics and, in one recent case, went so far as to murder a physician who performed abortions. Environmentalists chain themselves to trees in the face of oncoming heavy machinery to prevent deforestation. Civil rights activists risk personal safety in violent confrontations with Ku Klux Klan members at their rallies. And, of course, the Vietnam War inspired many to protest in ways that risked and sometimes sacrificed their own lives.

Thus people can sometimes care very deeply about one particular attitude to the exclusion of concern about all others. More often, it seems, individuals care a great deal about a few of their attitudes, whereas they attach little or no

significance to others. This sort of variation seems as likely to describe attitudes in the political domain as attitudes in other domains, regarding consumer products, social groups, individual people, aspects of the self, places, and many more classes of objects.

What are the cognitive, motivational, and behavioral consequences of attaching personal importance to a particular attitude? What causes individuals to consider some attitudes to be very important while attaching little or no importance to others? In this chapter, we review research that has explored these questions. We begin by defining attitude importance, differentiating it from some closely related constructs, and explaining how it has been operationalized. Next, we review evidence addressing the extent to which important attitudes are strong attitudes, and we outline a series of consequences of importance. Finally, we examine the origins of attitude importance and discuss the implications of all this work for future research.

CONCEPTUAL AND OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Conceptual Definition

Attributes that differentiate strong attitudes from weak ones fall into at least three general categories (see Krosnick & Petty, ch. 1, this volume). Some of these attributes are features of the evaluation itself, such as its extremity (e.g., Judd & Brauer, ch. 3, this volume). Others are features of the cognitive structure in which the attitude is stored in memory, such as the strength of the link between the object and the evaluation (e.g., Fazio, ch. 10, this volume) or the amount of information linked to the attitude (e.g., Wood, Rhodes, & Bick, ch. 11, this volume). Other attitude attributes are subjective judgments or perceptions of the attitude, such as how confident people are in its validity (e.g., Gross, Holtz, & Miller, ch. 9, this volume).

Attitude importance falls into this latter category and is defined as an individual's subjective sense of the concern, caring, and significance he or she attaches to an attitude (e.g., Krosnick, 1988a). To attach great personal importance to an attitude is to care tremendously about it and to be deeply concerned about it. There is nothing subtle about attitude importance, particularly at its highest levels: People know very well when they are deeply concerned about an attitude, and they know just as well when they have no special concern about one. In short, attitude importance is a belief (see Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), linking an attitude to an attribute (i.e., high, moderate, or low psychological significance).

In our view, attitude importance is consequential precisely because of its status as a belief: Perceiving an attitude to be personally important leads people to use it in processing information, making decisions, and taking action. To understand when this subjective perception is most likely to have impact, it is useful to

consider Fazio's (1990a) distinction between spontaneous and deliberative processing. He suggested that people sometimes perform behaviors without actively and effortfully considering relevant attitudes (via spontaneous processing); an extreme example might be a spur-of-the-moment purchase of a candy bar at a supermarket checkout counter. On the other hand, some decisions are made only after very careful thinking about all relevant considerations, including attitudes (via deliberative processing); an extreme example would be deciding whether to marry a particular person.

We expect attitude importance to have its most pronounced effects under these latter conditions, when people can consciously make reference to their beliefs about attitude importance. Importance may also have automatic effects on spontaneous processing as well, as we suggest here. But we suspect that these effects are likely to evolve over time as the result of deliberate choices that people make based upon how much personal importance they attach to particular attitudes. Thus, whereas Fazio (1990a) expected greater effects of attitude accessibility during spontaneous processing, we expect greater effects of attitude importance during deliberative processing.

To attach personal importance to an attitude is to commit oneself to think about the object, to gather information about it, to use that information as well as one's attitude in making relevant decisions, and to design one's actions in accord with that attitude. In this sense, attaching personal importance to an attitude represents a substantial commitment, in some ways analogous to taking a job or making a long-term commitment to an interpersonal relationship. Consequently, we suspect, people are not likely to attach personal importance to an attitude lightly, in response to relatively trivial events. Just as people are "misers" with regard to cognitive processing (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991), they are probably also miserly with their attachments of psychological significance and value to attitudes: Only clear and compelling reasons seem likely to motivate such a psychological investment. So high levels of importance are unlikely to emerge unnoticed over time. Rather, deep and lasting concern is likely to be instigated by significant events of which people are well-aware.

This definition suggests that attitude importance is related to, yet distinct from, other attitudinal constructs, including centrality (Converse, 1964; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948), involvement (Apsler & Sears, 1968; Miller, 1965), ego-involvement (Sherif, 1980; Sherif & Howland, 1961), ego-preoccupation (Abelson, 1988), salience (Hoelter, 1985; Lemon, 1968), and personal relevance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, 1990). These constructs are all conceptually similar to attitude importance, in that they emphasize the significance of an attitude for an individual's psychological system. And, in fact, some discussions of these constructs have explicitly linked them to personal concern, caring, or investment. For instance, Petty, Cacioppo, and Haugtvedt (1992, p. 153) treated personal relevance as synonymous with the "importance" of an attitude object. Krech and Crutchfield (1948) discussed central attitudes in terms of their "importance to the person"

(p. 251). And Sherif and Hovland (1961) described ego-involving attitudes as those that have "intrinsic importance" (p. 197). Thus, all these constructs seem to share a common core of meaning.

However, our conceptual definition of attitude importance is critically different from the most common definitions of these other constructs in one significant respect. Whereas attitude importance is the subjective state of attaching personal importance to an attitude, these other constructs have almost always been defined in terms of links between the attitude object and the self. For example, Katz (1960) and Converse (1964) defined centrality in terms of the number and strength of the links between an attitude and the self-concept. Sherif and his colleagues defined ego-involvement as the extent to which an attitude is related to various aspects of the self (Sherif & Cantril, 1947). To Johnson and Eagly (1989), involvement is the links of an issue to an individual's "important goals and outcomes" (p. 292) or "important values" (p. 290).

In contrast, attitude importance is not *defined* in terms of links to the self. What distinguishes attitude importance from these other constructs is that it is defined as a subjective sense of significance and caring that is attached to an attitude. As we suggest later, links between an attitude and an individual's goals, values, or other aspects of the self may well be causes of attitude importance. Objective conditions presumably influence perceptions of the relevance of an attitude to one's self, and these perceptions of self-relevance may in turn shape decisions about whether or not to attach personal importance to the attitude. But it is conceivable that even in the face of information linking an attitude to oneself, a person may decide not to attach importance to it because of the future cognitive and emotional burdens such a decision would entail. Thus, links to aspects of the self are conceptually distinct from subjective perceptions of importance, although these two constructs seem likely to be bound to one another in a causal chain.

Operational Definition

This concept, a subjective sense of psychological significance, seems best measured via people's self-reports. Certainly, self-reports may be subject to intentional distortion due to self-presentation concerns or unintentional errors due to vague internal cues. Nonetheless, the most direct way to get at the critical self-perception component of the construct seems to be by asking people.

In our own research, for example, we have relied on three principal sorts of questions: asking people how important an attitude object is to them personally, how deeply they care about it, and how concerned they are about it. Thus, our operationalization has stuck close to the conceptual definition of the construct of interest. Our research has focussed on political attitudes, and we have asked people about the personal importance they attached to attitude objects rather than the attitudes themselves. Thus we have asked people, "How important is the issue of abortion to you personally?" rather than addressing the construct of interest more

directly by asking "How important is your attitude toward abortion to you personally?"

We have shied away from this latter approach because the word "attitude" is a psychologists' technical term that most people use differently than we do. We feared that there was a significant danger of misunderstanding or confusion (see Abelson, 1988, for a similar argument). In asking about objects, we have presumed that the importance people report attaching to them is an interchangeable proxy for the importance they attach to their attitudes toward those objects. And, indeed, recent studies have shown that these two sorts of judgments are indeed essentially identical for the sorts of political attitudes we examine (median $r = .94$, Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994a). Furthermore, the reliabilities of items asking about the importance of objects are significantly greater than the reliabilities of items asking about the importance of attitudes (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994a). Consequently, it seems advisable to use the former rather than the latter.

Like all other self-report rating measurement approaches employed in questionnaires, our approach to assessing attitude importance is subject to both random and systematic measurement error (see Krosnick, 1986; Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Marsh, 1986).¹ To minimize the impact of random measurement error, it is necessary to measure importance with multiple items that can be mathematically combined. And to minimize the impact of systematic measurement error due, for example, to response biases (see, e.g., Green & Citrin, 1994), it is helpful to employ different response scales for the different items (e.g., "extremely, very, . . ." vs. "a great deal, a lot, . . .") and average them together. Better yet, one can implement a multitrait-multimethod approach across a range of constructs, thus allowing for statistical isolation of method effects (e.g., Krosnick et al., 1993). Differences across people in their use of rating scales can also be eliminated by measuring the importance of a wide range of attitudes and statistically controlling for shared variance among them in a repeated-measures analysis that focuses on within-person variance in attitude importance (see, e.g., Berent & Krosnick, 1993b).² In this sense, measurement and analysis of attitude importance should be carried out just as carefully as, for instance, the measurement and analysis of reaction time (see Fazio, 1990b) in order to obtain precise data. When this is done, attitude importance appears to be a highly crystallized construct, with stability coefficients over 3- to 4-month periods averaging .83 (Krosnick, 1986).

¹In fact, the reliability of single items measuring importance is often in the range of .50 to .60 (Krosnick, 1986). Random errors appear partly because the meanings of response options such as "extremely important" or "very important" are somewhat vague (e.g., Wallsten, Rudeescu, Rapoport, Zwick, & Forsyth, 1986), so the translation of one's subjective judgments onto such verbal expressions is only approximately accurate. This problem is even greater when a rating scale involves some points labeled only numerically rather than words (see Krosnick & Berent, 1993).

²When long rating scales are used (e.g., 0-100 points), we have also found it useful to subject responses to a logarithmic transformation, which focuses analytic attention on variability at the high end of the importance continuum (Krosnick, 1988a).

Because our conceptual definition of attitude importance is distinct from the conceptual definitions of related constructs (in terms of our emphasis on subjective perception), it is not surprising that our operationalization of importance (via self-reports) is quite different from approaches that have often been used to gauge these other constructs. For example, involvement has been gauged through interest in attitude-relevant information (Bishop, 1990; Watts, 1967), amount of attitude-relevant knowledge (Stember & Hyman, 1949–1950), frequency of thought about an attitude object (Bishop, 1990), frequency of talking or reading about it (Watts, 1967), or the confluence of importance, frequency of thought, commitment, and social support (Miller, 1965). Similarly, ego-involvement has been measured via the sizes of latitudes of rejection and noncommitment (Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965), via the number of categories used in sorting attitude statements (Sherif & Hovland, 1953), and via membership in social groups known to be behaviorally involved in an issue (Hovland & Sherif, 1952). After correcting for distortion due to random and systematic measurement error, these operations and others used to gauge related aspects of strength are only weakly or moderately associated with subjective self-reports of attitude importance and do not seem to reflect a single higher order construct (Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993). Consequently, our operational definition of attitude importance appears to be appropriately intertwined with, but nonetheless distinct from, these other related constructs. The studies reviewed in this chapter included measures of importance conforming to our operational definition, even in cases where the investigators did not discuss their findings in terms of attitude importance.³

Personal Versus Collective Importance

One could envision measuring a person's perceptions of the importance of an attitude object at a variety of social levels in addition to the personal level. For example, people could be asked how important an object is for a particular social group, for a country as a whole, or for the entire world. Indeed, a number of studies have explored beliefs about *rational* importance by asking respondents what are the country's most important issues or how important is a particular issue for the country as a whole (e.g., Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1989; Neuman, 1986, p. 72; Repass, 1971).

³The correlational approach we and others have taken to studying attitude importance is quite different from experimental manipulations of related constructs (e.g., personal relevance or involvement) conducted in laboratory settings (see Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, ch. 5, this volume; Thomsen, Borgida, & Lavine, ch. 8, this volume). Studies employing such manipulations have rarely included measures of attitude importance as manipulation checks and have even more rarely examined whether importance mediated the effects of the manipulations. And of those that did measure importance, some failed to find effects on it (as we discuss later). Therefore, we will not presume that an experimental manipulation of personal relevance or outcome-relevant involvement (Johnson & Eagly, 1989) is informative about attitude importance *per se* unless importance was measured and examined directly.

Although our measures of personal importance and these measures of national importance may seem similar, they reflect distinguishable constructs. After correcting for random measurement error and correlated error due to measurement method, Fabrigar and Krosnick (1994a) found that personal and national importance clearly reflected distinct, though related, constructs (median $r = .66$). These judgments were also distinguishable in terms of their causes: Whereas personal importance was driven uniquely by self-interest (as we discuss more fully later), national importance was uniquely a function of exposure to news media coverage of the issue (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994a; see also Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Fabrigar and Krosnick also found that personal importance was a significant predictor of five indicators of psychological engagement in a political issue (attitude expression via votes in an election and via telephone calls or letters to politicians, newspapers, or magazines, attitude extremity and accessibility, and memory for attitude-relevant information), whereas national importance had essentially no measurable impact on any of the indicators. These findings are consonant with Cialdini and Petty's (1981, pp. 221–222) view of the persuasion literature as showing that forewarning's effect on an individual is regulated by his or her perception of personal importance, not the importance of an object for people generally. Because very little research has examined national importance judgments and because national importance seems markedly less consequential than personal importance, we focus here on personal importance.

ARE IMPORTANT ATTITUDES STRONG?

According to Krosnick and Petty (ch. 1, this volume), strong attitudes possess four key features: They are resistant to change, are stable over time, have significant impact on cognitive processes (such as attitude formation), and are powerful determinants of social behavior. We now turn to research that has explored whether important attitudes possess these four features.

Resistance to Change and Stability

As one would expect, several studies have shown that important attitudes are unusually resistant to change. For example, Fine (1957) demonstrated that subjects concerned about biological warfare changed their attitudes less in response to a persuasive message than did subjects who were less concerned. And Gorn (1975) replicated this same finding using the issue of Canadian separatism.⁴

⁴Consistent with these studies, Rhine and Severance (1970) found that subjects exhibited less attitude change in response to a persuasive message on a topic they considered important (increasing tuition) than in response to a persuasive message on a topic they considered unimportant (increasing acreage in a local park). However, confounds of topic and message with importance make it difficult to know exactly what accounted for the observed differences in persuasion.

Additional research has revealed bolstering of important attitudes even before a persuasive message is encountered. For example, Allyn and Festinger (1961) exposed teenagers to a message advocating a raise in the minimum driving age. Half of the teenagers were forewarned about the message's content and half were not. Forewarning reduced the impact of the persuasive message, but only among teenagers for whom it was important to have a driver's license. Along similar lines, Cialdini, Levy, Herman, Kozlowski, and Petty (1976) found that in response to the news that an individual would be discussing an issue with someone with whom they disagreed, important attitudes became more polarized, whereas unimportant attitudes became more moderate. Thus, people appear to take steps to resist change in important attitudes even before they encounter forces encouraging such change.

There is also evidence suggesting that important attitudes are unusually stable. Correlations between reports of political attitudes made by the same individuals on two or more occasions separated by months or years are stronger when the attitudes involved were more important (Converse, 1964; Feldman, 1989; Hahn, 1970; Kendall, 1954; Krosnick, 1988b; Schuman & Presser, 1981). Recently, Pelham (1991) found the same result with regard to self-views regarding the traits or features people believe they possess: The importance people attached to such self-views was positively associated with their correlational consistency over time.

However, as Krosnick (1988b) pointed out, there is a plausible alternative explanation for this greater consistency. Perhaps people are able to report their important attitudes more *precisely* than they can report their unimportant attitudes, because people presumably think more about the former and therefore have a more refined sense of how they feel about the objects involved. This precision, in and of itself, should reduce the amount of random measurement error in attitude reports and would thereby increase their over-time consistency. In fact, Kendall (1954), Converse (1964), Schuman and Presser (1981), and Feldman (1989) interpreted the relation they observed between importance and over-time consistency as reflecting a difference in this sort of reporting precision, not a difference in the stability of the underlying attitudes involved.

To test this interpretation more precisely, Krosnick (1988b) and Judd and Krosnick (1982) estimated the amount of random measurement error in attitude reports directly (via multiple-indicator structural equation models) and found a nonsignificant, weak *positive* relation between it and attitude importance.⁵ Furthermore, after controlling for random measurement error, Krosnick (1988b) found that political attitudes people considered personally important were indeed more stable over several months than were unimportant attitudes.

⁵It is also useful to note that reports of unimportant attitudes are apparently not more susceptible to systematic measurement error due to measurement method (Bishop, 1990; Krosnick & Schuman, 1988).

Krosnick and Cornet (1993) found that the relations of importance to stability and reliability varied across the 1976 U.S. presidential election campaign. During the last 4 months of the campaign, higher attitude importance was associated with greater attitude stability and slightly more random measurement error, replicating Krosnick's (1988b) findings. But during the first 5 months of the campaign, important and unimportant attitudes were equally stable, but there was strikingly more measurement error in reports of unimportant attitudes. Krosnick and Cornet (1993) concluded that the stability gap between important and unimportant attitudes is most likely to appear when people are experiencing lots of potentially change-inducing events (i.e., aggressive campaigning), rather than during the relatively quiescent times early in a campaign. Furthermore, these investigators viewed the early-campaign measurement error differences as reflecting the fact that people were not being provoked to think about their unimportant attitudes and therefore had less precise senses of them.

Another source of variation in the importance-stability relation is the positivity or desirability of the attitude one holds. Pelham (1991) proposed that people are motivated to hold positive views of all aspects of themselves. At times, however, people see an aspect of themselves as negative, and they are motivated to make that self-appraisal more positive. This is especially true, said Pelham (1991) for aspects of the self that people consider very important personally. Consider, for example, a man who considers his social skills to be lacking. If he is newly divorced and feels that his social skills are an important self-aspect, then he will be especially motivated to improve his sense of self in this domain and will therefore show greater instability than a person for whom the negative self-appraisal is less important (Pelham, 1991). But once an initially negative appraisal reaches an acceptably positive level, it is unlikely to change thereafter.

Impact on Other Attitudes and Behavior

Also indicating that important attitudes are strong, a great deal of evidence suggests that these attitudes are especially likely to shape other attitudes and behavior.

Attitudes

Theories of cognitive consistency argue that people should be attracted to others who share their attitudes and repelled by others whose attitudes conflict with their own (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958), a prediction confirmed by many studies (e.g., Byrne, 1961, 1971; Newcomb, 1961). This phenomena is one instance of situations described by Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action. This theory asserts that people's attitudes toward an object (e.g., another person) are derived from their beliefs about the attributes of the object (e.g., his or her attitudes) and their attitudes toward those attributes (i.e., agreement or disagreement with them). In any such situation, attributes toward which an

individual has more important attitudes should presumably have greater impact on the overall attitude toward the object.

A great deal of evidence on interpersonal attraction is consistent with this idea. For example, attitude similarity is a more powerful determinant of attraction to strangers (Byrne, London, & Griffitt, 1968; Clore & Baldridge, 1968) and to political candidates (Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977; Granberg & Holmberg, 1986; Krosnick, 1988a, 1990a; McGraw, Lodge, & Stroh, 1990; Rabinowitz, Prothro, & Jacoby, 1982; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Shapiro, 1969) when the attitude involved is personally important to the individual. Also, correspondence between an individual's attitudes and his or her friends' attitudes is greater when those attitudes are more important to the person (Tedin, 1974, 1980).

Comparable results have been obtained regarding part-whole attitude effects. Budd (1986) showed that the attributes of cigarette smoking that individuals considered more important were also more strongly correlated with overall evaluations of smoking. Watkins and Park (1972) and Rosen and Ross (1968) reported that attitudes toward one's body parts were more strongly correlated with overall attitudes toward one's body when attitudes toward the body parts were especially important. Individuals' self-esteem is more influenced by satisfaction with dimensions of self-evaluation that are more personally important (Hoelter, 1985; Kaplan, 1980; Marsh, 1986; Pelham & Swann, 1989; Rosenberg, 1965; Showers, 1992). And considerations of economic self-interest have more impact on presidential candidate preferences among people whose attitudes on economic issues are especially important (Young, Borgida, Sullivan, & Aldrich, 1987).⁶

Holtz and Miller (1985) found related evidence in their exploration of social groups, specifically college fraternities and commuting students. On issues about which people had personally important attitudes, they tended to agree with ingroups and disagree with outgroups. But on issues about which people had unimportant attitudes, attitudinal agreement was equivalent for ingroups and outgroups. These findings are consistent with the claim that important attitudes shape people's liking of social groups, whereas unimportant attitudes do not.

Behavior

Some of the most important goals of attitude research are to predict and explain individuals' behavior. Although the attitude-behavior relation is typically not very strong, it would seem likely that the relation would be strong in the case of important attitudes. And as expected, a number of studies have found greater attitude-behavior consistency among people for whom the attitude was more personally important (e.g., Parker, Perry, & Gillespie, 1974; Rokeach & Klicjunas, 1972). For example, Budd (1986) showed that cigarette smoking

⁶Some investigators who studied this issue (e.g., Hinckley, Hofstetter, & Kessel, 1974; Marsh, 1986; Niemi & Barnds, 1985) reported some evidence that they viewed as indicating that importance did not regulate part-whole attitude effects. However, Krosnick (1988a) reviewed a variety of methodological features of these investigations that were likely to have masked importance effects.

behavior is better predicted by attitudes toward such behavior when these attitudes are important to individuals. Jaccard and Becker (1985) demonstrated that people's use of birth control methods is best predicted by attitudes that are more important to the individual. And Krosnick (1988a) and Schuman and Presser (1981) showed that attitudes on specific policy issues were more likely to shape voting behavior in elections when the attitudes involved were more important.

Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence presented here indicates that personally important attitudes have the four features of strong attitudes: They are generally resistant and persistent, and they guide attitude formation and behavior. What are the mechanisms and processes whereby important attitudes acquire these characteristics? To address this question, we now turn to research that has examined the influence of attitude importance on exposure to and elaboration of attitude-relevant information, as well as the organization of attitude-relevant knowledge.

MOTIVATION TO PROCESS INFORMATION

In order to understand the sources of the strength of important attitudes, it is useful to consider the effects of attitude importance on the processing of information about attitude objects. Although some psychological theories have described effortful and elaborative information processing strategies in which people may engage (Craig & Tulving, 1975; Wyer & Srull, 1986), many researchers presume that people are cognitive misers and rarely engage in such intensive strategies during the course of daily life (see, e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). More recently, a third perspective has emerged emphasizing the notion that individuals do expend the energy required for elaborative processing when they have unusual motivation to do so (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

When do people decide to engage in effortful processing? One possible answer is that people will do so when information is relevant to an attitude they consider personally important. According to this view, attitude importance may help us to determine when it is adaptive and rational to take a cognitive miser's approach or a more effortful, systematic approach when considering attitude-relevant information. Two areas of research support this notion. First, several studies have demonstrated the influence of attitude importance on exposure to attitude-relevant information. Second, a number of studies have found effects of attitude importance on the degree to which people elaborate upon attitude-relevant information.

Information Exposure

Given the vast array of information that is available to people in their environments every moment of every day, people must selectively expose themselves to only some of that information. If exposure decisions are driven by motivation to process certain types of information, then we would expect attitude importance

to instigate strategic exposure. In a test of this hypothesis, Berent and Krosnick (1993a) asked subjects to evaluate political candidates based on statements they made on six policy issues. Subjects were told they could only read statements on three of the six issues for each candidate and were asked to select the three issues about which they wanted to hear. As expected, subjects selected information relevant to important attitudes at the expense of information relevant to unimportant attitudes. Consistent with this finding, Krosnick et al. (1993) found that people who considered an attitude more important reported being more interested in obtaining relevant information.

One way for people to maximize the value of information they gather is to expose themselves to information that they could *not* anticipate. Expending the effort to gather information that could have been guessed anyway hardly seems worthwhile. Therefore, Berent and Krosnick (1993a) hypothesized that making their subjects aware of a candidate's party affiliation would allow them to infer his or her position on issues about which subjects had important attitudes, so subjects' interest in exposure to this information might be reduced. As expected, subjects were able to infer issue positions quite well from candidates' party identifications. However, subjects preferred exposure to information relevant to their important attitudes just as much when given this information as when party affiliations were unknown. This suggests that exposure selections were not influenced by a deliberate, strategic strategy for maximizing information value. Instead, the preference for information relevant to important attitudes seems to have reflected a routinized, habitual behavioral tendency.

Also suggesting that attitude importance inspires selective exposure to information is research on memory by Berent and Krosnick (1993b). These investigators exposed subjects to political statements and administered free recall and recognition memory measures 1 day later. Subjects exhibited better memory for information relevant to more important attitudes when they could selectively expose themselves to such information. When selective exposure was not possible, attitude importance was unrelated to memory. Therefore it appears that attitude importance inspires selective exposure, which yields better memory for information.

Several studies of consumer attitudes documented effects of attitude importance on interest in and exposure to information. For instance, people for whom a product class was more important were more interested in reading information on how the product was made and about its relative quality (McQuarrie & Munson, 1992; Zaichkowsky, 1985).⁷ Also, people higher in product importance reported having acquired more information about the product class (Richins, Bloch, & McQuarrie, 1992).

⁷Importance in these studies was measured using the Personal Involvement Inventory (for a complete description, see Zaichkowsky, 1985) and the Revised Product Involvement Inventory (for a complete description, see McQuarrie & Munson, 1992). Both of these inventories include ratings of importance, concern, and caring.

Information Elaboration

Once exposed to information, people may be particularly motivated to process it if it pertains to an important attitude (see Petty, Haugvedt, & Smith, ch. 5, this volume). As such, attitude importance may help us determine the amount of effort to invest in processing information. Consistent with this hypothesis, people who care deeply about an attitude are more likely to report thinking about it on a regular basis (Herzog, 1993; Krosnick et al., 1993; Richins et al., 1992).

In a more formal test of this notion, Celsi and Olson (1988) examined the processing of advertisements. They found that when the topic of an ad was relevant to a personally important attitude, subjects spent more time viewing the ad, generated more thoughts about the ad, and generated higher proportions of product-related thoughts and product-related inferences. In another study, Howard-Pitney, Borgida, and Omoto (1986) had subjects watch a debate on drinking-age legislation and complete a thought-listing task. Subjects whose attitudes on this issue were more important generated more message-oriented thoughts and fewer unrelated thoughts.

Further evidence that attitude importance influences selective elaboration was reported by Berent and Krosnick (1993b). In their studies of memory for political information, free recall and recognition memory accuracy were positively related to attitude importance when subjects were given time to elaborate on the information they read or heard (see also Smith & Jamieson, 1972). But when elaboration time was not provided, the memorial advantage of information relevant to important attitudes disappeared. Therefore, it appears that attitude importance inspired selective elaboration of information relevant to personally important attitudes, thereby yielding better memory for it.

CONSEQUENCES OF EXPOSURE AND ELABORATION

If people do indeed selectively expose themselves to and elaborate upon information relevant to important attitudes, then a number of consequences should follow. These include effects upon the attitudes themselves and the knowledge bases accompanying them in memory. We review evidence on these effects next.

Extremity and Accessibility

Tesser (1978) argued that thought about an attitude increases its extremity when the attitude is accompanied by schematically organized knowledge. Therefore, as important attitudes are frequent foci of thinking, it is not surprising that more important attitudes tend to be more extreme (Borgida & Howard-Pitney, 1983;

Brent & Granberg, 1982; Cialdini et al., 1976; Converse & Schuman, 1970; Feldman, 1989; Granberg & Burlison, 1983; Howard-Pitney, Borgida, & Onoto, 1986; Krower, 1936; Krosnick, 1986, 1988a; Krosnick et al., 1993; Lemon, 1968; Rholes & Bailey, 1983; Riland, 1959; Smith, 1982). Because extremity enhances an attitude's strength (see Judd & Brauer, ch. 3, this volume), the extremity of important attitudes is likely to be one source of their strength.

Frequent thought about important attitudes should also presumably strengthen the object-evaluation association in memory and thereby enhance the attitude's accessibility (Fazio, 1989). And indeed, Krosnick (1989) and Tourangeau, Rasinski, and D'Andrade (1991) found that people reported their attitudes on political issues more quickly when those attitudes were more personally important. Also, people whose attitudes on an issue are more important are more likely to mention it as a reason for liking or disliking political candidates during election campaigns (Krosnick, 1988a). Because accessibility strengthens attitudes (see Fazio, ch. 10, this volume), the accessibility of important attitudes is also likely to be one source of their strength.

Consistency of Attitudes with Core Values

Important attitudes are presumed to be more central within attitude systems, in the sense that they are more extensively linked to other attitudes and core elements such as values (e.g., Judd & Krosnick, 1982, 1989; Newcomb, Turner, & Converse, 1965). Therefore, more extensive thinking about such attitudes should enhance their consistency with a person's basic values (Festinger, 1957; Judd & Downing, 1990; Judd & Krosnick, 1989). Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that pairs of political attitudes are more ideologically consistent when one or both of the attitudes involved are personally important (Jackman, 1977; Judd & Krosnick, 1989; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Smith, 1982). Also, more important attitudes have been found to be more consistent with ideological orientations (i.e., liberal and conservative) and with values for equality and individualism (Krosnick, 1990b).

Judd and Krosnick (1982) pointed out that simply examining zero order associations between attitudes and other attitudes or values in this way is potentially problematic. This is because variation in these correlations according to importance could reflect differences in measurement error or polarization instead of in consistency. Judd and Krosnick (1982) therefore conducted structural equation analyses to overcome these problems, and, surprisingly, they found that the factor loadings of concrete policy attitudes on a latent ideology factor did not vary with attitude importance, which questioned the importance-consistency relation. However, later work revealed that comparisons of factor loadings in this way across groups of people cannot be interpreted in the way Judd and Krosnick (1982) thought (Bielby, 1986; Williams & Thomson, 1986). Fabrigar and Krosnick (1994b) developed an analytic approach to overcome this problem

and estimate between-attitude consistency while controlling for random measurement error, systematic measurement error, and polarization. As expected, they found that important attitudes were indeed more ideologically consistent with other attitudes than were unimportant attitudes. This evaluative consistency and the structural links in memory that presumably produce it are likely to contribute to the strength of important attitudes (see Chaiken, Pomerantz, & Sorolla, ch. 15, this volume; Eagly & Chaiken, ch. 16, this volume).

Quantity and Accuracy of Attitude-Relevant Knowledge

If people selectively expose themselves to and elaborate upon information relevant to important attitudes, and if the latter yields better memory for that information, then one would expect attitudes that people consider important to be accompanied by more relevant knowledge in memory than unimportant attitudes. A number of studies have documented just such a correlation (e.g., Berent & Krosnick, 1992; Krosnick et al., 1993; Wood, 1982).

Furthermore, Krosnick (1990a) found that the knowledge accompanying more important attitudes is especially likely to be accurate. In his study, voters who attached more importance to their attitudes on a political issue were more likely to accurately perceive the positions taken on the issue by presidential candidates. Because competing candidates tend to take opposing stands on issues, a person higher in attitude importance will tend to perceive a greater discrepancy between the candidates, thus allowing him or her to make a vote choice on the basis of that one issue relatively easily (Krosnick, 1986, 1988a). Along similar lines, Campbell (1986) found that attaching importance to an attitude increased the accuracy of college students' perceptions of the distributions of opinions toward the object among others.

Another set of studies in this area examined systematic bias in perceptions of the distributions of attitudes toward an object in particular groups of people. Campbell (1986) and Krosnick (1992) found that perceptions of groups' attitudes were less susceptible to the false consensus effect (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) when the attitude involved was more important to the perceiver, and Fabrigar and Krosnick (in press) found that the magnitude of the false consensus effect to be unrelated to attitude importance. Thus, these studies are consistent with the claim that important attitudes do not bias perceptions more than unimportant ones. This is presumably so because people possess more accurate information on which to base their perceptions relevant to important attitudes.

In situations where people lack information on which to base perceptions, however, they are more likely to use their own important attitudes to infer the attitudes of others. In a study by Marks and Miller (1982), subjects were shown photographs of attractive or unattractive people and were asked to guess their attitudes on various issues. When subjects' attitudes on an issue were important, they inferred that attractive people held attitudes relatively similar to their own

and that unattractive people held relatively dissimilar attitudes. But on issues about which subjects had unimportant attitudes, these attitudes were not used in conjunction with attractiveness to infer the other people's attitudes. Thus, in the absence of any other information, importance inspires people to use available cues (e.g., their own attitudes and the other person's attractiveness) to infer others' attitudes.⁶

Berent and Krosnick (1992) demonstrated that people are very adept at using knowledge associated with important attitudes. Their study assessed the speed and consistency with which subjects made inferences relevant to political attitudes. For example, subjects were asked whether it was likely that people with particular social characteristics (e.g., old or wealthy) would take certain stands on particular political issues (e.g., favor legalized abortion or oppose gun control laws). As expected, inferences relevant to more important attitudes were made more quickly, and these inferences were made more consistently across two occasions.

Taken together, then, this literature indicates that large bodies of accurate knowledge typically accompany important attitudes. And this knowledge presumably enhances their strength (see Wood, Rhodes, & Bick, ch. 11, this volume), at least partly by enhancing people's ability to counterargue. Along these lines, Howard-Pitney, Borgida, and Omoto (1986) demonstrated that people for whom an attitude is personally important are especially likely to generate challenging cognitive responses to counter-attitudinal arguments. Thus, a tendency toward biased cognitive elaboration presumably enhances resistance to attitude change. However, although importance apparently inspires biased elaboration, it does not instigate bias in *perceptions*.

Organization of Attitude-Relevant Knowledge

The extensive exposure and elaboration apparently induced by attitude importance also appears to affect the organization of attitude-relevant knowledge in memory. The process of elaboration involves evaluating and relating newly acquired information to the knowledge already stored in a person's memory. The more one

⁶Granberg and colleagues (Brent & Granberg, 1982; Granberg & Brent, 1974; Granberg & Seidel, 1976) examined the association between people's own attitudes on political issues and their perceptions of a presidential candidate's stand on those issues. This association was positive among people who liked the candidate, and it became increasingly strong as people attached more importance to their attitudes on the issue. Granberg and colleagues viewed this evidence as indicating that high importance was associated with greater bias due to projection of one's own attitudes onto liked others. However, Krosnick (1990a) failed to replicate Granberg et al.'s findings with other national survey data. Furthermore, Granberg et al.'s finding is likely to be at least partly if not completely due to similarity-driven evaluation of the candidates and persuasion of voters by candidates (see Krosnick, in press), both of which would constitute manifestations of attitude strength. Therefore, Granberg et al.'s evidence does not provide a strong basis for inferring that importance is associated with greater bias in social perception.

thinks about a new piece of information, the more likely he or she is to recognize what it has in common with previously stored knowledge. As a result, he or she is likely to incorporate the new information into an existing knowledge structure by linking the information either to existing nodes or newly formed nodes (Anderson, 1983; Collins & Loftus, 1975). Therefore, if attitude importance does indeed inspire deeper processing of relevant incoming information, it should also yield a more elaborate organization of relevant knowledge in memory.

Berent and Krosnick (1992) explored this idea in a recent series of experiments. In one study, these investigators measured knowledge organization by examining the order in which pieces of information are retrieved from memory during an open-ended knowledge listing task (see Ostrom, Pryor, & Simpson, 1981). Specifically, items linked to a common node in a cognitive structure should be generated close to each other during such tasks. Berent and Krosnick (1992) had subjects list their knowledge about a political issue and identify pairs of pieces of knowledge they felt were similar. Knowledge organization was gauged by the average number of pieces of information listed between the two items in each pair. As anticipated, subjects whose attitudes on an issue were more important listed psychologically related pieces of knowledge closer to each other.

In another study, Berent and Krosnick (1992) examined the number of dimensions subjects used when organizing their knowledge. Subjects listed all their knowledge about a political issue, grouped together pieces of knowledge they felt were related to one another in some respect, and described why they were related. Next, subjects rated each piece of knowledge written during the listing task according to how well it fit each group descriptor. A measure of multidimensional organization was computed from the knowledge grouping and rating tasks data using a modification of the dimensionality measure proposed by Scott, Osgood, and Peterson (1979). As expected, greater attitude importance was associated with more organizing dimensions, thereby suggesting yet another source of the strength in important attitudes (see Eagly & Chaiken, ch. 16, this volume).

Conclusion

Thus attitudes people consider personally important apparently have a number of structural characteristics that distinguish them from unimportant attitudes. These features may all be the result of selective exposure to and elaboration of relevant information, and they all seem likely to enhance the strength of important attitudes.

THE ORIGINS OF ATTITUDE IMPORTANCE

Finally, we turn to the causes of attitude importance. What makes people care deeply about some attitudes they hold whereas they care little about others?

Hypotheses

At the outset of this chapter, we suggested that links between an attitude object and an individual's goals, values, or social identifications are likely to be causes of attitude importance. Although there has been little empirical work testing these relations until recently, social scientists' speculations for more than 30 years suggest that an attitude may become important to an individual for one of three reasons: self-interest, social identification, and value-relevance (e.g., Key, 1961; Modigliani & Gansman, 1979). Although these causes are not exhaustive of all the potential links to the self, they may represent three particularly potent sets and have been the exclusive focus of recent research.

Self-interest develops when one perceives an attitude to be instrumental to the attainment of one's goals, or to one's tangible rights, privileges, or lifestyle (Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980). Perceived self-interest is likely to be high among people who feel their own personal well-being may be directly affected by an issue in some immediate and concrete manner (Modigliani & Gansman, 1979; Popkin, Gorman, Phillips, & Smith, 1976). And an attitude seems likely to become important to individuals who perceive the attitude object to be linked to their material self-interests (e.g., Apsler & Sears, 1968).

Strong identification with a social group may lead an attitude to become important to a person if the group's rights or privileges are perceived to be at stake (Key, 1961; Modigliani & Gansman, 1979). Also, strong identification with a group that consensually considers an attitude to be important can serve as an impetus for importance, independent of whether rewards for the group are in question (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). Similarly, attitude importance may develop as a result of identification with reference individuals whose interests are perceived to be at stake or who are perceived to care deeply about a particular attitude.

Rokeach (1968) defined a value as an abstract belief (not specific to any attitude object) about proper modes of behavior, about how the world should be, or about the worthiness of various long-term goals. Rokeach (1973) suggested that values are "standards employed . . . to tell us which beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions of others are worth challenging, protesting, and arguing about, or worth trying to influence or change" (p. 13). In this sense, values may tell people which attitudes to consider personally important. The closer the perceived linkage between an attitude object and an individual's values, and the more important the values, the more important the attitude is likely to be to him or her (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Katz, 1960; Rosenberg, 1956).

Evidence

Tests of these hypotheses come from three different sorts of studies. One study involved introspective accounts of the sources of attitude importance. Other studies were correlational, relating attitude importance to the three classes of predic-

tors. Finally, other studies were experimental, manipulating the antecedents and examining their effects on importance. We review this work in the following section.

An Introspection Study. Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent (1995) asked people to explain why they considered various political attitudes to be personally important or unimportant. Content analyses of explanatory responses revealed that self-interest accounted for a larger proportion (59%) of the statements than social identification (18%) and values (17%). Also, 8% of explanatory statements mentioned the amount of knowledge subjects had on the issue or the amount of information acquisition or thinking they had done on the issue. No other causes of attitude importance were mentioned frequently enough to be recognized by judges.

Correlational Studies. One early correlational study uncovered the expected positive association between self-interest and attitude importance (Lau, Brown, & Sears, 1978). In that study, people who had friends or relatives serving in Vietnam in 1968 reported being more personally concerned about the war than did those who didn't, but only slightly so. But in five correlational studies conducted by Boninger et al. (1995), perceived self-interest was found to be a powerful and consistent predictor of attitude importance (mean $\beta = .33$). Social identification was also a significant predictor (mean $\beta = .33$), as was value-relevance (mean $\beta = .20$).

Boninger et al. (1995) also examined the impact on attitude importance of measures of presumed antecedents of self-interest and social identification. The issue addressed was gun control, and the antecedents were past experiences and likely future experiences of oneself or one's reference group with guns and crime. As expected, these antecedents were significant predictors of attitude importance, though weaker than their subjective counterparts. Furthermore, path analyses suggested that the presumed antecedents were determinants of their subjective counterparts, which in turn shaped attitude importance. These results attest both to the validity of the subjective measures and to their role in mediating the impact of life events on attitude importance. Thus, these studies provide further support for the role of self-interest, social identification, and values in determining attitude importance.

Experimental Studies. Experimental studies have generally provided evidence that self-interest affects importance, although their results have been somewhat mixed. For example, Apsler and Sears (1968) told undergraduates that a change in their university's policy would or would not affect them directly. This self-interest induction succeeded in increasing reports of concern, but failed to significantly alter judgments of personal importance. Similar manipulations of self-interest have succeeded in increasing attitude importance ratings in studies

by Madsen (1978) and Brickner, Harkins, and Ostrom (1986) and in one study reported by Sorrentino, Bobocel, Gitta, Olson, and Hewitt (1988), but failed in their other study and in a study by Price (1989). Unfortunately, in cases where a manipulation of self-interest succeeded in increasing attitude importance, there was no explicit assessment of whether perceptions of self-interest mediated the effects on importance.

Boninger et al. (1995) conducted an experiment designed to overcome this limitation and to provide more conclusive causal evidence. Their study manipulated self-interest by inducing some subjects to imagine a self-relevant scenario involving traffic safety. Prior research had demonstrated that imagining an event occurring to oneself increases people's estimates of the likelihood that the event will actually occur to them in the future (Anderson, 1983; Sherman, Gialdini, Schartzman, & Reynolds, 1985). Therefore, Boninger et al. (1995) expected that people who imagined being injured in a traffic accident would come to believe that they were more likely to experience that event. They further anticipated that these subjects would then perceive their self-interests to be more closely tied to the issue of traffic safety. This should, in turn, increase the personal importance these individuals attached to their attitudes on that issue. These expectations were consistently confirmed by Boninger et al. (1995).

DISCUSSION

Summary

In this chapter, we have reviewed evidence showing that important attitudes are strong, and we have explored why they are strong. In short, it seems that important attitudes embody the features of strong attitudes because attitude importance instigates exposure to and elaboration of attitude-relevant information. This heightened motivation to acquire and process information seems to enhance attitude extremity, accessibility, and consistency, as well as the quantity, accuracy, and organization of relevant knowledge in memory.

Thus, the centerpiece of our findings is the notion that important attitudes become strong via their impact on motivation to process relevant information. When faced with the whirlwind of information with which people are often confronted, each individual must decide what to attend to, what to think about, and what to act on in the future. The research we have reviewed suggests that people make these decisions partly by assessing whether incoming information is relevant to a personally important attitude. This may occur either as a result of deliberate, conscious decisions to focus on these attitudes or simply because these attitudes are especially accessible in memory and come to mind automatically as new information is encountered. In any case, the evidence presented here indicates that when information is not relevant to important attitudes, people are more likely to

behave like cognitive misers. However, when information is relevant to important attitudes, people are likely to attend to and carefully process that information.

In Fig. 7.1, we have sketched out a causal model that embodies the findings we have reviewed, as well as some additional speculations about the sources of the strength in important attitudes. Self-interest, social identification, and values are causes of attitude importance, which in turn induces selective exposure to and elaboration of relevant information. This more frequent and extensive information processing increases attitude extremity, accessibility, and consistency, as well as knowledge quantity, accuracy, and organization. Each of these latter factors presumably enhance the likelihood that one's behavior will be consistent with the relevant attitude, as well as that attitude's resistance to change and its stability. Finally, we note the likely possibility that performing attitude-consistent behaviors bolsters an attitude and thereby increase its resistance to change and its stability. Although we have omitted from this diagram reciprocal causal influence as well as some direct, unmediated causal effects, we do not mean to suggest that they may not exist. The figure simply documents what we suspect are the primary directions of causal relations and mediational patterns.

In thinking about productive directions for future research, it is useful to note that some relations illustrated in Fig. 7.1 have been supported empirically and some have not yet been tested. First, as we have reviewed in this chapter, attitude importance has been shown to be correlated with all the other variables in the model. Also, experimental manipulations of self-interest have been shown to enhance attitude importance (Boninger et al., 1995) as well as elaboration of relevant information, resistance to attitude change, attitude stability, and impact of attitudes on behavior (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty et al., ch. 5, this volume; Thomsen et al., ch. 8, this volume).

It will be useful to see whether attitude importance mediates these latter relations, as well as the effects of self-interest, social identification, and values on selective exposure and elaboration and all variables to the right in Fig. 7.1.

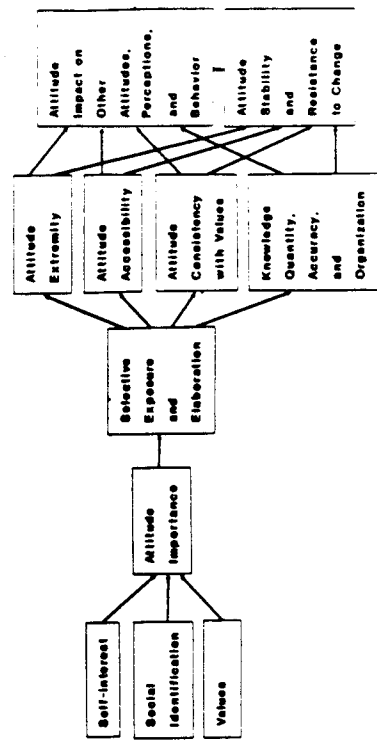


FIG. 7.1. A model of the causes and consequences of attitude importance.

However, conducting such studies is not likely to be possible in single, short laboratory sessions using conventional paradigms. The processes by which attitude importance evolves its consequences are likely to stretch over much longer periods of time. As a result, innovative techniques for these studies will need to be developed.

Importance and Involvement

Another useful direction for future research is exploring the relation of attitude importance to involvement. Involvement has typically been studied by manipulating self-interest in a newly formed attitude in a laboratory setting, whereas attitude importance has usually been studied by measuring it in correlational laboratory and field studies addressing preexisting attitudes. The fact that many findings from these two lines of research are concordant suggests that involvement and attitude importance may be the same construct (see, e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1990).

There are, however, two provocative disjunctions between the correlates of importance and involvement. Although attitude importance is positively related to memory for relevant information (Berent & Krosnick, 1993b; Krosnick, 1990a; Krosnick et al., 1993; Wood, 1982), experimentally induced involvement is apparently unrelated to memory for relevant information (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Similarly, although attitude importance is positively related to knowledge organization complexity (Berent & Krosnick, 1992), Boninger (1991) failed to find a reliable relation between induced involvement and knowledge organization. There are many possible explanations for these discrepancies (see Berent & Krosnick, 1993b), and we look forward to future research that clarifies their meaning. In the meantime, it may make sense to preserve the possibility that involvement as created in the laboratory and importance as studied in real-world settings may function differently in some regards.

The evidence we have reviewed regarding attitude importance addresses an unresolved issue in the involvement literature. Although some have speculated that attitude involvement mediates the effects of manipulated self-interest on the observed outcomes (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1990), this literature has rarely generated empirical evidence to directly support this presumption. Instead, because the goal of these studies has been to illustrate the impact of self-interest on information processing, measures of importance usually served only as manipulation checks rather than as analytic handles for mediational analysis. The findings we reviewed explicitly link attitude importance both to self-interest and to various strength-related consequences, thus bolstering confidence in the speculation that importance does indeed mediate self-interest's effect.

A debate in the involvement literature also raises some interesting questions for the importance literature. Although Johnson and Eagly (1989, 1990) and Petty

and Cacioppo (1990; Petty, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1992) agreed that involvement is a function of self-interest (or outcome-relevance) and value-relevance, these authors disagreed about whether involvement induced by self-interest affects attitude change via the same processes as involvement induced by value-relevance. Along similar lines, attitude importance induced by self-interest may or may not have the same consequences as importance induced by social identification or values. Research has not yet addressed this question, and it is therefore a worthy focus of future studies.

However, the findings described previously regarding the origins of attitude importance raise questions about tactics that have been used in the past to study this distinction. In their meta-analysis, Johnson and Eagly (1989) treated studies inducing involvement by experimental manipulations of self-interest as exploring outcome-relevant involvement (e.g., Apsler & Sears, 1968). However, Boninger et al.'s (1995) studies found that heightening objective self-interest can also inadvertently enhance social identification and value-relevance. Also, Johnson and Eagly (1989) treated nonexperimental studies that differentiated high and low involvement subjects based on self-reports of issue importance as exploring value-relevant involvement (e.g., Gorn, 1975). Yet the evidence we reviewed previously indicates that issue importance ratings reflect both value-relevance and outcome-relevance. Consequently, the presumed separation of these two sorts of involvement in Johnson and Eagly's (1989) meta-analysis may not in fact have been effective. Thus investigators must be cautious in presuming that they have operationalized one sort of importance or involvement distinctly from the other, and in making assumptions about which source of importance or involvement was manipulated or measured in any particular study.

Other Possible Origins

Self-Perception. Roese and Olson (1994) proposed a new hypothesis regarding the origins of attitude importance ratings: self-perception processes (e.g., Bem, 1972). These investigators proposed that when asked to report how personally important an attitude is, people may "look to their past behavior for clues, at least to the extent that the attitude is not initially regarded as highly important" (p. 41). Roese and Olson proposed that a person may infer that an attitude is important to him or her if the attitude has been expressed frequently in the past. They also proposed that people may use the "ease with which attitudinal information comes to mind as a heuristic cue for inferring perceived attitude importance" (p. 47). Thus, people might believe that if an attitude comes to mind quickly and easily, it must be important to them.

Roese and Olson (1994) reported an experimental study testing the notions that attitude importance might be caused by people's perceptions of prior attitude expression frequency and attitude accessibility. They had some subjects report their attitudes on an issue five times, whereas others did not express their attitudes

at all. This expression manipulation increased later reports of attitude importance and also increased the accessibility of subjects' attitudes (as gauged by response latencies). Furthermore, the effect of the manipulation on importance was mediated by accessibility. Thus, subjects apparently did not infer importance directly from frequency of expression; only accessibility directly shaped importance. This is quite sensible, because the previous expressions were "mandated" (to use Bem's term), so there was no reason for subjects to believe that their frequency was informative per se.

The finding that accessibility shapes importance is surprising to us in light of our presumption that importance evolves in noticeable ways as the result of significant events. Consistent with this view, attitude accessibility can explain only a very small proportion of the variance in importance, 10% at most according to Krosnick et al.'s evidence (1993). Also, in Boninger et al.'s (1995) introspection study, less than 10% of the explanations for importance ratings made reference to self-perception indicators such as knowledge levels. Consequently, we suspect that accessibility is not a major source of importance as it exists in everyday life.

Nonetheless, Roese and Olson's (1994) results suggest some interesting possible reinterpretations of previous studies on repeated expression. A number of such studies have documented effects of repeated attitude expression (e.g., stronger attitudinal effects on information processing) that have been attributed to attitude accessibility (see Fazio, ch. 10, this volume). However, Roese and Olson's (1994) finding suggests that these effects may instead have been mediated by attitude importance. That is, attitude importance may have been the *proximal* cause of the effects, whereas repeated expression (and perhaps accessibility) may have been more distal causes, farther back in the causal chain. We look forward to future research exploring these possibilities.

Dissonance Reduction. Another possible cause of attitude importance is suggested by Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. He argued that dissonance is likely to be most powerful when two inconsistent cognitions are highly important to an individual. And one way to reduce this dissonance, Festinger proposed, is to reduce the importance attached to one or both of them. Thus, some of the over-time dynamics in attitude importance may be attributable to the emergence of situations in which cognitive dissonance is created and then resolved. Remarkably, this notion has yet to be tested directly.

However, a related hypothesis suggested by Pelham (1991) has received some empirical attention. He speculated that the importance people attach to their self-views may be determined partly by self-enhancement and self-protection motives. The notion here is that people attach importance to positive self-views and consider negative self-views to be unimportant in order to feel good about themselves. This notion may apply more generally to all types of attitudes: People may attach importance to attitudes they are proud of and may avoid attaching

importance to attitudes about which they might be embarrassed. In line with Pelham's (1991) hypothesis, people report attaching more personal importance to positive/complimentary self-views on which they fare favorably than to negative/threatening self-views (Pelham, 1991; Showers, 1992). This notion certainly deserves empirical scrutiny in terms of its applicability to attitudes generally.

Coda

In closing, it seems sensible to address the normative question of whether attitude importance is good or bad, adaptive or harmful, helpful or damaging. And our sense from the literature described previously is that attitude importance serves a positive function for people, in that it makes their lives easier and more manageable by telling them where to focus their time, effort, and energy. That is, importance guides the selection of adaptive strategies in coping with the enormous amount of information in the world around us. We ignore or pay only cursory attention to information relevant to unimportant attitudes so that we have the time and energy to carefully attend to information relevant to important ones. Thus, attitude importance allows us to minimize the cognitive costs of social perception, evaluation, and decision making yet maximize subjective expected utility. In this sense, important attitudes may indeed be indispensable.

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7. CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ATTITUDE IMPORTANCE
- 189
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