

Attitude: History of Concept

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Abstract

The concept 'attitude' became used widely in several social science disciplines to indicate a relatively stable evaluative stance of a person toward any object. Originally from the language of painting and sculpture, the term became used to designate an inner preparedness of some stability. Rivaling with competitors in the public space around the turn of the twentieth century such as instinct, imitation, habit, etc., attitude outperformed others primarily because Thurstone suggested a measurement technique which became within a very short period of time the standard technique to gauge opinions. A set of items which could be scaled between opposing extremes is then an attitude variable and the single items are attitudes.

'Attitude' entered the vocabulary of the social and behavioral sciences early in the twentieth century after the term had traveled for a while in other corners of language uses. A look at the prehistory of the concept reveals some of the advantages and problems it later experienced. Unlike many other social science concepts, the word 'attitude' existed in more than one Indo-European language in the same form before the social sciences captured it for their own use: *Attitudine* in Italian, *attitude* first in French and then in English. The word goes back to the medieval Latin *aptitude* and the classical *aptus* (*Oxford English Dictionary*; Fleming, 1967: 292). Before becoming a social science concept, 'attitude' was used in painting and in particular in sculpture to describe a bodily pose of an individual who presents him/herself: as in present day usage 'to strike an attitude.' Here it is less clear whether the term is directed more to the person's preparedness and execution or the position reached finally. By referring to something located inside a human and not easily observable, 'attitude' encompassed something which became attractive for social scientists.

According to Fleming (1967: 293–297) Charles Darwin made use of attitude for the first time conceptually. In *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) he discusses the, for him surprising, fact that particular strong emotions are accompanied by gestures, bodily postures expressing the emotion where a vis-à-vis can understand the emotion of the other by reading the body gestures. Attitudes are, for Darwin in this book, strong motor expressions of a particular emotion. Since Darwin was read widely one can presume that his repeated use of the term attitude functioned as the way in which the term entered the language of the social sciences.

Fleming (1967) discusses a second way attitude could have become the concept it was from the 1920s onward. Back then psychologists worldwide looked at Germany as the most mature representation of the discipline, and since the majority of professional psychologists and other social and behavioral scientists of that time not only read German but often studied in Germany, it could have been the case that the translation of the German *Einstellung* as attitude was the way attitude became the concept we know today. In this case, it would have been the Würzburg School of *Denkpsychologie* – Oswald Külpe, Narziß Ach, and their pupils – who developed in their experiments their own conceptual language. Someone has to solve a task (*Aufgabe*) and the experimental psychologists interviewed the

participants afterward about their inner reasoning, their thinking while executing the task, inviting the selected participants to execute introspection, then regarded as the bridge into the brain, so to speak. German *Denkpsychologen* used several composite words to describe what happened in the person before executing an action. One single word expression for this phenomenon inside an actor was *Einstellung* and when E.B. Titchener worked on a translation of works from the Würzburg School he had chosen attitude for it.

Furthermore we need to recognize that attitude had to fight against the prominent rivals occupying the intellectual space of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses. Imitation following Gabriel Tarde and instinct with no similar prominent coiner populated the textbooks of social psychology and sociology of the early years of the twentieth century together with habit as more or less synonymous expressions. But also belief, opinion, wish, idea, mental and emotional 'states,' etc., populated the universe from which social scientists took out what pleased them to speak about unobservable moves in people's inner life. Even if one used 'attitude,' he was free to define it as it pleased the author. For instance, Franklin H. Giddings from Columbia University in his textbook *The Principles of Sociology: An Analysis of the Phenomena of Association and of Social Organization* (1896) describes the phenomenon of communication as a form of association: "The expression of conscious states by means of attitude, muscular movement, and utterance is a language common to animals and men" (Giddings, [1896] 1916: 108).

More broadly and with higher impact is what William I. Thomas from the University of Chicago contributed to the establishment of attitude as a social science concept. He not only studied in Germany but read widely according to his biographers-interpreters and he was teaching a course on 'social attitudes' from 1900 onward (Fleming, 1967: 322). Fleming identified casual usage of attitude in some of the early writings of Thomas but there is widespread consensus in the small literature on the conceptual history of attitude that *The Polish Peasant in America* (1918) was the birthplace of the sociological and social psychological concept of attitudes, initially mostly used with the prefix social. Both Thomas's teaching and the book functioned as media to make attitude, the concept it remains since then.

Thomas positioned attitude explanatorily in a prominent environment (and his coauthor Florian Znaniecki; but there is wide agreement that the famous Methodological Note – of 86 pages – was written by Thomas alone). He claims that there are two “fundamental practical problems ... which have constituted the center of attention of reflective social practice in all times” (Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918]1927: 20). On the one hand the ‘dependence of the individual upon social organization and culture’ and on the other hand the ‘dependence of social organization and culture on the individual’ (Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918]1927). According to Thomas, the first problem could be reformulated as the question “How should we produce the desirable mental and moral characteristics in the individuals constituting the social group?” whereas the second problem “How should we produce the desirable type of social organization and culture?” In a footnote, he even adds that the two practical turns might strengthen each other in succinct steps of doing. For these two sides – the objective and the subjective – Thomas then proposed two concepts: value and attitude.

By a social value we understand any datum having an empirical content accessible to the members of some social group and a meaning with regard to which it is or may be an object of activity.
Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918]1927: 21

And he adds after this well-done definition a list of illustrative cases of values: “Thus, a foodstuff, an instrument, a coin, a piece of poetry, a university, a myth, a scientific theory, are social values” because individuals could act according to them transforming any natural object into a meaningful subject of activities.

Moving to the other concept Thomas defines attitude as “a process of individual consciousness which determines real or possible activity of the individual in the social world” (Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918]1927: 22). Less well developed than the other definition, the list of illustrations makes clear what Thomas had in mind: “Thus, hunger that compels the consumption of foodstuff; the workman’s decision to use the tool,” etc. The list of conceptual correspondences is revealing: Compel, decision, tendency, feeling, expression, sympathy and admiration, needs, fear, devotion, creating, understanding, and the ways of thinking – ‘all these are attitudes’ (Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918]1927).

Thomas goes even a step further and assigns social psychology to take care of attitudes because they are the subjective side of the phenomenon, entrusts sociology to concentrate on the objective axis, and investigates values. The Methodological Note did not remain the *locus classicus* of the early understanding of attitude because Thomas reworked his conceptual scheme continuously. He puts, figuratively speaking, below attitudes and values wishes – most probably his adoption of Freud’s *Trieb* (alternatively translated into English as drive or instinct) – and proposed that the spectrum of wishes could be classified into his famous ‘four wishes’: desires for new experience, security, response, and recognition. These forcing powers then mold both the selection of values and the formation of attitudes in a particular ‘situation’ which is accompanied by the ‘definition of the situation’

either by an individual or offered by social groups or culture as such.

The major drive behind Thomas and others concerned with the concept attitude should be seen in the light of the scholarly discourses in the first decades of the twentieth century. The strong performance of behaviorism prompted authors to propose means to describe observable processes of behavior by abstaining from any introspection as a valid tool for research on humans’ actions. What followed was the recession of the tradition of *Denkpsychologie* and the encapsulation of Freud’s and others’ depth psychology from academic discourses. The tradition to which Thomas contributed switches to a ‘behavioralistic’ language in presenting their insights.

Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess’s *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* ([1921]1942), the ‘green bible’ of the early Chicago School, contains under the chapter heading Social Forces several concepts aside from attitude (interests, social pressure, idea-forces, sentiments, wishes). The chapter’s introduction, the selected exemplary text, and the recommendations for further readings show strong affinities toward psychoanalysis and committed to Thomas’s four wishes but the explanation of what an attitude is remains highly elusive. Instead of defining attitude, the authors offer what attitudes are not:

They are not instincts, nor appetites, nor habits, for these refer to specific tendencies to act that condition attitudes but do not define them. Attitudes are not the same as emotions or sentiments although attitudes always are emotionally toned and frequently supported by sentiments. Opinions are not attitudes. An opinion is rather a statement made to justify and make intelligible an existing attitude or bias. A wish is an inherited tendency or instinct which has been fixed by attention directed to objects, persons, or patterns of behavior, all of which then assume the character of values. An attitude is the tendency of the person to react positively or negatively to the total situation. Accordingly, attitudes may be defined as the mobilization of the will of the person.

Park and Burgess, 1942: 438

There is some family resemblance to what later analytic philosophers did with ambiguous expressions by focusing on the use of them by different speakers, but Park and Burgess do not go explicitly into this direction, very much to their and attitude’s disadvantage. Just as one illustration of what Park and Burgess did have in mind one could see from the list of topics suggested for written examinations: “Typical Attitudes: Familism, Individualism, ‘Oppressed Nationality Psychosis,’ Race Prejudice” or from the list of questions for discussion: “How far would you say that the attitude may be described as an organization of the wishes?” (Park and Burgess, 1942: 502–503).

Attitude entered center stage only when the statistical versatile psychologist L.L. Thurstone applied his measurement competencies to attitudes too. In 1928 he published a programmatic statement ‘Attitudes Can Be Measured’ which paved the way for the, until then, very vague concept. Similar to the concept intelligence, which became usable via measuring it, also attitude made its success along the road of operationalism. Thurstone borrowed from psychophysical experiments the idea of the ‘just noticeable difference’ to propose a continuum with opposite extremes and a set of items in between. He illustrated

his proposal by referring to an attitude variable militarism-pacifism, with a neutral zone in the middle. The 10 items running from one extreme to the other have been selected in a multilevel process. From a first long list of brief statements from anywhere (questionnaire, press, publications, letter, etc.) those items have been removed which did not allow to accept or reject them. The reduced list was then given to a group of several hundred 'judges or readers' asking them to order the items "in eleven piles ranging from opinions most strongly affirmative to those most strongly negative" (Thurstone, 1928: 545). Further refinements which became standard afterward generated a much shorter list of scaled attitude items where every single item stands for an attitude related to the topic with its opposite extremes.

Thurstone did not solve a single conceptual ambiguity but suggested a solution in the way to transform an undecidable conceptual problem into an empirical measurable analysis. The next decades demonstrated the attractiveness of this proposal (an early affirmative review of the field of attitude research is Gordon W. Allport (1935)). In particular, in psychology and social psychology measuring attitudes, forming and changing attitudes, and investigating the correlation between attitudes and behavior are still around. The techniques of scaling have been applied to other measurable dispositions and routinization sidestepped any debate about explanatory power of the concept attitude.

See also: Allport, Gordon W (1897–1967); Applied Social Research, History of; Attitude Formation and Change; Attitude Measurement; Attitudes and Behavior; Darwin, Charles Robert (1809–82); Definition of the situation: History of the Concept; Environmental Attitudes and Behavior: Measurement; Mentally Ill, Public Attitudes towards; Psychology, History of (Twentieth Century); Public Opinion: Social Attitudes; Semantic Differential; Sociology, History of; Thorndike, Edward Lee (1874–1949).

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