

Chapter 8

Function over Form: A Behavioral Approach to Implicit Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Research surrounding the construct of “implicit attitudes” and the various methodologies for measuring that construct is currently founded on the social cognitive paradigm. However, no robust and agreed upon theoretical framework has emerged from this paradigm, despite the widespread adoption of implicit testing methodologies and their associated theoretical assumptions. The current chapter outlines a functional approach to implicit testing, describing research stemming from Relational Frame Theory that was developed in parallel with the emergence of the IAT, and arguing for the benefits of connecting these two strands of research to improve the understanding of attitude behaviors and create better understood implicit testing methodologies. The chapter concludes with descriptions of two examples of such methodologies: the IRAP and the FAST.

INTRODUCTION

Form: The Implicit Attitude Construct

The central pillar of the cognitive paradigm is the position that mental representations mediate how information is perceived, processed, analyzed, stored in the brain, and that these representations precede behavior in the chain of cause and effect.

These mental representations are conceptualized in terms of hypothetical constructs inferred from observable behavior, which are in turn thought to explain that behavior. In the field of Social Psychology, there is no more ubiquitous construct than the Attitude.

Despite its central place in explaining human social behavior (Allport, 1935), there is no universally agreed upon definition of what precisely

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6599-6.ch008

is represented by an attitude. There is, however, broad agreement on the general form of the attitude construct. An attitude is usually defined as being a combination of cognitive (i.e. propositional) and affective evaluations of an object with a variable strength (Olson & Kendrick, 2008). An attitude is thought to be stored in the mind as a set of *associations* between the attitude object and these evaluations, with attitude strength being a function of the relative accessibility of these associations. When activated, attitudes predispose the person towards a favorable or unfavorable behavioral response towards the attitude object (see Olson & Zanna, 1993, for a review). Attitudes can be formed in relation to any given object including other individuals (e.g., McConnell, Rydell, Strain, & Mackie, 2008), social groups (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002), or even abstract concepts (e.g., nationality; Devos & Banaji, 2005). Stereotypes, prejudice, self-esteem, general positive or negative evaluations and biases all fall under the umbrella of “attitude”. As such, attitude research has historically been a key topic in social cognitive research, and it is likely to continue to be so for many years to come. However, attitude research underwent a minor revolution in the last years of the 20th century, with the introduction of the concept of *implicit attitudes*.

Greenwald and Banaji's 1995 paper simultaneously introduced the concept of implicit attitudes and a methodology designed to detect this new hypothetical construct – The Implicit Association Test (IAT). Drawing upon research in implicit memory, the authors described how past experience can influence present attitudes and the responses mediated by those attitudes without conscious awareness. Central to the new concept was the suggestion that some experiences lead to the formation of evaluative associations (i.e., attitudes) that were not readily accessible by introspection and whose influence on behavior is outwith the control of the subject. The implicit attitude construct was said to explain why self-reported attitudes were not reliable predictors

of behavior. More specifically, the behavior was considered to be mediated by implicit attitudes, which in turn can be defined as “the introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) trace of past experience that mediates [favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought or action towards social objects]” (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995, p.8).

The seminal IAT experiment used a “known groups” paradigm, presenting participants with flower names (e.g. Tulip), “insect” names (e.g. Spider), pleasant words (e.g. Love) and unpleasant words (e.g. Ugly) and required participants to categorize them by means of a key press. (Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998). In the first (consistent) condition, the same response key was assigned to both “flower” and “pleasant” words, while the other response key was assigned to “insect” and “unpleasant” words. In the second (inconsistent) condition, one response key was assigned to “unpleasant” words and “flower” words, and the other to “pleasant” and “insect” words. The researchers found (as expected) that reaction times were shorter in the consistent condition than in the inconsistent condition. In line with the pre-experimental assumptions outlined above, Greenwald and colleagues stated that the IAT effect (i.e., the difference in response times between the two conditions) was indicative of the existence of an implicit attitude construct in which flowers were associated with positive evaluations and insects with negative associations. The magnitude of the difference between the normed reaction times in each condition is taken to be an indicator of the *associative strength* between the category of interest and a positive/negative attribute (e.g., Hoffman, Gawronski, Geschwnder, Le, & Schmidt, 2005). The implicit associations so measured by the IAT are assumed to be relatively stable, trait-like cognitive associations that are existent objects in the individual (Nosek & Hanson, 2008).

Despite the widespread adoption of the IAT methodology and the tacit acceptance of its theoretical assumptions, Greenwald and his colleague

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