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# Access to Attitude-Relevant Information in Memory as a Determinant of Attitude-Behavior Consistency

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This research examined whether access to attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences mediates the relation between attitudes and behavior. Subjects' opinions toward preservation of the environment and their recall of preservation-related beliefs and experiences were assessed during the first experimental session. Approximately 2 weeks later, subjects were contacted at home and asked to sign and circulate proenvironment petitions and were asked to participate in a recycling project. Subjects' responses to the petition request and the number of weeks they recycled were assessed, and an aggregate behavioral index was formed from these measures. The results revealed that subjects with relatively high levels of access were likely to act in a manner consistent with their opinions; those in favor of preservation recycled, signed, and agreed to circulate the petitions, whereas those less favorable were not as likely to do so. Subjects with relatively little access demonstrated little attitude-behavior consistency. 

It has long been argued that attitudes exert a "directive or dynamic influence" on behavior (Allport, 1935) but systematic attempts to identify exactly how attitudes guide or influence actions are relatively recent.

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One of the most popular approaches to this question, derived from a cognitive framework, examines the accessibility or salience of attitudes in memory when one is confronted with the attitude object. Research in this area has focused on the situational and dispositional factors believed to increase subjects' awareness of their own opinions during attitude and behavior expression. Such awareness is thought to enhance attitude-behavior consistency (Abelson, 1982).

Increases in one's awareness of internal states have been linked to a variety of situational factors. For example, placing people in a "thinking person's environment," in which they are given time for directed thought about their attitudes before attitude or behavior expression, apparently activates the attitude in memory and thus increases attitude-behavior correspondence relative to settings in which people are not encouraged to reflect on their attitudes (Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982; Snyder & Swann, 1976). Also, reminding people that their attitudes have implications for a particular behavioral choice has been found to increase attitude-behavior consistency, at least when the attitude-consistent action does not conflict with subjects' personal interests (Borgida & Campbell, 1982). In addition, more subtle factors, such as exposure to one's mirror image, tape-recorded voice, or a camera, may enhance attention to the self and consequently increase attention to opinions and beliefs (Wicklund, 1982). It is apparently for this reason that relatively high attitude-behavior correlations result when at least one component is measured during exposure to the mirror, tape recording, or camera.

A somewhat different approach to the accessibility issue has been taken by researchers focusing on past experiences which give rise to chronically accessible attitudes. Fazio and his colleagues (Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982; Fazio, Herr, & Olney, 1984; Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983; Fazio & Zanna, 1981; Powell & Fazio, 1984) have argued that direct experience with an attitude object enhances the link in memory between the object and one's evaluation of it. Strong object-evaluation associations increase the likelihood that the attitude will be accessed upon encountering the object. An accessible attitude then guides people's perceptions of the attitude object and contextual cues, and it is these perceptions which appear to influence the behavioral response. In contrast, when one has had only indirect experience with the attitude object, object-evaluation associations are thought to be weak, attitudes are relatively inaccessible, and the resultant effect of the attitude on perceptions and behavior is relatively small. In one of the most direct tests of this approach (Fazio et al., 1982, Study 4), the strength of the object-evaluation link was enhanced for some subjects and, as would be expected, attitude-behavior correspondence increased in comparison to subjects with apparently weaker object-evaluation links. Since a prior study had found that strong object-evaluation ties are associated with high levels of attitude

accessibility (Fazio et al., 1982, Study 3), the increased attitude-behavior correspondence was attributed to enhanced access.

Although the research of Fazio et al. (1982) has obtained support for certain relations in their model (e.g., amount of prior experience and strength of object-evaluation link, strength of object-evaluation link and attitude accessibility), no single study that we could locate directly assessed both individual differences in accessibility and consequent attitude-behavior consistency. Further, much of the research noted above has been conducted in lab settings with attitude objects such as experimental games. It would be desirable to extend this work to more naturalistic settings and to attitude topics with implications for subjects' daily lives.

*The Present Research*

The present work was designed to examine whether high levels of accessibility enhance attitude-behavior relations, and further to explore this issue in a field setting using a direct assessment of behavior. To accomplish this, we first evaluated subjects' attitudes toward preservation of the environment and their recall of preservation-related beliefs and experiences. Then we measured the extent to which they engaged in behavior relevant to environmental concerns. Similar to Weigel and Newman (1976), we evaluated whether subjects signed and circulated environmental petitions and whether they recycled bottles, aluminum cans, and other metal over a several-week period.

To measure access to beliefs, subjects were given 2 min to list characteristics and attributes of preservation. Access to prior experiences was measured by the extent to which they could list relevant prior actions.

Subjects with high levels of access to beliefs and prior experiences have been found to rely on this internal information when stating their opinions, even when faced with new ideas and new experiences. In contrast, those with little access do not appear to draw on prior experiences and beliefs when reporting their opinions and instead appear to rely on currently available cues. Consequently, new information has less impact on the opinions of subjects with high (vs. low) levels of access (Wood, 1982; Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985). Further, high levels of access appear to confer the ability or the motivation to critically evaluate the content of a persuasive message. High access recipients appear to base their opinions on an assessment of the validity of message content whereas those with less access appear more likely to rely on simple heuristics (Chaiken, 1980), such as "long messages are valid" (Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985) or "likable communicators are credible" (Wood & Kallgren, in press).

In the present study, subjects with high levels of access were expected to find attitude-relevant information salient in memory when confronted

with the attitude object. The accessible beliefs and prior experiences should provide a constant, stable source of information from which to derive attitudes and to initiate behavior, resulting in enhanced attitude-behavior consistency (cf. Ostrom, 1984). It was anticipated that subjects with less access to attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences would demonstrate little consistency between attitudes and actions. This hypothesis would be supported by a significant interaction between subjects' accessibility and their attitudes in the prediction of behavior; attitudes and behavior should be closely related for high accessibility individuals but have little relation for low accessibility ones.

Finally, it was anticipated that this prediction would hold only for certain types of behavioral measures. The behavioral measures we obtained in this study ranged from relatively narrow preservation-related actions, such as a decision to sign a petition concerning endangered species, to the more general, aggregated behavioral measure which included recycling and petition signing on two topics, concerning endangered species and James Watt. Attitudes and behaviors should be most likely to correspond if they are measured at comparable levels of specificity (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Consequently, the very general measures of attitude toward preservation and access to preservation-related information should relate reliably only to the aggregate behavioral index, since this behavioral measure taps the same broad domain as the attitude and accessibility measures.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

Sixteen male and 33 female undergraduate psychology students at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee participated in 1983 for extra course credit. Only students with listed telephone numbers who did not live with their parents or in the university dormitories were eligible. Because of these constraints, the mean age for the sample was 27.18. An additional four subjects were not included in the analysis, one due to experimenter error, another because she lived with her parents, a third figured out the connection between the recycling project and the experiment, and a fourth requested to be dropped.

### *Procedure*

*Session 1.* Subjects reported individually to the laboratory for an attitude assessment study. They were told that several assessment techniques would be used in this study because "using a variety of assessment techniques should induce you to think carefully about your opinions." Subjects first completed the belief and behavior retrieval measures for the critical topic, preservation of the environment, and two additional issues, right to abortion and physical exercise.

The subject was then seated in front of a monitor and asked to respond to attitude statements presented on the screen by a microcomputer. Subjects indicated their agreement with these statements by pressing one of nine keys labeled from "extremely unfavorable" (1) to "extremely favorable" (9). Subjects were first presented with six practice items. Then the attitude statements were presented: 18 concerned environmental preservation, 17 concerned abortion, and 17 concerned physical exercise. The order of the statements

was randomized for each subject. Responses were recorded by the microcomputer.[1]

Finally, subjects provided background information about themselves, including sex, age, and membership in organizations related to preservation.[2] Subjects were then given credit slips for participation and received a partial debriefing which claimed that the purpose of the study was to examine the relation between people's attitudes and the way they store attitude-relevant information in memory.

*Session 2.* Approximately 2 weeks after the first session, subjects were telephoned and asked to participate in a pilot recycling project. This project was purportedly independent of the initial experimental session. To maintain the illusion of independence, different experimenters were used for Sessions 1 and 2. The experimenter for Session 2 was unaware of subjects' responses in the first session.

Home visits were scheduled for all subjects willing to hear a description of the recycling project. If the subject indicated willingness to participate in the project during the home visit, he or she was instructed to place recyclable material (aluminum, other metal, and glass) near his or her garbage cans for pick-up on a specified day, once a week. A handout on the project which explained how to prepare recyclables for pick-up was given to interested subjects. After the first scheduled pick-up all subjects who agreed to recycle were sent a letter reminding them of their respective pick-up day.

Also during the home visit, the subject was asked to sign two petitions; one called for the protection of endangered species and the other for the removal of James Watt as U.S. Secretary of the Interior. After agreeing or declining to sign either or both of the petitions, the subject was given the opportunity to circulate a copy of each petition for signatures from friends, family members, and others. Two stamped, pre-addressed envelopes were provided to return the petitions. Since only one subject returned the petitions prior to debriefing, subjects' intentions to circulate and return the petitions were scored instead of the actual return rate.

It should be noted that only subjects who expressed interest in recycling during the initial telephone contact were asked to sign and circulate petitions. This procedure resulted in no petition data for the 25 subjects refusing a home visit.

*Final contact.* Approximately 3 weeks after the second session, the subjects were contacted again by phone. The interviewer explained that she was calling participants from the attitude assessment study. Subjects were asked to describe the experiment "because it has been a while since you first participated, and we would like to know what you thought the experiment was about." They were given as long as they needed to respond, and none made any allusion to attitude-behavior relations or to the recycling project.

Finally, subjects were fully debriefed and informed that because the recycling project was part of the experiment, it would be discontinued in one week. The final pick-up gave subjects a chance to recycle any material they might have collected since the most recent pick-up. Data from this final pick-up were not analyzed. Subjects were told that additional experimental credit had already been arranged with their psychology instructors. A follow-up letter reiterating the debriefing and a list of local recycling centers was sent to all subjects.

## *Measuring Instruments*

*Attitude assessment.* The 18 specific attitude statements related to environmental preservation were initially selected from a pool of 28 statements. Forty pretest subjects rated

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[1] Subjects' reaction times to rate the attitude statements were not measured.

[2] Only four subjects reported belonging to an environmental organization, thus this measure was dropped from the analysis.

their favorability toward each statement on a 9-point scale ranging from "extremely unfavorable" to "extremely favorable." Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha equaled .83 for the 18 items selected. Included in this group were items assessing attitudes toward issues such as preserving endangered species, retaining James Watt as Secretary of the Interior, and recycling at a recycling center. Consistent with the pretesting, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was .85 for the final sample of subjects.

To assess overall favorability toward the environment, an index was computed by taking the mean attitude rating for each subject across the 18 relevant statements.[3] Subjects' overall opinions on this measure were highly favorable ($M = 7.34$). For the analyses, the attitude index was transformed to a standard score.

*Accessibility of attitude-relevant beliefs and behaviors.* The measure of accessibility of attitude-relevant information consisted of two tasks (cf. Wood, 1982). First, subjects listed the relevant facts and characteristics they believed to be true about preservation of the environment and two other topics, right to abortion and physical exercise. Next, the subjects listed the past behaviors they had engaged in related to the topics. Both of these tasks were completed with a time limit of 2 min for each issue. The number of discrete beliefs and behaviors listed were coded by two independent raters (mean $r$s across topics = .98 and .99, for beliefs and behaviors, respectively). The number of preservation-related beliefs and behaviors listed were correlated, $r(47) = .60$, $p < .001$. Each measure was transformed to a standard score and these scores were summed to form a retrieval index for each of the three topics. The mean number of environmental beliefs and behaviors listed, in original units, was 5.86. Unlike prior work (Wood, 1982; Wood et al., 1985), environmental attitudes correlated significantly with environmental retrieval, $r(47) = .38$, $p < .01$. To control for this relation, subjects were divided into three groups representing low, medium, and high accessibility (scored 1 to 3). The three-way split was calculated separately for subjects with opinions at each point along the original 9-point attitude scale.[4]

## *Behavior Measures*

Petition signing behavior was not assessed for the total sample. Consequently, the only meaningful behavioral measure for the total group is whether or not subjects agreed to a home visit, which was scored 0 or 1.

For the subjects who agreed to a home visit, each of the 3 weeks that material was left to be recycled was coded 1. Recycling scores for the recycling behavior criterion thus ranged from 0 to 3.

For those subjects agreeing to a home visit, signing each petition was coded 1, and not signing coded 0. Similarly, agreeing to circulate a petition was coded 1 and not agreeing to circulate was coded 0. Petition scores for each topic, then, ranged from 0 to 2.

For the subsample who agreed to a visit, a composite behavioral index was formed by adding together subjects' standardized scores on recycling and petitioning. Before standardization this index ranged from 0 to 7, and had a mean of 4.17.

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[3] During the first and third contacts subjects were also asked to indicate their opinions toward preservation of the environment on a 9-point scale ranging from "highly unfavorable" to "highly favorable." This attitude measure is not included in the text because, due to problems in administration, subjects did not appear to interpret the scale in a similar manner at both assessments, and consequently the measure proved to be highly unstable across the assessments, $r(47) = .09$, ns.

[4] Three experimenters were employed in Session 1. A Subject Sex × Experimenter interaction was obtained in the analysis on environmental retrieval, $F(1, 43) = 3.52$, $p < .05$. This interaction did not appear on other measures and did not compromise interpretation of the results reported in the text.

## RESULTS

It was anticipated that the strongest relations between attitudes, accessibility, and behaviors would be obtained if these constructs were all measured at comparable levels of specificity (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Consequently, the general measures of attitude toward preservation and preservation retrieval and the specific behavioral measures of recycling and petition signing should be only weakly related. However, for the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle ($n$ = 24), a global behavioral measure can be calculated by aggregating across the recycling and petition signing measures. It was anticipated that the global attitudes and accessibility measures would demonstrate coherent relations with this behavioral index.

Before reviewing the results it is important to note that the subsample who agreed to recycle did not differ in any identifiable way from the sample who refused, except for agreement to recycle. On the overall opinion measure the subsample who agreed ($M$ = 7.49, $SD$ = 0.86) was not significantly different from the refusing subsample ($M$ = 7.21, $SD$ = 0.87), $t(47)$ = 1.14, ns. Also, on the retrieval measure the agreeing subjects ($M$ = 5.50, $SD$ = 2.59) were not significantly different from the ones who refused ($M$ = 6.20, $SD$ = 2.12), $t(47)$ = 1.04, ns.

The total sample yielded only one specific behavioral measure, whether subjects agreed to a home visit (scored 0 = no, 1 = yes). This behavior was predicted from the attitude and accessibility scores using a hierarchical regression analysis. Attitude was entered first into the equation, then retrieval, and then the interaction between attitude and retrieval. As anticipated, none of these predictors was significant ($ps$ > .15). The second specific behavioral measure was calculated with subjects who agreed to recycle ($n$ = 24), and involved whether they actually did recycle (scored 0 = no recycling, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 3 = 3 times). Attitude toward preservation did predict this behavioral measure ($\beta$ = .64, $p$ < .001), $R$ = .64, but retrieval and the interaction were not significant ($ps$ > .25). Finally, for subjects who agreed to recycle or to read the petitions ($n$ = 26),[5] two final specific behaviors could be calculated, petition signing for removal of James Watt and for protection of endangered species (for each petition scored 0 = did not sign, 1 = signed, 2 = signed and agreed to circulate). For the Watt petition, none of the predictors was significant ($ps$ > .09). For the endangered species petition, the interaction between attitude and retrieval was significant ($\beta$ = .98, $p$ < .05), $R$ = .55, but not attitude or retrieval ($ps$ > .10).

The global behavioral measure, which included both recycling and

[5] Two additional subjects who already recycled were included in this analysis. They expressed interest in assisting the project when contacted for a home visit and were sent the petitions through the mail.

petition signing, could only be calculated with the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle ($n = 24$). Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that attitudes alone significantly predicted behavior ($\beta = .60$, $p < .01$), $R = .60$. However, the addition of retrieval to this equation ($\beta = -.19$, $p > .20$) did not improve the prediction of behavior, $R^2$ change = .04. The addition of the interaction between attitude and retrieval ($\beta = .92$, $p < .05$) did significantly improve prediction, $R = .74$, $p < .001$, and $R^2$ change = .16.

Following a procedure suggested by Cohen and Cohen (1983, p. 323), the interaction was evaluated by examining the relation between attitude and behavior for varying levels of accessibility. The best fitting regression line for subjects with relatively low levels of retrieval, that is for those with accessibility scores at least one standard deviation below the mean (3.50 or less), had a slope of .19, indicating that attitude had little impact on behavior. The regression line drawn for subjects with opinions at the mean ($M = 5.86$) had a slope of .52, and the slope for subjects with accessibility scores at least one standard deviation above the mean (8.22 or more) was .84, indicating that attitudes had a relatively strong impact on behavior in this subgroup. Thus as predicted, the relation between attitudes and behaviors depended on subjects' extent of retrieval.

This relation between environmental attitudes, retrieval, and the global behavioral measure proved to be issue specific. Thus, extent of retrieval on topics unrelated to preservation, such as abortion or physical exercise, did not significantly enhance the prediction of environmental behaviors beyond that provided by environmental opinions alone. For the subsample who agreed to recycle, abortion retrieval and exercise retrieval were not significant predictors ($R^2$ change = .00 and .03, respectively, ns) and neither were the interactions between abortion or exercise retrieval and environmental attitudes ($R^2$ change = .07 and .00, respectively, ns).

## DISCUSSION

This research demonstrated that attitudes can be important predictors of behavior. When attitudes and behaviors were measured at a comparable level of specificity, attitudes alone accounted for over 35% of the variance in actions. This finding is noteworthy in that it was obtained with a relatively important attitude topic, preservation of the environment, and further was observed in a field setting with actions, recycling and petition signing, performed by people in their everyday lives.

Further, the results provide some support for the idea that to obtain correspondence, attitudes and behaviors need to be measured at a comparable level of specificity (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Weigel & Newman, 1976). The global measures of attitude toward preservation and retrieval of environmentally-related beliefs and experiences proved to be inconsistently related to the specific behavioral measures of agreement to

recycle, the amount subjects recycled, and whether they signed and agreed to circulate petitions calling for the removal of James Watt or for the protection of endangered species.

A global behavioral measure, which included recycling and petition signing, was calculated for the subsample of 24 subjects who agreed to recycle. It is important to note that the subsample who agreed to recycle did not differ in any identifiable way from the sample who refused, except for agreement to recycle. The subsample who agreed was not significantly different from the one which refused on favorability of opinion or on extent of retrieval.

When the global measure was used as the behavioral criterion, attitudes toward preservation and the interaction between attitude and accessibility were significant predictors of actions. As we anticipated, the significant interaction revealed that the relation between attitudes and behaviors was not constant across all levels of accessibility. Attitudes and behaviors were strongly related for subjects with relatively high levels of accessibility and, to a lesser extent, for subjects with moderate levels of accessibility. For these subjects, highly favorable attitudes were associated with agreeing to sign and circulate the proenvironment petitions and with recycling. Subjects with less favorable opinions engaged in relatively few propreservation actions. In contrast, for subjects with relatively low levels of accessibility, attitudes and actions were not closely related. These subjects apparently did not use their opinions as a guide to performing or not performing proenvironment behaviors.

We have argued that people who can recall many attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences are more likely to have this information accessible to guide their behavior than those with little recall. From this perspective, high (vs. low) retrieval subjects may be more likely to possess a guiding schema which directs encoding, storage, and retrieval of attitude-relevant data. Supporting the idea that amount of recall is related to the way information is organized in memory, a recent study found that the total number of beliefs and activities subjects could list concerning preservation of the environment correlated with their reaction time to rate agreement with preservation-related statements, $r(27) = .41$, $p < .05$ (Wood, 1985).[6]

It is possible that, in addition to revealing whether attitude-relevant information is stored in a manner that can be easily accessed, the recall measures reflect subjects' knowledge about the message topic. The 2-min time limit on the recall task was designed to limit subjects to indicating

[6] In this study 29 subjects completed the listing task for 6 issues and approximately 2 days later rated statements on a variety of opinion topics by responding "yes" or "no" when they were presented via a microcomputer. Fifteen of the statements concerned preservation, and a mean reaction time was calculated across these items.

only readily accessible beliefs and experiences, not the extent of their knowledge concerning preservation. This appears a plausible assumption for the preservation topic, given the wide variety of potential experiences (e.g., buying returnable pop bottles) and beliefs (e.g., from frequent media focus on this issue) subjects could indicate. At a broader level, consideration of the amount and the organization of knowledge has appeared in comparisons of experts and novices, with expertise conferring not only a greater amount but better organized information (Fiske, Kinder, & Larter, 1983). It seems likely that with topics of less familiarity to subjects than preservation of the environment, the recall measures would tap, to a large extent, the information component of expertise, that is, the amount of knowledge one possesses about the topic.

Although the present study provides good evidence that high levels of accessibility improve attitude-behavior consistency, it provides little insight into the exact mechanism by which this is accomplished. According to Fazio and his colleagues (e.g., Fazio et al., 1982; Powell & Fazio, 1984), accessible attitudes guide people's perceptions of the attitude object and contextual cues and it is these perceptions which influence behavior. In the present study it seems likely that high retrieval subjects viewed the opportunity to recycle or sign petitions as a chance to engage in pro- or antipreservation activities whereas those with lower access may have believed that these actions had other implications, such as a chance to engage in community projects, to impress the neighbors, or to please the interviewer.

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