



# Attitude Importance: Understanding the Causes and Consequences of Passionately Held Views

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## Abstract

People care passionately about some attitudes and consider them deeply important, and they accord no particular significance to other attitudes. In the current paper, we review the state of the psychological literature on attitude importance. We consider the factors that cause people to attach importance to some attitudes but not to others, and we review the cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of attaching importance to an attitude. Finally, we explore several open questions regarding attitude importance, charting a course for future research in this area.

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Attitudes, or people's overall evaluations of the objects in their environment, have garnered a tremendous amount of scholarly attention across the social sciences. The fields of sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, and social and political philosophy are just some of the many disciplines that have taken an interest in human likes and dislikes. For social psychologists, however, the attitude construct has held an especially privileged and central status. In fact, attitudes have famously been referred to as 'the most distinctive and indispensable concept' in the field of social psychology (Allport, 1935).

One of the reasons that attitudes are practically and theoretically important to social psychologists is because they have predictable and very powerful effects on behavior (see Greenwald, 1989). However, determining which attitudes most accurately predict which behaviors under what circumstances has turned out to be a highly complex enterprise, stimulating social psychological research for more than half a century. This research has revealed that some kinds of individuals are more likely than others to act on their attitudes (e.g. Rholes & Bailey, 1983; Zanna, Olson, & Fazio, 1980). In addition, some kinds of situations are more likely than others to promote attitude-congruent behaviors (e.g. Carver, 1975; Jamieson & Zanna, 1989).

In addition to differences across people and across situations, there are also marked differences across types of attitudes – some kinds of attitudes are more likely than others to motivate and guide behavior. The term 'attitude strength' has been used to capture this distinction. Specifically, strong attitudes are those that resist change in the face of attack, persist

over long spans of time, and exert a pronounced impact on thought and behavior, whereas weak attitudes exhibit none of these characteristics (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Thus, predicting an individual's behavior with respect to a given object requires not only knowing his or her attitude toward the object, but knowing the strength of that attitude as well. If the attitude is strong, it will be highly predictive of the individual's behavior, but if the attitude is weak, it will provide little leverage for predicting behavior.

Not surprisingly, a high priority for attitude scholars has been identifying the markers of strong versus weak attitudes. Such investigations have uncovered about a dozen features of an attitude that contribute to its strength. These features include, for example, the *certainty* with which the attitude is held, the volume of attitude-relevant *knowledge* on which the attitude is based, the degree of personal *importance* that is attached to the attitude, the degree to which the attitude is *ambivalent*, and others (for a review, see Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Each of these features has been shown to differentiate strong attitudes from weak attitudes in independent lines of research. For example, increases in certainty and knowledge and importance are all associated with greater attitude strength, and increases in ambivalence are associated with decreasing strength.

These dozen or so strength-related attitude features can be said to fall into one of four basic categories (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). The first category includes features that are aspects of the attitude itself, such as the degree of favorability or negativity of the attitude (i.e. attitude extremity). The second category includes features of the cognitive structure associated with the attitude in memory, such as the amount of knowledge linked to the attitude object in memory, and the strength of the association between the attitude and attitude object (i.e. attitude accessibility). In the third category are the cognitive processes by which an attitude is formed, such as the degree of thinking that one has done about an attitude object's merits and shortcomings (i.e. attitude elaboration). Finally, the last category includes subjective beliefs about the attitude and the attitude object, such as how certain one is about his or her attitude towards an object. Attitude importance, the focus of the current paper, falls into this last category.

## **Defining Attitude Importance**

### *What attitude importance is*

Attitude importance is a subjective judgment about or perception of one's attitude towards an object (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995b; Krosnick, 1988b). Specifically, it is the extent to which a person is concerned with and cares about a particular attitude that he or she holds (Krosnick, 1989; Krosnick, 1990; Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993). For example, a woman who is deeply concerned about the issue of legalized abortion and who experiences her attitude on this

issue as highly personally significant can be said to have an attitude toward abortion that is high in importance. Thus, a very succinct definition of attitude importance is the 'subjective sense of psychological significance' a person attaches to his or her attitude (Boninger et al., 1995b). Given its status as a subjective judgment, attitude importance is typically assessed by direct self-report.

### *What attitude importance is not*

In the past, researchers have used the term attitude importance synonymously with the terms 'attitude centrality' (e.g. Converse, 1964; Peterson & Dutton, 1975; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Tourangeau, Rasinski, Bradburn, & D'Andrade, 1989), 'ego involvement' (e.g. Sherif & Hovland, 1961), and 'personal relevance' (e.g. Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1992), among others (Judd & Krosnick, 1982). It initially seemed to many scholars that the theoretical distinctions among these various constructs were relatively small such that differentiation among them was unnecessary (Judd & Krosnick, 1989). Indeed, each refers to the significance of the attitude for the individual's psychological system (Boninger et al., 1995b), and all may share a 'motivational quality' (Thomsen, Borgida, & Lavine, 1995). Attitude importance, however, is now understood to be distinct from these other concepts.

The first two terms, ego involvement and attitude centrality, each describe properties of the attitude's cognitive organization, such as the number and strength of the cognitive links between the attitude and the self, and the attitude's relative position within an interconnected cognitive framework. Attitude importance, however, is not defined in terms of how it is represented mentally, but how it is experienced subjectively. Thus, although correlations between attitude importance and cognitive-structural properties of an attitude are often fairly strong, the degree of personal importance that an individual attaches to his or her attitude is not necessarily dependent on the degree to which the attitude is connected to other cognitive elements, like beliefs, values, and other attitudes (i.e. 'embeddedness'; Scott, 1968). Subjective importance may also be independent of the number and strength of cognitive links between the attitude and the self (i.e. 'ego involvement'; Sherif & Cantril, 1947). In addition, subjective importance is not necessarily dependent on the centrality of the attitude within a cognitive structure (Rokeach, 1968).

The last term, personal relevance, can be defined as the degree to which an attitude object affects an individual's hedonically relevant outcomes (e.g. Marsh & Wallace, 2005). Indeed, whether the attitude object is high or low in 'vested interest' (the degree to which an attitude object is deemed personally consequential; Crano, 1995) is often related to attitude importance. Issues or objects that impinge on individuals' material outcomes are often ascribed greater personal importance than issues or

objects that do not. However, just because an attitude object directly affects an individual does not necessarily mean that he or she attaches personal importance to it. For example, moving an outdoor tennis court indoors is highly relevant for a person who plays on that court every day. Even if this individual prefers playing on the outdoor court, however, he or she may consider this particular issue relatively unimportant. Furthermore, issues or objects that do not personally affect an individual's own hedonic outcomes may sometimes be judged personally important. As we will see in the following section, perceiving a link between an attitude object and one's own material outcomes can cause individuals to attach importance to their attitudes toward the object, but an attitude or object does not need to directly affect an individual for him or her to attach importance to it.

Other researchers, however, have described personal relevance as more than mere outcome relevance. For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1979) have used the term personal relevance to refer to 'the extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance.' In cases like this, personal relevance is synonymous with attitude importance. Additional terms that have been used to refer to personal importance or intrinsic importance above and beyond vested interest include 'personal involvement' (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), 'issue involvement' (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), and 'personal meaning' (Sherif et al., 1973).

Finally, it should be noted that personal importance is distinct from people's perceptions of what is normatively important or prescriptively important in society. An individual may believe that international trade is an important issue for the country, for example, but may not personally care about this issue. Although judgments of personal importance and national importance are often moderately correlated, they seem to spring from different antecedents. Specifically, people's judgments of the national importance of a given issue are predicted by their exposure to news media coverage of that issue, whereas the personal importance that they attach to the issue tends not to be affected by news exposure (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994a). Moreover, personal importance and national importance appear to have at least some distinct consequences. For example, the degree of personal importance that people attach to an issue has been shown to predict various indicators of engagement with the issue, whereas perceptions of the issue's national importance do not predict such engagement (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994a).

### **Antecedents of Attitude Importance**

Why do people care passionately about some attitudes and attach no special significance to others? In 1948, Krech and Crutchfield proposed that attitudes become important to the extent that 'they are functionally related to the more central characteristics of the individual's personality structure ... and when they are based upon needs for identification with

other people and groups' (Krech & Crutchfield, 1948, 164). Almost 50 years later, these two intuitive suppositions were borne out in empirical research (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995a), and a third antecedent was identified. The three determinants of attitude importance for which there is now compelling empirical support are (a) the degree to which the attitude object impinges on one's material self-interest, (b) identification with reference groups or individuals who deem the attitude important, and (c) the relevance of the attitude or attitude object for one's personal values.

### *Self-interest*

*'I think that access to birth control is so important because ...'*

'Birth control is important to me for the simple reason that it allows me to protect myself.' Sarah, Wernersville, PA<sup>1</sup>

First, an attitude may be important because a person perceives it to be linked to his or her material self interest. That is, people attach importance to an attitude when they feel that their rights, privileges, outcomes, or lifestyle or could be directly affected by an attitude or attitude object (Boninger et al., 1995a). In the above quote, for example, an individual asserts that she attaches a great deal of importance to access to birth control because it provides her, personally, with protection from unwanted pregnancies.

### *Social identification*

*'I think that access to birth control is so important because ...'*

'I work with teen moms. Everyday I talk to girls that only wish they had chosen to get on birth control sooner. Most of the girls I see can barely take care of themselves let alone a baby.' Monique, Ypsilanti, MI<sup>2</sup>

A second reason that an attitude may be important to a person is because he or she identifies with another individual or with a social group for whom an attitude object has psychological significance. In the above quote, a woman mentions that the reason access to birth control is important to her is because it is an important issue for teenage girls, a population she cares about and works with. Although not a member of this group herself, she identifies with those individuals whose interests are at stake, and her concern for their well-being has caused her to attach personal importance to the issue.

### *Value relevance*

*'I think that access to birth control is so important because ...'*

'I think that access to birth control is so important because it is a matter of personal choice, freedom and privacy.' Carol, New Paltz, NY<sup>3</sup>

Finally, an attitude may be personally important to an individual if he or she believes that the attitude is related to his or her core values. These

include ethical or moral values, ideological values, social values, aesthetic values, and others. The above quote illustrates how value relevance can affect the importance a person attaches to an attitude. The author perceives her values of 'personal choice, freedom, and privacy' to be at the heart of the issue of access to birth control, and she supports access because it is consistent with basic values she endorses.

### *Evidence*

The most direct evidence for these three antecedents comes from Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent (1995a). In a series of studies, these authors used open-ended verbal reports, survey data from college samples and a representative sample of American adults, and laboratory experiments to investigate the three causes of attitude importance outlined above. In coding the open-ended reports of college-aged students, for example, it was discovered that self-interest served as the most common basis for deciding how important a variety of issues were to participants (comprising 63% of statements), followed by social identification and value relevance (19% and 18% of statements, respectively). In several sets of survey data using college-aged participants and nationally representative samples of adults, path analyses revealed that self-reports of self-interest, social identification, and value relevance each independently predicted reports of attitude importance on a variety of issues. Last, experimentally manipulating the perceived likelihood of having to confront an attitude object changed participants levels of self-interest in the object, which then caused changes in attitude importance.

Attitude accessibility has also been nominated as a determinant of attitude importance, but evidence for this relationship has been weak. Initial studies suggested that manipulations of attitude accessibility (e.g. repeated attitude expression) significantly increased reports of attitude importance (Roesse & Olson, 1994). However, follow-up research using identical methodologies paired with improved analytic procedures found either no relation between attitude expression and importance or a marginally significant decrease in importance as a function of repeated expression (Bizer & Krosnick, 2001).

### *Unresolved issues and future directions: Antecedents of importance*

*Unidentified antecedents of attitude importance.* A firm empirical foundation supports the conclusion that self-interest, social identification, and value relevance are antecedents of attitude importance. Still, a good deal of variation in attitude importance remains after accounting for the variance explained by these three antecedents, suggesting that there are additional causes of attitude importance left to be uncovered (Boninger et al., 1995a). A fruitful direction for future research, therefore, may be to elucidate these remaining causal antecedents.

Several candidates have been identified.

For example, dissonance reduction processes may sometimes contribute to subjective judgments of attitude importance (Boninger et al., 1995a). Festinger (1957) originally proposed that cognitive dissonance, a negative affective state that arises when people hold inconsistent cognitions, may be reduced through one of three routes. One mode of dissonance reduction is to decrease the perceived importance attached to one or more of the relevant cognitions. Indeed, research has shown that individuals will trivialize inconsistent cognitions to reduce dissonance when trivialization is the easiest mode of reduction to engage in or when it is the first mode made available (Gosling, Denizeau, & Oberlé, 2006; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). Thus, the importance that people attach to particular attitudes may depend in part on the consonance of those attitudes with other cognitive elements. Attitudes that conflict with other attitudes or beliefs may be accorded less importance in an effort to reduce the aversive state of dissonance.

Another antecedent of attitude importance that deserves further exploration is the driving force of self-esteem maintenance. Pelham (1991) has proposed that people may attach importance to their attitudes in service of self-enhancement, increasing the importance attached to attitudes that reflect positively on the self and decreasing the importance attached to attitudes that do not reflect positively on the self. For example, in order to maintain a positive self-view, a person who is an excellent swimmer may attach high levels of importance to her attitudes about swimming, and relatively little importance to her attitudes about those sports at which she does not excel. Additional research on the implications of self-enhancement motives and cognitive dissonance processes on attitude importance is warranted.

*Additive versus interactive combinations.* The three antecedents of attitude importance identified to date have implicitly been assumed to combine additively to determine levels of importance. It is possible, however, that self-interest, social identification, and value relevance may interact. Self-interest, for example, may be an especially potent cause of attitude importance when an object or issue impinges not only on one's own outcomes but on the outcomes of fellow in-group members as well. Thus, the combination of self-interest and social identification may lead to a particularly pronounced increase in attitude importance. Taking into consideration interactions of this sort may enable scholars to explain more of the variance in attitude importance, shedding additional light on the processes that give rise to this sense of psychological significance.

*Which antecedent?* Attitudes may be deemed important on the basis of self-interest, social identification, or value relevance. This raises the interesting possibility that there may be systematic differences across individuals or groups in the tendency to attach importance based on one antecedent rather than another. For example, Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent (1995a)

suggested that the relative magnitude of each of the determinants of personal importance may vary across cultures and across time, as well as across attitude objects. Additional research is required to fully understand what accounts for the variation in the extent to which particular antecedents lead to attitude importance and to examine how individual and social variables affect and the development of attitude importance through different routes.

*Attitude functions.* One potentially fruitful approach to clarifying which antecedents drive attitude importance for subsets of individuals or subsets of attitudes might involve forging connections to the attitude functions literature. Indeed, the founding research on the causes of attitude importance noted the clear parallels between the antecedents of self-interest, value relevance, and social identification, and the utilitarian, value-expressive, and social-adjustive functions of attitudes, respectively (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995a).

Functional theories of attitudes hold that attitudes serve a variety of important psychological purposes (Katz, 1960; Katz & Stotland, 1959; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). Attitudes that serve a 'utilitarian' function are said to provide guidance in maximizing rewards and minimizing punishments for the self (Katz, 1960). For example, a person's attitude towards federal tax cuts would fill a utilitarian function if it was based on the personal benefits and penalties associated with tax cuts, and if the attitude helped the person maximize his or her benefits and minimize his or her penalties. Attitudes that are personally important on the basis of self-interest seem, therefore, to be important because they fill a utilitarian function.

Attitudes that allow a person to express his or her central values and that enable self-expression, self-actualization, and the maintenance of self-identity are fulfilling a 'value-expressive' function (Katz, 1960). This would be the case, for example, for a person whose attitude toward tax cuts is tightly linked to his or her abiding commitment to principles of fairness, and for whom the attitude permits expression and affirmation of this core value. Therefore, attitudes that are important for reasons of value relevance may serve a value-expressive function.

Last, attitudes that are held in the service of affiliating with others and ensuring smooth social interactions are said to serve the 'social-adjustive' function (Smith et al., 1956). Continuing with our example, an individual whose attitude toward federal tax cuts ensures harmonious social interactions with important others may hold that attitude for social-adjustive purposes. While this function has a large self-presentational component that may not be represented in the social identification antecedent of attitude importance, it is the case that important attitudes based on social identification facilitate the creation and maintenance of social bonds. Attitudes that are important because of social identity may, therefore, serve a social-adjustive function.



This line of speculation can be extended to include other antecedents as well. Katz (1960) suggested that some attitudes serve an 'ego-defensive' function, enabling individuals to avoid acknowledging undesirable aspects of the self. Pelham's (1991) suggestion that attitude importance may sometimes be driven by efforts to achieve or maintain positive self-regard would seem to parallel this ego-defensive function.

These parallels between the antecedents of attitude importance and the attitude functions literature are certainly intriguing. Taken together, these parallels might suggest that attitudes are considered personally important to the extent that they are seen as serving valuable psychological functions. Ultimately, though, understanding the links between the antecedents of attitude importance and the psychological functions served by those attitudes requires further investigation.

### **Established Consequences of Attitude Importance**

Given that an individual attaches great importance to an attitude (due to self-interest, value relevance, social identification, or some combination of the three), what does that mean for how he or she experiences the world and behaves within it? What do important attitudes 'do' that less important attitudes do not?

Of course, as a strength-related attitude feature, attitude importance is known to confer resistance to change (e.g. Fine, 1957; Gorn, 1975) and persistence over time (e.g. Krosnick, 1988a; Krosnick & Cornet, 1993), and to increase the impact of an attitude on thought (e.g. Howard-Pitney, Borigida, & Omoto, 1986; Krosnick et al., 1993) and behavior (e.g. Jaccard & Becker, 1985; Krosnick, 1988b; Rokeach & Kliejunas, 1972). But a host of more fine-grained consequences of attitude importance have been identified in the last 20 years or so, painting a richer portrait of the nature of attitude importance. These consequences can be roughly divided into three categories: behavioral, cognitive, and affective. We provide an illustrative (although by no means exhaustive) review of them below.

#### *Behavioral consequences*

*Attitude expression.* Important attitudes are publicly expressed more often than are less important attitudes. In a study of attitudes toward global warming, for example, people who attached importance to their attitudes were more likely than those who attached little importance to their attitudes to write a letter to a public official or attend a public forum to express their views on this issue (Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003). Similarly, those who considered their attitudes toward legalized abortion personally important were more likely than those who attached less importance to this issue to engage in a range of attitude expressive behaviors like signing a petition or displaying a bumper sticker or button expressing their views

on abortion (Visser, Krosnick, & Norris, forthcoming). And people who attached personal importance to a range of contemporary policy issues were more likely to express their political views by turning out to vote in a Presidential election (Visser et al., 2003).

*Information seeking.* Attitude importance also inspires the search for attitude-relevant information. For example, across three separate studies, people who attached importance to their attitudes toward abortion, capital punishment, and defense spending expressed great interest in obtaining additional information about those issues (Krosnick et al., 1993). When given an opportunity to actively select information that would enable them to use their attitudes in a subsequent judgment, people who attached importance to those attitudes were especially likely to do so (Berent & Krosnick, 1993; Visser et al., 2003). Similarly, when given the opportunity to learn about a set of fictitious political candidates by reading statements they made on various issues, people sought more information on issues that they regarded personally important than on issues that they cared less deeply about (Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005).

#### *Cognitive consequences*

*Information processing.* In addition to motivating people to actively seek out attitude-relevant information, attitude importance also leads people to attend more closely to that information and to process it more deeply (e.g. Celsi & Olson, 1988; Holbrook et al., 2005). For example, rather than attending equally to the vast array of information to which they are exposed in the course of watching a presidential debate, people seem to selectively focus on information relevant to their important attitudes at the expense of information about less important attitudes (Holbrook et al., 2005). In addition, people spend more time processing information related to important relative to less important attitudes (Holbrook et al., 2005).

*Attitude accessibility.* Because people think more often and more deeply about their important than their unimportant attitudes (and because they express those attitudes more frequently), attitude importance also leads to heightened attitude accessibility (Bizer & Krosnick, 2001). Thus, the personal importance of an attitude object partially determines the speed and ease with which an individual's attitude comes to mind when he or she encounters the attitude object.

Interestingly, because of its impact on attitude accessibility, attitude importance has also been shown to moderate the relation between implicit and explicit attitude measures. Across two different attitude objects, as attitude importance increased, the relation between implicit and explicit measures of the same attitude object also increased (Karpinski, Steinman, & Hilton, 2005).

*Affective consequences*

To care deeply about an attitude object is to attach personal and likely also emotional significance to it. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that attaching importance to an attitude will have affective as well as cognitive consequences. A growing body of evidence is consistent with this line of thinking. For example, when confronted with a counter-attitudinal persuasive message on the issue of allowing gays to serve in the military, individuals high in attitude importance not only generated more negative cognitions than did individuals low in attitude importance, they also experienced more intense negative affect (e.g. anger, irritation; Zuwerick & Devine, 1996). Furthermore, negative affect and negative cognitions both partially mediated the effect of attitude importance on resistance to attitude change, suggesting that attitude importance confers resistance to persuasion through both cognitive and affective processes.

Consistent with these findings, when confronted with a scenario in which the government enacted a new law on the issue of abortion that was contradictory to their own views, people who attached greater importance to their view reported greater levels of distress (Visser et al., forthcoming). People who attached importance to their attitudes also indicated that they would be especially upset if they found it difficult to refute a counter-attitudinal speech on abortion (Visser et al., forthcoming).

*Unresolved issues and future directions: Consequences of importance*

As we mentioned at the start, importance is one of many features of an attitude related to its strength. Although some of these features tend to be correlated, attitude researchers have increasingly come to recognize that each is a distinct construct in its own right (Visser, Bizer, & Kronick, 2006). One consequence of this recognition is a growing attention to the causal relations among these features and to their interactive effects on thought and behavior.

*The effect of importance on other strength-related features.* Investigations of attitude importance have recently shown that importance directly affects a few specific strength-related features. As we touched on earlier, for example, experimentally induced increases in attitude importance have been found to produce increased attitude accessibility (Bizer & Krosnick, 2001). Attitude importance also leads to greater attitude elaboration, and to the acquisition of attitude-relevant knowledge (e.g. Holbrook et al., 2005).

Attitude importance has also been predicted to affect attitude extremity (Liu & Latane, 1998). According to the catastrophe theory of attitudes, important attitudes act as categories with bipolar or unipolar distributions of favorability, whereas unimportant attitudes have a continuous distribution of favorability (Latane & Nowak, 1994). As a consequence, when an

attitude is deemed highly important, small changes in the positivity of the information that a person has about the attitude can cause an abrupt shift in the favorability of the attitude (Latane & Nowak, 1994). When an attitude is low in importance, on the other hand, small changes in the positivity of attitude-relevant information will cause small changes in attitude favorability along a continuous dimension. In line with this reasoning, attitude importance and extremity have been found to be positively correlated across a number of political issues, both at the group and individual level, while ruling out the possibility that this correlation was a product of political involvement (Liu & Latane, 1998).

Further exploration of the causal relations between attitude importance and the other strength-related attitude features is an important direction for future research. Such work will clarify the multiple paths by which attitudes achieve durability and impactfulness.

*Interactions between importance and other strength-related features.* Recent investigations have also revealed that attitude importance interacts with other strength-related features to co-produce a variety of outcomes. For example, attitude importance and attitude certainty are both related to attitude-congruent behavior, but the combination of high importance and high certainty has been found to produce especially pronounced increases in attitude-expressive behaviors (Visser et al., 2003). Attitude-expressive behaviors are also particularly likely among individuals who simultaneously attach great importance to their attitudes and hold a large store of attitude-relevant knowledge in memory (Visser et al., forthcoming). Further work of this sort is likely to yield additional insights regarding the conditional effects of importance on thought and behavior.

## **Remaining Issues and Future Directions**

The last 20 years have been a very fruitful time for research on the nature of attitude importance. We now recognize several paths by which people come to attach personal importance to particular attitudes, and a number of outcomes of attitude importance have been identified, including various cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences. As we have pointed out, however, a number of important questions remain to be addressed regarding the antecedents and consequences of attitude importance. We conclude by reviewing several additional issues that await further research.

### *Distinguishing between attitude importance and issue importance*

Although attitude importance is defined as the significance that people attach to *their attitudes* toward a given object, in practice, researchers more often assess attitude importance by asking people how important *an attitude object* is to them (Boninger et al., 1995b). For example, it is much more

typical to ask individuals how important the issue of capital punishment is to them personally rather than asking them how important their *attitude* toward capital punishment is to them personally. This approach has been adopted because it is presumed that participants can more easily comprehend and answer a question about the personal importance they attach to an object than a question about the personal importance that they attach to their attitude, a narrowly defined psychological construct (e.g. Bonninger et al., 1995b).

In support of this assumption, there is some empirical evidence that there are significantly greater reliabilities for items asking about the importance of objects than for items asking about the importance of attitudes (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994b). Moreover, because judgments about attitude importance and object importance are extremely highly correlated (Fabrigar & Krosnick, 1994b), some researchers have suggested that these two are functionally equivalent and can be used interchangeably (Boninger et al., 1995b).

However, there may be cases in which these two concepts vary independently. For example, consider a person who strongly identifies with a particular political party and for whom it is of fundamental importance to hold ideologically appropriate attitudes. There may well be a range of political issues that this individual does not care about personally. In this case, he or she may attach very little importance to a particular object, but he or she may nonetheless attach a great deal of importance towards holding a particular attitude towards that object. Thus, the importance of the attitude may be quite high despite the fact that the importance of the object is low.

Conversely, there may be cases in which individuals deem a particular object or issue highly personally important and yet may attach relatively little importance to their own attitudes toward the object or issue. This may be especially likely when individuals feel that they do not possess a great deal of information about the object, or when they are deeply conflicted about the object. For example, most individuals would presumably attach a great deal of importance to a potentially life-saving medical procedure and yet they may attach relatively little importance to their own personal views toward the procedure.

It may be unwise to make too much of these potential incongruities between object importance and attitude importance, however. Such cases are likely to be quite rare given the near-perfect correlations between measures of object importance and attitude importance that have been observed in past research (Boninger et al., 1995b). Furthermore, the more commonly used measure of object importance has a solid empirical history of being significantly predictive of behavior. Ultimately, the reliability advantage of asking about object importance in lieu of attitude importance, per se, may well justify the continued use of measures of object importance. Nonetheless, further research directly assessing the functional equivalence of these two measures clearly seems warranted.

*Attitude importance as a motivator*

The notion that attitude importance has motivational power has been brewing for quite some time. For example, it has been almost 30 years since the first empirical demonstration that increasing the personal relevance of a message motivates increased message processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). In addition, Krosnick (1988b) hypothesized that voters should be motivated to attend to, process, and behave in accord with information relevant to their important attitudes, and they should be less inclined to do so for unimportant attitudes. In line with these early foreshadowings, the notion that attitude importance operates through motivational processes is now being directly investigated, and this motivational quality is being contrasted with the properties of other strength-related features. For example, importance has recently been contrasted with attitude-relevant knowledge. Whereas the former seems to operate through motivational channels (e.g. the motivation to express and defend one's views), the latter seems to operate by conferring particular cognitive abilities (e.g. the ability to effectively plan and execute attitude-expressive behaviors; Visser et al., forthcoming). This motivational quality of attitude importance may differentiate it from some (though perhaps not all) of the other strength-related attitude features.

*Attitude importance as a multidimensional construct*

As we have conceived of attitude importance up to this point, it is a unitary psychological construct that arises from at least three potential antecedents (self-interest, social identification, and value relevance) and that sets into motion an array of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. It is possible, however, that attitude importance is instead a multidimensional construct. That is, the precise nature of attitude importance and the particular consequences that it produces may depend on the specific antecedent that gave rise to it. Attitude importance that arises from the recognition of a connection between an attitude object and one's core values may be distinct in terms of its phenomenology and its consequences from attitude importance that arises from the perception of a link between an attitude object and one's material interests. And both may be distinct from attitude importance that arises from the perception that one's reference groups or individuals view an attitude as important. Each may inspire discrete motivations: to protect the attitude that expresses one's core values, to hold the correct attitude toward the object that impinges on one's self-interest, and to remain in step with important others with regard to the attitudes that they deem important.

Here, too, forging connections to the attitude functions literature may prove fruitful. To the extent that the distinct antecedents of attitude importance lead to attitudes that serve different psychological functions, this would point to differences in these attitudes despite the fact that are all deemed

personally important. For example, this would suggest that equally important attitudes that arise from distinct antecedents would be susceptible to different types of persuasive appeals, in line with the function matching literature (e.g. Snyder & DeBono, 1985). We look forward to future research exploring this possibility.

## Conclusion

People care passionately about some attitudes. They attach tremendous psychological significance to these attitudes and are willing to incur great personal sacrifices to express and defend their views. Other attitudes are accorded much less psychological significance and elicit no particular concern. The concept of attitude importance provides valuable leverage for differentiating these two fundamentally different types of attitudes. Advances in our understanding of attitude importance – of the factors that give rise to it, as well as its precise consequences for thought and behavior – promise to yield both theoretical and practical payoffs. Indeed, as the field of social psychology moves forward in an attempt to better determine which attitudes most accurately predict which behaviors under what circumstances, the continued refinement of our understanding of attitude importance is likely to play a central role.

## Short Biographies

Asia A. Eaton received a BS in Psychology and a BA in Philosophy from Carnegie Mellon University in 2002 and is presently a PhD candidate in the Social Psychology Program at the University of Chicago. She is a recipient of the John Dewey Lectureship Prize at the University of Chicago, which supported the development of her course on the social psychology of gender and power. Her research interests include attitudes and persuasion, social power, gender, and the self. Her primary line of research examines the relation between the possession of social power and resistance to attitude change, with the long-term aim of determining the extent to which age-graded social roles that vary in social power may account for the observed shifts over the life course in openness to change. A secondary line of research examines the relation between sex role norms and sex differences in persuadability.

Penny S. Visser is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses primarily on attitudes – how they influence the way we process information, how they motivate and guide our behavior, and how we maintain them in the face of persuasive appeals. Crosscutting her specific interests in attitudes and persuasion is a more general interest in political psychology, and some of her research examines attitude processes within the political context. Her most recent work explores the impact of the social context on attitude properties and

processes. For example, current projects examine how the strength of our attitudes is influenced by the social networks in which we're embedded, and by the social roles that we occupy. Visser earned her PhD at Ohio State University.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1-3</sup> Quote from <http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/choice-action-center/take-action/prevention/>.

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