9.6: Attitudes

Attitudes are our likes and dislikes. The clustering of beliefs around a person, place or thing, causes us to like or dislike that person, place or thing. When more positive than negative beliefs are clustered around an object, the resulting attitude is favorable. When there are more negative than positive beliefs, the resulting attitude is unfavorable.

An attitude itself cannot be directly observed; only the behavior that follows from the attitude can be observed. Milton Rokeach defines an attitude as, “a learned predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably towards a person, place, or event.” (Rokeach, 1989)

9.6.1: “Roy E. Disney” (CC BY-SA 3.0; Towpilot via Wikimedia Commons)

“When your values are clear to you, making decisions becomes easier.” --Roy E. Disney" \(^1\)
Take vegetables. You have several beliefs clustered around the object, vegetables. You believe that vegetables are good for your health, some taste good, some, like carrots, are convenient to eat and vegetables are economical. Based on all these beliefs you have a positive attitude towards vegetables.

Attitudes guide our behavior. If you have developed a positive attitude about getting a college degree, you are more likely to attend classes regularly and get good grades. If you have developed a negative attitude toward getting a college degree, you are more likely to cut school regularly and get poor grades. If you have a positive attitude towards vegetables, your behavior will probably include eating more vegetables.

Attitudes have a measurable direction. We can place attitudes on a continuum with highly favorable at one end, and highly unfavorable at the other end. Pollsters measure not just if you like a product or not, but how much you like a product.

Attitudes are learned. We have attitudes on just about everything we know. These attitudes are learned. People are not born liberal or conservative, baseball or basketball fans. Do you share the same attitudes of your family?

Attitudes have importance or salience. We simply feel stronger about some of our attitudes than about others. We may feel somewhat that a college education will make us better and more informed citizens, but we have a stronger belief that in obtaining that education we will be much better off financially. Some subjects are closer, more important, or more relevant to us than others. Some subjects are distant, less important, or less relevant to us than others. The more personalized the attitude, the more salience it will possess. Attitudes emerge from the clustering of beliefs and values.
we learn from others with whom we live and associate. Because they are learned, they can be unlearned and changed, although change most often will be resisted.

One important question emerges. Once we have an attitude, can it be altered? Are there attitudes that can never change? Many of our attitudes begin to form when we are young and continue to develop through adulthood. Once attitudes have had years to form, they are more resistant to change. Attitudes are a fact of life and play a vital role in how we make decisions.

Reference