THE THEORY OF ATTITUDE FORMATION AND CHANGE AND ITS APPLICATION TO SOCIAL GROUP WORK

by

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Introduction

Why do people think the way they do? How do they change their minds? These and similar questions have long been asked by epistemologists and more recently by social psychologists. The latter, since the second world war, have accumulated data from experiments and surveys which are, to a greater degree than heretofore, measurable; and the implications of this research on attitude change extend to social group work. The social group worker asks the question, Why do group members think as they do? And where unacceptable behavior springs from the delinquent's attitude towards society, the group worker may ask, How can the delinquent be induced to change his mind?

The fundamental question—Why do people hold particular attitudes?—may be answered in a number of ways. The answer proposed in this article is an exposition of the theory of Daniel Katz which involves a functional approach to attitudes. The second part of the article concerns the allied but distinct topic of the processes of opinion change. Here the thinking of H.C. Kelman on compliance, identification and internalization is explored. While Kelman and Katz are both social psychologists and their conclusions cannot be incorporated into the theory and practice of social group work without further investigation and experiment, nonetheless what they say is clearly relevant to group work, even if there remain many unanswered questions. For this reason, I shall refer to those aspects of their theories which have special relevance to groups and work with groups, though I shall not attempt to spell out in detail all the implications for social group work.

What are attitudes and opinions?

Green states that any attitude is a hypothetical or latent variable rather than an immediately observable variable. It is, in other words, an abstraction. According to Green, the concept of attitude does not refer to any one specific act or response of an individual, but it is an abstraction from a large number

of related acts or responses. When we state that a certain individual, A, has a less favourable attitude towards trade unions than another individual, B, we mean that A's words and deeds are consistently less favourable to trade unions than B's words and deeds. So we conclude that there is an underlying attitude which mediates between the stimuli (e.g. union activities which evoke comment or behavior) and the response (favourable or unfavourable comments, etc.). Cambell emphasizes the characteristics of attitude that are basic to all attitude measurement, i.e. response covariation, when he defines an individual's social attitude as an enduring "syndrome of response consistency with regard to a set of social objects."\(^4\) Katz defines attitude as "the predisposition of an individual to evaluate some symbol or object or aspect of his world in a favourable or unfavourable manner."\(^5\) It is interesting that his 'predisposition' corresponds to the 'latent variable' of Green, though his definition takes in at the same time the response covariation which Cambell stresses. The structural hierarchy of attitudes organized into value systems need not concern us here, for the elaboration is not relevant to the present topic. It is clear, however, that values are never completely isolated either from the other values of the individual or from those values held by the prevalent society.\(^6\)

Opinion is, according to Katz, the verbal expression of an attitude. Here we run into difficulty. It is not always easy to interpret an opinion since the underlying attitude often escapes us. Radin and Glasser have discussed some of the difficulties associated with data interpretation when researchers employ parental attitude questionnaires with culturally deprived families. There is the problem of language complexity, for instance.\(^6\) One very obvious implication for social group work is the desirability of having attitude change expressed in behavioral change outside the group. This can be more solid evidence of a change of mind than its verbal expression within the group.

The functional approach to attitudes

Sociologists and anthropologists have employed functional analysis to explain societal structures.\(^7\) Katz uses much the same methodology to analyse attitudes. The method is not the only possible one, nor does it exhaust the meaning of attitudes; but it is a useful method. Katz cites two streams of thought regarding man's attitudes: one which minimizes man's rational powers and the other which invokes a rational model of man. Katz, who clearly be-

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longs to the second school of thought, asserts that at the psychological level the reasons for holding onto or for changing attitudes are found in the functions they perform for the individual. The functions are those of adjustment, ego-defense, value expression and knowledge. It seems to me that there might easily arise some confusion here, especially in the category of the knowledge function of attitudes, between functional analysis and causal analysis. It is true that the individual holds an attitude because it explains phenomena, and therefore in a very real way Katz's assertion is true that an individual holds an attitude in order to give meaning to what would otherwise be meaningless and chaotic. But, leaving aside for the moment the other functions of attitudes, what causes the attitude is both the evidence confronting the individual and his own power of reasoning.

The adjustive function

This category embraces those attitudes which are utilitarian in origin and intent. Very often the object is some tangible benefit. Often, too, these attitudes are affective associations based upon previous experience. A favourable attitude towards a certain food is based on pleasant memories of the food.

This function of attitudes has relevance in the realm of behavioral theory and social group work. Take, for instance, the matter of 'shaping' behavior. It follows from the nature of the adjustive function of attitudes that the clarity, consistency and nearness of rewards and punishments as they relate to the individual's attitudes and goals are important factors in the acquiring of new utilitarian attitudes. This must be taken into account in shaping new habits.

A further implication for social group work is that if the group worker is in a situation where utilitarian, adjustive attitudes predominate among individuals, the group goals must be such that they will help in the satisfaction of utilitarian needs or in the avoidance of punishments. But punishment can be dysfunctional in promoting attitude change where there is no apparent course of action available to the individual to save him from undesirable consequences. Fear appeals must be linked to delineated courses of action if attitude change is desired. Furthermore, as the research of Janis and Terwilliger indicates, when a relatively high level of fear is induced by warnings presented in a persuasive communication, the recipients will become motivated to develop psychological resistances to the communication's arguments, conclusions and recommendations.

The ego-defensive function

This is where attitudes proceed from within the person, and the objects and situation to which they are attached are merely convenient outlets for their expression. Katz gives the example of an individual who projects hostility to a minority in order to protect himself from feelings of inferiority. One common type of ego-defensive function is transference where an attitude adopted towards a person is not based on the reality of the situation. These ego-defensive attitudes stem basically from internal conflicts. One of the difficulties of ego-defensive attitudes is that the usual procedures for changing attitudes and behavior may not cause the individual to modify but may force him to reinforce his defenses, causing him to cling tenaciously to his emotionally held belief. Among the procedures for attempting to change attitudes, Katz includes invoking punishments. This has relevance in the application of behavioral theory to social group work. However, it should be noted that those who advocate the application of behavioral theory most frequently favour a system of rewards rather than punishments.

The value-expressive function

These attitudes have the function of giving positive expression to central values and to the type of person an individual conceives himself to be. A man, for instance, may think of himself as an internationalist. Attitudes in keeping with this—favourable attitudes, say, towards other countries—would have a value-expressive function for him. These attitudes may have a double function: they may be a confirmation of self-identity; and they may also help to mold the self-image "closer to the heart's desire."

Favourable attitudes towards a group very often have a value-expressive function. The group gives the individual a sense of identity. Arthur Cohen in writing of the group as an important source of attitude change states, "Many research findings which show that members of a group resist communications that run counter to the norms and values of the group and accept those sanctioned by it can be interpreted in terms of social approval or disapproval." He cites studies which would indicate that those who place a high value on their membership in the group are most vulnerable to threats of social punishment, for they have the strongest desire to maintain friendly relationships with the other members and to secure the prestige and privileges associated with their status as group members. Also of significance for social group workers is Cohen's finding that persons of low self-esteem tend to be more susceptible to influence from persons of higher self-esteem. A favourable attitude to the group may be value-expressive insofar as it gives a person of low self-esteem...

11 Ibid., p. 41.
a sense of identity and by the same token opens him to the influence of the group.

Katz mentions two conditions which are relevant in changing value-expressive attitudes:

1. Some degree of dissatisfaction with one’s self-image or its associated values, which opens the way to fundamental attitude change. This is closely allied to the hypothesis that a person of low self-esteem tends to be more open to change from a person (or group) of high self-esteem.

2. Dissatisfaction with old attitudes as inappropriate to one’s values. Clearly, this dissatisfaction can be aroused in a group where members are shown by the worker and group members that present ways of acting conflict with values held.

The knowledge function

The knowledge function of attitudes has already been discussed briefly when treating of functional and causal analysis of attitudes. According to Katz, an individual seeks knowledge to give meaning to what would otherwise be a chaotic and unorganized universe. As an example of the knowledge function of attitudes Katz cites the findings of Herzog who studied the gratifications which housewives gain by listening to daytime serials on the radio. Herzog found that one of the important reasons why serials were popular was the fact that they were daily sources of information and advice.

Discussing patterns of social influence, Cohen draws attention to the role of “opinion leaders”. The attitude of others towards “opinion leaders” is functionally determined by the need of knowledge. Even more pertinent to social group work is Cohen’s discussion of the group’s informational function. Members seek covalidation for their ideas within the group, and they look to the group for knowledge. The group has therefore an effectiveness for influencing the attitudes of its members.

Attitude formation and attitude change

Some of the determinants of attitude formation and attitude change have been dealt with in the separate sections concerning the functions of attitudes; but it is useful to sum up in general terms what forms attitudes and what changes attitudes, for this will give an over-all view of Katz’s theory. In the most general terms it can be said that an attitude is formed by the excitation of a need in the individual. This need may arise within the individual or be triggered by a relevant cue in the environment. To induce attitude change the

12 Ibid., p. 113.
13 Ibid., Ch. 7.
expression of an old attitude or its anticipated expression must be seen to give satisfaction no longer.

Processes of opinion change

One way of changing people is to change their attitudes and opinions. Attitudinal change or opinion change is a type of change in which the change-agent exercises social influence. This social influence can be a very superficial thing where the subject merely says what he thinks the change-agent would like to hear or it may be profound where the subject endorses and takes as his own the attitudes of the change-agent. Kelman distinguishes three ways or processes of social influence: compliance, identification and internalization. These processes are not presented by Kelman as though one were 'better' than another; they are stated simply as ways of exerting social influence. The ways of influencing will depend on (1) the importance that the subject attaches to opinion-change as a means of attaining his goal; (2) his readiness or unreadiness to accept this particular opinion; and (3) the power of the influencing agent as, for example, the prestige of the value carriers which Williams drew attention to when writing on the value orientations in American society.  

Kelman's predilection for the processes of compliance, identification and internalization as an explanation of social influence arose through a dissatisfaction with the dichotomy of public conformity and private acceptance of ideas which did not seem to him a sufficient explanation of such diverse phenomena as the behavior of the "true believer" and the "brain-washed".

Before going further, it might be well to say that Kelman consistently uses the phrase 'opinion change' rather than 'attitude change' in his study of processes. However, since an opinion is an expressed attitude, his remarks on opinion change have relevance to modifications in attitude. The implication is that every opinion, even that which is most discrepant with the individual's life-pattern, is an expression of an underlying attitude. Kelman's study is in part an exploration of the connection between opinion and attitude. Furthermore, by treating of opinion change rather than of attitude change, Kelman is focusing on what is more amenable to study.

Compliance

According to Kelman, compliance is said to occur "when an individual accepts influence from another person or group because he hopes to achieve a favourable reaction from the other." The typical situation is where a person expresses a "correct" opinion because it is what is expected of him or because

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14 See Williams, op. cit.
he believes that it is expected of him. The characteristic of compliance is that opinions are only expressed when the person's behavior is observable by the influencing agent who has the means-control and who is seen as limiting the choice of behavior. The subject is concerned with the effects of his behavior.

The concept of compliance is not intended to be value-loaded. It will be functional or dysfunctional according to circumstances and according to the viewpoint of the individual who is making the judgement. In a group, for example, compliance may be all that is demanded initially. In the Provo experiment, the short-term goal of the early treatment was the maintenance of a certain minimum of compliance, i.e., the continuing presence of the delinquents at the rehabilitation centre. (This was not, of course, the exclusive goal.) Sarri and Vinter have pointed out the role of compliance in group work with juvenile delinquents.

One of the consequents of compliance is that when the group worker wishes to change an induced response, he must change the perception of the conditions for social rewards. Thus in the Provo experiment, changing compliant passivity (the physical presence of the boys) to compliant activity (discussion of delinquent behavior) was brought about by making the newcomer see that his eventual release depended on a certain type of active participation in the programme.

Identification

"Identification can be said to occur when an individual adopts behavior derived from another person or a group because this behavior is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship to this person or group." This is the most elusive of Kelman's concepts. Identification contains at least three components:

1. Identification is defined in terms of behavior, the verbal and nonverbal behavior of the individual. Identification of the subject with the change-agent is inferred from what the subject does or says.

2. This behavior is linked up with how the subject sees himself (the self-image) in relation to the change-agent.

3. This relationship is all important to the client, precisely because it gives him a sense of identity. This is what is meant by a self-defining relationship.

The group member may identify with the group leader by adopting socially acceptable opinions. He actually believes. He actually believes in the opinions and the actions he adopts—so it is not merely compliance—not because he has examined the opinions closely and found them satisfying, but because he likes the group leader and sees himself as an obedient and faithful follower. Destroy this leader and then there remains no reason for holding his opinions. His mere absence, however, will not result in an opinion change, for the leader acts as a sort of invisible censor. This identification differs from Freudian identification in its stress on role reciprocity (e.g. leader-follower), though it may include elements of classical identification (man-man).

**Internalization**

Kelman states that internalization occurs “when an individual accepts influence because the induced behavior is congruent with his value system.” The characteristics of the change-agent do not play an important part in internalization, for the important factor is the agent’s credibility. Kelman does not analyse the concept of credibility, though he draws attention to its complexity.

As for internalization in group work, it is clear that internalization does take place in a group setting. The group member adopts attitudes because perhaps they are seen to work in and out of the group or because these attitudes fit in so well with his values. Put technically, the subject accepts certain attitudes because he perceives them as conducive to the maximization of his values. There will of necessity be selectivity here. The group member does not feel bound to adopt all the opinions of the group leader, because he is now concentrating on the intrinsic worth or validity of what is said or expressed and not on the attraction of the group worker.

**Conclusion**

The social group worker, especially in a remedial setting, is frequently concerned with the modification of behavior. But to effect this he must bring about a change in attitudes. Social psychology, and in particular behavioral theory, offer some clues as to how attitude change can be accomplished. Basic to an understanding of attitude formation and change is a knowledge of the functions of attitudes. Katz considers these to be the adjustive function, the ego-defensive function, the value-expressive function and the knowledge function. While his theory throws light on the nature of attitudes, it does not illustrate precisely the processes of attitude modification. Consequently the group worker, whose goal may be the modification of group members’ attitudes, still lacks a theoretical structure which might be of practical assistance to him in the field. Where Katz leaves off, Kelman in his research on opinion change takes over. The processes through which opinions (and presumably underlying attitudes) change are—according to Kelman—compliance, identification and internalization. For group workers trained in the behavioralist school these processes offer not only an explanation of opinion change but in addition suggest strategies of intervention which the group worker may employ in modifying attitudes.