

This Week's Citation Classic

Sherif C W, Sherif M & Nebergall R E. *Attitude and attitude change. The social judgment-involvement approach.* Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1965. 264 p. [Inst. Group Relations and Dept. Speech, Univ. Oklahoma, OK]

Social judgment theory relates involvement of self to the situational contexts for communication. Predictions about assimilation-contrast effects in judgments of communications and attitude change on issues varying in personal importance are tested through research findings derived through multiple and innovative methods. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI[™]) indicates that this book has been cited over 190 times since 1966.]

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"Sherif and Hovland¹ proposed a theory of social judgment to clarify apparent contradictions in attitude change research. This book elaborated the theory and presented an enlarged data base, especially from a joint project on reactions to communications on 1960 presidential campaign issues. M. Sherif and I collected data while visiting the University of Washington, returning to the University of Oklahoma with data in one car and three children in another. RE. Nebergall, then in Oklahoma's speech department (now at University of Illinois), had collected data in several southwestern states.

"Testing the theory required new procedures for assessing attitudes. Two distinct methods were presented (method of ordered alternatives and the own categories technique). A person's attitude was conceived as a set of categories enabling discrimination and evaluation of communications on an issue. Attitude was measured as the latitudes (ranges) of

advocated positions acceptable and objectionable to the person, with positions neither acceptable or objectionable composing the latitude of noncommitment. The three latitudes vary in structure with the degree of the person's involvement in accepted positions. With higher involvement, the rejected latitude broadens while noncommitment all but disappears.

"To the degree that acceptable positions define one's self, the more those positions serve as standards for sizing up messages on the issue. Messages close to the internal standard are assimilated (the differences minimized), but messages increasingly different are contrasted (differences exaggerated).

"Propensity for attitude change by individuals varying in involvement forms a series of curvilinear functions, when plotted against positions advocated in communications increasingly different from the acceptable latitude. Probability of change increases with small to moderate message differences, but decreases with larger discrepancies, declining to no change and finally change opposed to the advocated position. The range for message assimilation and increasing change is greater with less personal involvement. This book introduced problems concerning degrees of involvement in various issues which became central in subsequent research.²

"The extensive research support for the theory is one reason for the citations. The novel research procedures are another. Finally the timing may have been right. Communication researchers were becoming aware that degree of involvement is critical in practical problems of attitude change. After one printing, the publisher was absorbed by the Columbia Broadcasting System, which axed 'small titles' It is gratifying that the book has been cited despite the publisher."

1. Sherif M & Hovland C I. *Social judgment. Assimilation and contrast effects in communication and attitude change.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961. 218 p.

2. Sherif C W. Values, attitudes, and involvement of the self. (Howe H & Page M, eds.)