

This Week's Citation Classic

Fishbein M. An investigation of the relationships between beliefs about an object and the attitude toward that object. *Hum. Relat.* 16:233-9, 1963. [University of California, Los Angeles, CA]

This paper provides support for the hypothesis that attitudes toward an object are a function of (1) salient beliefs about the object and (2) the evaluative aspects of those beliefs. It also provides evidence for the validity of a measure of belief strength and demonstrates that descriptive beliefs are important determinants of attitude. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited over 150 times since 1966.]

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"Many different factors contributed to the development of the theory of the relations between beliefs and attitudes presented in this paper. The paper was based on my doctoral dissertation and, not surprisingly, it reflects the theoretical and research interests of my two major advisors: Bertram H. Raven and Irving Maltzman. Bert, a social psychologist, was, at the time, excited and intrigued by Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*.¹ Thus, my first job as Bert's research assistant was to develop a measure of belief strength that could be used as the dependent variable in an experiment testing Festinger's model of 'forced compliance.' Although this seemed like a reasonable request at the time, Bert and I quickly discovered that no generally accepted measures of belief strength existed. However, Charles Osgood's *The Measurement of Meaning*² had also just been published and it seemed to me that the 'semantic differential' technique could be used to measure beliefs as well as attitudes. These notions eventually led to the development of the AB Scale.³

"Although the AB Scale appeared to have both reliability and validity, it led to the finding that there was no necessary relation between beliefs in the existence of an object (e.g., ESP) and the attitude toward that

object. This finding was contrary to most social psychological theory since beliefs had traditionally been viewed as a part of attitude. It therefore became necessary to not only distinguish between beliefs in the existence of an object and beliefs about an object, but also to better understand the relations among beliefs about an object and the attitude toward that object. Existent theories were based on notions of consistency, congruence, or balance but I had trouble accepting the notion of a need or drive toward consistency. In particular, I thought it was perfectly reasonable for someone to hold some negative beliefs about an object yet to generally evaluate that object positively.

"It was here that Maltzman's influence came into play. Maltzman, an experimental psychologist, had been applying Hull-Spence learning theory to an analysis of thinking. I found that by conceptualizing a belief system as a habit-family-hierarchy of responses and by relying on notions of mediated generalization, I could account for the relations among beliefs and attitude without having to incorporate a need or drive for consistency. My doctoral dissertation was an attempt to articulate the theory in both S-R and social psychological terminology, to further validate the B Scale, and to provide an empirical test of the theory.

"I feel that I was very fortunate in being able to work under two men with radically different views of psychology. More important, I am grateful that they both provided the support and encouragement for me to pursue my own ideas. The fact that my dissertation has now become a *Citation Classic* is a tribute to both of them.

"I believe that this article has become a *Citation Classic* because of (a) the general interest in the attitude concept by investigators in a variety of disciplines and (b) the fact that the paper describes a relatively simple operational procedure for identifying and assessing the cognitive structure underlying attitudes toward any object. For a more recent discussion of the model and its application to behavioral prediction in a variety of content domains see *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behavior*.⁴

1. **Festinger L.** *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Evanston, IL: Row Peterson, 1957. 291 p.
2. **Osgood C E, Suci GJ & Tannenbaum PH.** *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1957. 342 p.
3. **Fishbein M & Raven B H.** The AB scales: an operational definition of belief and attitude. *Hum. Relat.* 15:35-44, 1962.
4. **Ajzen I & Fishbein M.** *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980. 278 p.