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A CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD PETTY → Ohio State University



Krupat: *Let's begin at the beginning. Can you tell me what an attitude is and why it is that social psychologists seem to find this concept so important and interesting?*

Petty: The most common perspective today would be that attitudes refer to people's general evaluations of objects, issues, and people. There are a variety of sources that these general evaluations come from. They can be based on your emotions or specific information or beliefs or past behavioral experiences. The reason I think attitudes are important is that a good amount of evidence shows that these general evaluations are one of the most critical determinants of our behavior. So when people talk about social problems of the day, whether it's heart disease and cholesterol, AIDS, or drug abuse, one of the critical things we must do is to influence and modify people's attitudes. Most of our major social problems turn out to be problems of attitudes. For example, people think that they don't like low-fat food. They say it's not good tasting, or they are afraid to try it. So the first step in any kind of public education campaign is to look at what people's attitudes are and attempt to modify them so that behavior will follow.

Krupat: *But couldn't someone say, "Why bother with attitudes? Why not get right to the matter of interest and just get people to comply, to change their behavior without worrying about attitudes?"*

Petty: According to most attitude theorists, change through compliance is only temporary. Compliance occurs because of people's re-

sponses to particular aspects of some situation. The factors that produce compliance in one situation might not be present in another situation. On the other hand, people carry their attitudes with them from one situation to the next. So producing an internalized change in attitudes is the best way of influencing behavior across situations.

Krupat: *It's very interesting that you've been giving examples from a lot of very important social areas, such as AIDS and various kinds of health issues. Aren't attitude researchers often thought of as laboratory-type theoreticians rather than applied problem solvers?*

Petty: This has varied over the course of history to some extent. If you go back to Kurt Lewin, one of the founders of social psychology, he was trying to modify people's attitudes about eating generally disliked, but surplus, foods during World War II, and Carl Hovland's group was studying the morale of the troops during that war. Understanding attitudes and persuasion turned out to be more complex than it initially seemed, however, and lots of conflicting findings were produced. For example, expert sources were sometimes good for persuasion and sometimes they weren't. Sometimes variables influenced attitudes initially, but the effects were very short lived. These problems almost killed the field. It's only recently by back to the lab and trying to get more control over things that we are getting a handle on what's happening. Now we may finally be ready to reemerge and apply what we know. I think we have learned enough about when things work and why that it's time again to start looking at important problems in the real world.

Krupat: *You said that we are now just beginning to master the complexity of attitude change and to learn just when things work and why. When do things work, and why?*

Petty: That's a big question, isn't it?

Krupat: *Agreed. Too big and too general, but let's start out at that level if you don't mind, and then we can get more specific as we go along.*

Petty: Let me offer a sort of abstract answer in terms of what we've learned over the past 20 years that we didn't know before. In some ways, the whole approach to the field of attitudes and persuasion has changed. If you went back 15 to 20 years ago, we had all these competing theories, each trying to explain all phenomena all the time. And, of course, what happened was that it turned out that one theory worked here, but maybe it didn't work there. One of the biggest advances of the past 10 years or so is the recognition that different processes work in different situations. For example, in our own work on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, we find that classical conditioning is a very

important mechanism, but it is especially effective in situations where people are relatively unmotivated or unable to think about the stimuli presented to them.

Krupat: *Let me interrupt you midstream, if I may. The model that you and John Cacioppo have developed—the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)—is one of the most important in the field. Yet I am certain that some people aren't familiar with it. Maybe you could describe it for us.*

Petty: Sure. The basic idea is that sometimes people like to and are able to think before they make decisions and sometimes decisions are made without much thought. So we have this continuum of thinking from very high levels of thought where careful deliberation occurs before forming a judgment or decision, which we refer to as the central route, to very little thought, consideration, and elaboration, which we refer to as the peripheral route. The basic postulate of the model is that different attitude change processes work at different points along this continuum. Simple processes like classical conditioning or mere exposure work best when people are unmotivated or unable to think. But they don't work so well when people are motivated to think. Other variables, like a person's mood, work by different processes at different points along this continuum. If you're in a good mood and you're not really motivated to think about something, you'll generally like anything that's associated with that good mood. But if you are highly motivated to think, mood doesn't work that way. Instead, mood influences the nature of the thoughts that come to mind. So mood can work in a thoughtful way or a less thoughtful way.

Krupat: *If follow you. But why does it matter whether we change someone's attitude as the result of high or low levels of thoughtfulness or, as you say, by the central or peripheral route?*

Petty: The reason we care whether you are at one end of the continuum or the other is that, although you can be effective at changing a person's attitude at any point along the continuum using the appropriate process, the attitude changes resulting from careful and deliberate thinking tend to last longer and to be more resistant to counterpressures. That, for example, is important in the drug abuse field. For example, you could bring in celebrities or high-status figures to say "Don't use drugs" and you would get the kids to say "We don't like drugs." But the first time their attitudes were challenged, they would have no defense. Their attitudes wouldn't be very resistant to countervailing forces, even though it looked as though the researchers were successful. One of the lessons of a model like the ELM is that the amount of attitude change isn't necessarily the critical thing, it's the strength of the change. Some procedures produce strong attitudes—

ones that will persist over time, resist counterforces, and be predictive and directive of behavior. But other attitude changes which look exactly the same on an attitude change scale don't have those qualities.

Krupat: *Before I interrupted you to explain the ELM, we were on the verge of getting from the larger, more abstract issues into specific questions about what works and why. Let's get back to that.*

Petty: When you think about a theory like the ELM, there are a couple of kinds of variables that are highlighted. One very powerful consideration is that there are individual differences in the extent to which people like to think about issues. John Cacioppo and I have investigated this in our work on the "need for recognition." High-need-for-recognition people generally like to think, and they tend to form strong attitudes that persist over time and are predictive of behavior.

Krupat: *But if I were just facing an audience and I couldn't measure their need for recognition, how would I use that information?*

Petty: In a case like that you could take one step back. We know that there are some correlates of the need for recognition, like education level. Or, if you are picking jurors for a trial, you could ask them a few questions related to the need for recognition scale to get a sense of whether you would need to use a central or a peripheral strategy. But if you knew absolutely nothing about your audience and wanted to induce central route change, what you'd want to do is to build some things into your message itself. I think the most powerful is self-relevance. If you can make people think that a message is relevant to themselves, they will naturally process it. We've demonstrated this in the lab by varying whether the consequences of the message are likely to affect the message recipients or not, like whether a tuition increase is for their university or some other university. One of my favorite studies on self-relevance simply varied the use of a pronoun. All the arguments were exactly the same, but, instead of having a detached third-person message that read, "Students will benefit by having an improved library," the message simply said, "You will benefit." And it showed the same kinds of effects that we got with more dramatic manipulations just by changing the pronouns and invoking the self-concept.

Krupat: *That sounds like a wonderful strategy. Are there others that work as well?*

Petty: Another thing that we found you can do quite easily is to use rhetorical questions. For one reason or another, people have learned that when they are asked questions they have to pay attention because they might have to give an answer. So simply by framing an argument in a way that says, "Wouldn't this be great if we did such-and-such?"

people think about it more than if you just say, “It would be great if we did such-and-such.”

Krupat: *As I listen to you, I am trying to integrate some of the newer thinking on attitudes with some classic approaches. For instance, the old communications model tried to understand attitude change by asking “who says what to whom?” Would I be correct to say that you are taking things like this and trying to go one step beyond?*

Petty: That’s the idea. We still need to deal with source variables, the question of who, and message variables, the question of what, and so forth. But we think about these variables in different ways now. Before, people would just take a long list of variables like expertise or attractiveness and say that these qualities are good for persuasion. You would think an expert source would be good for persuasion, right? But we now have research that shows that sometimes expert sources actually have the opposite effect. Now we recognize that some source variables can work by a simple peripheral process or they can motivate you to think. If an expert motivates you to think but presents weak arguments, your thinking will lead to greater rejection of the message.

Krupat: *But what happens when we try to export our knowledge to decision makers and policy developers? How do they feel about conditional statements that offer complex advice such as “If X then Y?”*

Petty: In the abstract it sounds complicated, but practically, if you are allowed to have control over the situation, you can move groups into the high-elaboration set by invoking self-relevance. As I mentioned, simple things can work, such as just changing the pronouns or including rhetorical questions. You might be able to assess what the level of interest is and use different persuasion strategies, depending on the nature of your audience. It means that you don’t go in and mindlessly say, “Here’s my message. I’m going to give it this way regardless.” Once you get some sense of your audience, you can change your message to fit them.

Krupat: *Are you finding these days that people in “the real world” are still skeptical about the findings and advice of academic researchers?*

Petty: Just with the number of phone calls that come from advertising agencies, law firms, and government panels, I think it’s certainly not the case anymore. They are becoming more aware of what’s going on. For example, more and more I see commercials and messages that you think were taken right out of the professional journals.

Krupat: *It seems to me that social psychologists are using their knowledge not so much to sell commercial products as to promote ideas and*

behaviors that most people value. Is that a direction you think we should be going?

Petty: Yes. When people talk about the drug problem, there is a growing recognition that it isn’t just the supply of drugs that we need to affect, but also the demand for drugs. When you start talking about demand, you’re talking about changing individuals and their attitudes. AIDS is also in large part a problem of attitudes. More and more social psychologists are getting involved in working with AIDS task forces. There’s always resistance of some people who think, “This is common sense. We know what we are doing.” But as people see the success rates you get from using laboratory-based persuasion techniques appropriately (as with Project DARE), their attitudes are definitely changing.