

Discuss attempts made by psychologists to measure attitudes

In order to measure attitudes effectively, it is important that we understand what an attitude is. There is no single definition of attitudes. According to Rosenberg & Hovland (1960) attitudes are 'predispositions to respond to some class of stimuli with certain classes of response'. These responses can be affective (emotional), cognitive (thoughts, beliefs) or behavioural (actual responses). An alternative conceptualisation of attitudes includes the definition by Allport (1935): 'An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organised through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related'.

As there is no common definition of what an attitude is (it is a hypothetical construct), measurement of attitudes relies on indications of attitudes. Thus most methods of attitude measurement are based on the assumption that they may be measured by people's beliefs or opinions about the attitude object (Stahlberg & Frey, 1988).

Most tools for assessing attitudes rely on verbal reports and often take the form of statements, which refer to the attitude being measured. However, this method of creating standard statements makes two assumptions. Firstly, that each statement is interpreted the same way by every individual and has the same meaning and, secondly, that subjective attitudes are quantifiable by a numerical score.

Thurstone (1928) made one of the first attempts at constructing an attitude scale. Firstly, 100 statements relating to an attitude object, and ranging from extremely positive comments to extremely negative, are presented to a sample of judges who represent the population for whom the scale is intended. These judges then evaluate the statements on an 11-point interval scale. Statements that create a varied response are discarded until 22 statements remain (two for each of the 11 points on the scale - 11 favourable, 11 unfavourable). The average numerical scale position of each statement is calculated. The order of the statements is then randomised and participants are asked to indicate every statement with which they agree. The final attitude score is the mean value for the statement.

Although this method is one of the first attempts to measure attitudes in an objective way, the Thurstone scale is not a common method for measuring attitudes today. This is because it is a time-consuming method and also it assumes that attitudes can be measured on an interval (and not an ordinal) scale. This suggests that the difference between one point on the scale and another is equal, and as attitudes are not easily quantifiable, this could be a false assumption.

One of the most common methods for measuring attitudes is the Likert scale (1932). This involves a measure of statements about an attitude object whereby participants indicate if they strongly agree/agree/undecided/disagree/strongly disagree with the statements. In order to control response acquiescence (when an individual consistently responds in a positive manner), statements are selected for which half the 'agree' responses represent a positive attitude and the other half a negative response.

The Likert scale is more statistically reliable than the Thurstone scale and it is easier to construct. It does not assume that the differences between two points on the scale are equal, rather the attitude to an attitude object can be labelled objectively according to the scale.

Sociometry (Moreno, 1953) is a method for measuring interpersonal attitudes in groups (for example, friendship groups). A sociogram is constructed by asking members of a group who their preferred partner is for a particular activity. This sociogram represents the diagrammatic relationship between individuals in that group. This method of measuring attitudes is restricted to interpersonal relationships, as they are dynamic and provide a reciprocal way of assessing attitudes. This approach would not work well on attitudes towards objects, as attitudinal dialogue or opinions would be unidirectional.

Another method of measuring attitudes is the Guttman scalogram method. This involves a set of statements which are ordered along a structured continuum of difficulty of acceptance. This ranges from easily acceptable attitudes to attitudes that are more extreme. This scale is cumulative: to accept one level of attitude statement is to accept the levels before it.

Osgood *et al.* (1957) developed the semantic differential method of measuring attitudes. This assumes a hypothetical semantic space in which the meaning or connotation of any word or concept can be represented on a seven-point scale. The advantage of this method is that it allows several attitudes to be measured on the same scale. The attitude object is presented as an individual word and seven bipolar opposing adjectives are presented to the individual (with a score of 7 at the positive end).

One problem with attitude scales and self-report methods is response acquiescence, when participants consistently answer positively. As mentioned, this can be controlled using the Likert method. Another common problem with measurement scales is social desirability: participants responding in the way in which they think they should rather than revealing their true feelings. In order to counteract this, psychologists should reassure participants that their responses will remain anonymous.

Milgram (1965) developed a lost letter technique to measure people's political attitudes. He measured the rate at which letters (addressed to various political groups, but unposted) were returned. By doing this, Milgram could assess the popularity of each organisation and the corresponding ideological bias of particular parts of the city. Although participants' anonymity was assured, they were deceived and had not consented to take part in this study. This, therefore, is unethical.

In order to access a participant's true response, Jones & Sigall (1971) carried out a study where they told participants they were connected to a machine like a lie detector, which measured the strength and direction of emotional responses. It was concluded that such a method reduces the likelihood of socially desirable answers. However such a study is unethical as participants are deceived and thus cannot give their fully informed consent to take part.

Psychologists have made many attempts to measure attitudes, but they have encountered many difficulties when doing so. As a common definition of attitudes has not been agreed upon this makes their measurement more difficult. The second issue is quantifying an attitude. As hypothetical constructs, they are prone to subjectivity and individual interpretation. Additionally, when responding to attitude statements, individuals are prone to response acquiescence and social desirability. The evolution of attitude measurement scales has attempted to address these issues, although the need for scales to be constantly updated to match the purposes for which they are required will continue.

