CHAPTER 9 SUMMARY

An attitude is a hypothetical mediating variable assumed to intervene between stimulus and response. Attitudes involve at least an evaluation of the attitude object, and many definitions also include cognitions and behavioral tendencies. Social cognition's contribution to the field began with a metatheoretical approach valuing a fine-grained analysis of the cognitive processes involved in attitude formation and change. Attitude research has also borrowed specific theories and methods from social cognition research.

Two traditional cognitive consistency theories have profited from newer social cognition insights. Dissonance theory's long-standing hypothesis of selective perception to support one's attitudes includes selective exposure (seeking attitude-consistent information), selective attention (heeding attitude-consistent information), and selective interpretation (perceiving ambiguous information to be attitude-consistent). Although evidence for selective exposure entails mostly de facto rather than deliberate exposure, evidence for selective attention and interpretation fully supports the premises of dissonance theory. In addition, dissonance theory has concerned selective learning and retention of attitude-relevant information. Incidental learning of attitude-consistent information demonstrates selectivity, but intentional learning and high degrees of motivation eliminate selectivity. People with high self-esteem, an internal locus of control, or a tendency to repress unpleasant experiences all show greater selectivity, which is consistent with dissonance theory.

Another consistency approach, balance theory, also posits that people selectively recall information, in this case information about the attitudes of self and others. People can most readily remember that friends agree (and perhaps that enemies disagree). A balanced triad of two friends who feel the same way about particular attitude objects creates a compact cognitive unit that is easier to imagine, comprehend, and remember. An unbalanced triad is more difficult and seems to be stored in separate pieces. Attitudes in general organize memory for relevant information to the extent that people may have difficulty remembering the evidence on which their attitudes were based.

Some social cognitive approaches emphasize people's everyday theories about persuasion. For example, attributional analyses of why the communicator is delivering a particular message influence persuasion. If a communicator delivers a particular message because of the audience or other situational factors, then it is suspect. Similarly, if a communicator is dispositionally biased in terms of knowledge or reporting motives, then the message is perceived as untrustworthy. Another lay theory approach examines attitude polarization in groups as a function of persuasive arguments raised by group members, social comparison information, or group identity.

Finally, people's implicit theories about stability and change encourage people to perceive or misperceive stability and change in their own attitudes and other dispositions. People do not typically expect their attitudes to change, so they misperceive stability, even when their attitudes have been altered by subtle means. Moreover, people misrecall their prior behavior to fit their current attitudes, again in line with the general belief that attitudes are stable and behavior accordingly follows. When people's theories suggest change, however, they also (mis)perceive change following a conversion, a self-help program, therapy, and the like.

People's attitudes vary along some dimensions important to social cognition. Conviction involves several components related to the importance of one's attitudes: emotional commitment, ego preoccupation, and cognitive elaboration. A related term for conviction is value-relevant involvement, and another related concept is strength. Whatever their name, such significant attitudes are few (for most people) and resist change. Such attitudes are stable, accessible, differentiate among attitude objects, and are consistent with other attitudes. They may be open to change only by paradoxical techniques.

People's attitudes serve several functions relevant to knowledge, values, and sociality. First, people's attitudes serve a knowledge function, providing heuristics for rapid responses and schemas for organizing knowledge. As people's need for structure increases, they are more likely to rely on their ready-made attitudes or on simple attitudes quickly constructed. Attitudes can also serve a self function of value expression, allowing people to demonstrate their prized standards and orientations. The attitudes of low self-monitors are especially likely to serve value-expressive functions. When people hold core conflicting values, their relevant attitudes become more complex with the necessity of integrating them. Finally, attitudes can also serve social-adjustive self functions. They help people to fit in with other people and to demonstrate interpersonal attunement. High self-monitors, who are oriented to the social environment, are more likely to hold social-adjustive attitudes. Apart from individual differences, some attitude objects may typically elicit attitudes with particular types of functions.

The various cognitive approaches to attitudes – those elaborating traditional theories and those positing altogether new processes, those emphasizing more thoughtful or more automatic processes, and those focusing almost entirely on cognition or more actively including motivation – have various implications for intergroup stereotyping and prejudice, for affect, and for the relationship between cognition and behavior, as the next chapters indicate.