Taking it personally : self-esteem and the protection of self-related attitudes
Wiersema, D.V.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 1

Introduction
We hold attitudes toward virtually everything we come across, such as attitudes toward objects (e.g. cars, cigarettes), an institution (e.g. the church, university), a person or social group (e.g. George Bush, Muslims) or an idea (e.g. abortion, the death penalty). Attitudes help us to make our way into the world by predisposing us to act toward an attitude-object in a predictable manner (Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). For instance, a positive attitude toward Italian food diminishes the range of eligible restaurants to choose from, thereby making the choice less complex.

There is more to attitudes than them having objects and guiding our behavior. This becomes evident when examining how attitudes are defined. Attitudes have been defined as a “...psychological tendency to evaluate a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). This definition of attitudes as a tendency suggests that attitudes are to some degree stable, but can also be flexible. This is especially visible when we are confronted with persuasive appeals. Indeed, it is hard to think of situations void of attempts at persuasion. The moment we turn on our television, open a magazine or journal, travel through cyberspace or simply make our way in the “real” world, we are flooded by attempts to lure us into buying all kinds of consumer goods or by attempts to change our opinion on some societal issue. Estimates on the amount of advertisements we encounter daily in 1972 ranged from 117 to 484 (Britt, Adams & Miller, 1972). Nowadays, the Dutch are confronted every day with an amazing 2,005 television commercials, 2,452 radio commercials, 988 magazine and journal adds, not to mention the vast amounts of advertisements on the street, the internet and other locations (Acxiom, 2008). The sheer quantity and ubiquity of persuasive appeals suggests that they are effective in changing people’s attitudes. Indeed, our attitudes are often influenced by these appeals. An evocative example of how easily attitudes sometimes can be changed is related to the United States presidential election of 1960.

On the 26th of September of that year, Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, the Democratic candidate, and Vice President Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate took part in the first-ever televised presidential debate.
Chapter 1 - Introduction

An estimated 80 million viewers tuned in to see this first of four “Great Debates” and were able to watch their candidates compete instead of listening to them on the radio or reading about them in the papers. The result was astonishing.

At the time, Nixon was just released from the hospital due to a knee injury. He looked tired (even more so because he refused to wear make-up), had lost a lot of weight, wore ill-fitting clothes and was visibly discomforted by the smooth delivery of his opponent. Indeed, Kennedy looked tanned, relaxed and confident. These contrasting appearances had a dramatic influence on people’s attitudes. After the debate, opinion polls indicated that the television viewers saw Kennedy as the absolute winner of the debate. However, people who had listened to the debate on the radio stated that Nixon had won the debate. At election time, more than half of the voters indicated that the televised debates had influenced their vote and 6% based their vote entirely on the debates. Kennedy won the elections and became the thirty-fifth president of the United States of America.

The example above not only shows the tremendous impact television can have on us, but also shows how easily attitudes can sometimes be influenced. However, persuasive appeals are not always successful and it is these examples that have puzzled policy makers, advertisers and social psychologists most. An example of the difficulty of changing attitudes is the Dutch “no” with reference to a joint European constitution in 2005’s referendum. In the run-up to the referendum, both the majority in the parliament as well as the government (especially the Dutch prime minister) incessantly stressed the importance of the constitution for the European Union as a whole and the Netherlands in specific. Despite these attempts, a vast majority of people voted against it. The same happened in France where only 45.1% of citizens supported the constitution.

In the realm of consumer psychology, similar failures have occurred. In 1958 the first DAF passenger car was introduced to the Dutch public. This “DAF 600” had an innovative, fully automatic transmission system, the Variomatic, which made driving a lot easier. Although at first the DAF 600 was received positively by the public interest eventually waned due to image
Taking it personally

problems. The car appealed mostly to seniors, especially elder women. As such, it became nicknamed as “truttenschudder met jarretelaandrijving” which means something like a twat-shaker with garter-drive, the garter referring to the rubber driver belts being part of the automatic transmission system. DAF was not able to turn the tide; in 1963 the production of the DAF 600 came to a halt and in 1975 DAF sold its passenger car division to Volvo.

These examples illustrate both the stability and flexibility of attitudes. However, it is often unclear why some attitudes are easily changed while others are not. The limited understanding of the factors contributing to persuasion has resulted in an accumulation of research on the how and when of persuasion. This research has looked at the phenomenon from diverse angles such as the message characteristics (e.g. strong versus weak arguments, Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), message source (e.g. expertise, Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981), the receivers’ responses to a persuasive message (Greenwald, 1968), the effects of fear aroused by a message (for a review see Ruiter, Abraham, & Kok, 2001), and characteristics of the attitude itself (e.g. ambivalence, Armitage & Conner, 2000; attitude importance, Zuwerink & Devine, 1996), to name a few. However, the focus of this dissertation is not on persuasion per se, but rather is on the causes and consequences of resistance to persuasion.

The goal of getting people to change their attitudes – and the behavior that goes with it – seems to be opposite to that of attitude-holders themselves, because people often are motivated to protect their attitudes from change. This is apparent for instance in the tendency of people to avoid counter-attitudinal information and prefer exposure to information that supports their attitude (for a review, see Frey, 1989). This tendency is even more pronounced when the attitudes involved are “strong” (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly, 2007).

Strong attitudes are characterized by their stability over time, resistance to persuasion and their strong impact on information processing and behavior (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). These four hallmarks of attitude-strength are related to various lower-order features of attitudes (i.e. attributes) such as the certainty with which they are held, the importance attached to them, their
accessibility and the amount of knowledge the attitude-holder has about an attitude-object, amongst others (e.g. Krosnick, Boninger, Chuang, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006).

When examining attitude-strength features, it is evident that some reflect subjective and introspective judgments of attitude-holders with regard to their attitude (e.g. importance, certainty), while others represent structural properties of the attitude itself (e.g. accessibility). For example, accessibility of an attitude refers to the strength of the link between the representation of an attitude-object and its evaluation in memory measured as the speed with which an attitude is expressed. Attitude importance on the other hand, is based on a person’s subjective feeling that an attitude is important. Important attitudes are thus attitudes that a person cares a lot about. It is this involvement that is assumed to motivate people to protect their attitude (Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006). Not surprisingly, higher levels of attitude importance are generally associated with lower levels of attitude change (e.g. Zuwerink & Devine, 1996). Attitude importance is thus a central ingredient and an important starting point for understanding resistance to persuasion.

Attitude importance is often treated as unitary construct, not divisible into other, lower-order constructs. However, this need not necessarily be the case. This point is best illustrated by thinking about what it is that makes an attitude important. For instance, I have a positive attitude toward spending the summer holidays in the south of France simply because I enjoy the sun, the sea and the French cuisine. This attitude is primarily based on personal experience and hedonistic aspects. My negative attitude toward university education becoming more and more scholastic on the other hand has nothing to do with how that affects me personally, but is caused primarily by my belief that students will learn more in a less scholastic environment; even if that means that they take longer to complete the curriculum. This attitude is mainly based on certain values I endorse. Even though both attitudes are equally important to me, they are so for different reasons. We will see that these different origins of attitude importance relate to how easily an attitude is changed.
In the literature, three different origins of attitude importance are being discerned: self-interest, social identification and value-relevance (e.g. Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995; Visser, Krosnick, & Norris, 2004, in Visser, Bizer, & Krosnick, 2006). Each of these three constructs was found to predict unique variance in the importance people attached to their attitudes. Hence, there is evidence suggesting that attitude importance is not a unitary construct.

The three sources of attitude importance introduced above, map directly onto three psychological functions of attitudes described in the so-called functional theories of attitudes (Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956; Katz, 1960). The basic assumption of these theories is that instead of being motivationally void, attitudes fulfill important personal and social needs. These theories thus deal with the relationship an attitude-holder has with his or her attitude. The function of an attitude influences the quality of this relationship, the type of involvement a person has with an attitude and more importantly, the ease with which an attitude is changed. But before going into this, I will first briefly explain the three attitude-functions.

The social adjustment function is similar to the construct of social identification. According to the social adjustment function, attitudes can be used as a tool to maintain and facilitate or disrupt social relationships (Smith et al., 1956). For example, we tend to like people who have similar attitudes (Byrne, 1961; Byrne, & Griffitt, 1966). The utilitarian function maps onto the construct of self-interest. This function is based on the hedonic principle that people want to maximize rewards and minimize punishment (Katz, 1960). These attitudes thus serve an individual’s (material) self-interest. For instance, my attitude toward spending my summer holidays in the South of France is based predominantly on hedonic principles. And last but not least, value-expressive attitudes are a means for expressing important personal values and central aspects of the self-concept. They are a reflection of who we are and what we stand for in life and expressing these attitudes is a means to self-actualize. My attitude toward university education becoming more and more scholastic is an example of an attitude that serves a value-expressive function for me. Crucially, the different attitude functions that correspond to the three antecedents of
attitude importance, affect how fiercely an attitude is protected. This will be explained below.

Attitudes serving a social adjustment function and attitudes serving a utilitarian function are more easily changed than attitudes serving a value-expressive function (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Maio & Olson, 1995). The latter are highly resistant to persuasion. One explanation is that the former two functions are dependent upon external factors (social groups, material gains et cetera) that are susceptible to change and hence the attitude will change accordingly when the context changes. For example, my attitude toward spending the holidays in the South of France became more negative when I found out I was not the only one who liked France and had to share the beach with loads of other Francophiles. However, a value-relevant attitude is associated with, yet is even a part of a person’s more stable self-concept and identity (Holland, 2003). If changing one’s attitude implies changing the self, people should be reluctant to do so, as indeed they are.

Interestingly, the involvement people have with their value-expressive attitudes is equated with the involvement associated with another function of attitudes (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Levin, Nichols, & Johnson, 2000): the externalization (Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956) or ego-defensive function (Katz, 1960). According to this function, people protect themselves from undesirable information about their personality, accomplishments, appearance et cetera. For instance, people engage in “memorial self-defense” when confronted with negative information about themselves: they tend to forget it (Sedikides & Green, 2004, 2000). Ego-defensive attitudes thus serve to defend one’s self-image and self-esteem. If people are involved with their value-relevant attitudes in a way that is similar to that of ego-defensive attitudes, then defending an attitude in which one has high value-relevant involvement is equivalent to defending the self. Counter-attitudinal information can in this vein be considered as information that threatens the self and instigates self-protective behaviors. But what kind of behaviors do people perform to protect their value-relevant attitudes? This is the focus of the present dissertation.
Taking it personally

If value-relevant attitudes are similar to ego-defensive attitudes, then the mechanisms that serve to protect them should also be similar. Katz (1960), building on Freudian principles, argues that ego-defensive attitudes can be protected via two separate classes of behavior. The essence of the first is the complete avoidance and denial of undesirable information; the second class has to do with rationalization, projection and displacement. Katz had distinctive views on these two classes arguing that the first class of behaviors is "primitive" and part of "the fantasy world of the paranoiac", while the second behavioral class is "less handicapping" (p. 172). Although there is evidence that some of these Freudian defense-mechanisms do take place (Schimel, Greenberg, & Martens, 2003; Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998), not all of these mechanisms let themselves translate easily to the situation where an individual is confronted with a counter-attitudinal message. For instance, it is hard to understand how projection - seeing (undesirable) traits that one thinks one does not possess in other people - might help a person in coping with the content of a message that is incongruent with his or her attitude on say, nuclear energy. However, a more basic understanding of these two behavioral categories would be that one is aimed at avoiding threatening, counter-attitudinal information altogether, while the other is aimed at dealing with it in a more direct fashion. Both strategies could be effective in protecting attitudes from change.

Although there is abundant evidence that the tendency to avoid or approach threatening information and situations exists (see Chapter 3, this dissertation), not much is known about when people are more likely to adopt one or the other strategy. In this dissertation I will explore the occurrence and outcomes of these two behavioral classes from an individual difference perspective. More specifically, I will investigate the role of self-esteem in relation to the two defensive strategies.

Self-esteem, in other words the attitude we have toward ourselves, is presumably the most consequential and important attitude we possess and the protection and enhancement of self-esteem is assumed to be a primary motive underlying human behavior (Allport, 1937; Brown & Dutton, 1995; Sedikides, 1993; Sedikides & Strube, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser, 1988). The
range of behaviors people (can) employ in order to protect their self-esteem is infinite. All kinds of behaviors can serve to protect the self, a phenomenon that has been labeled fluid compensation (Tesser, 2000). For instance, after receiving negative feedback about my performance on an IQ-test, I can protect my self-esteem by just forgetting the feedback (Sedikides & Green, 2004), but can also do so by questioning the validity of the test, by making external attributions about the cause of my low score (e.g. I was tired; Miller & Ross, 1975; Zuckerman, 1979) or by lowering the importance I attach to the domain of the feedback (e.g. having a high IQ is not that important, but having a high EQ is; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). I can even try protecting my self-esteem before taking the IQ-test. For instance, I can drink too much alcohol the night before taking the test in order to have a good excuse for obtaining a low score, a tactic that falls under the umbrella of the more global construct of self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Whichever of these behaviors a person eventually performs, will in part depend on the situation. To give an example, if the IQ-test is a highly established and well-known test, questioning its validity will be difficult and it will be easier to attribute a low IQ-score to external sources such as noise, being tired, having a hang-over et cetera. However, in this dissertation I will focus on characteristics of the person instead of situational factors.

Although the self-defense motive is ubiquitous, a person's chronic level of self-esteem affects the specific shape this motivation takes on. Low self-esteem individuals appear to be focused primarily on avoiding the loss of self-esteem, while their high self-esteem counterparts are oriented toward enhancing their self-esteem (see Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989, for a review). These differences could contribute to low and high self-esteem individuals using different strategies in order to defend their self-esteem. For example, consider the possibility of presenting your research at a social psychology conference. On the one hand, there is much to gain from doing this such as getting acquainted with other researchers in your field, generating new ideas concerning your research, and receiving compliments about your presentation and research. On the other hand there is something to lose as well, such as potentially not being
Taking it personally

able to answer tough questions from the audience, being visibly and audibly nervous, forgetting to convey crucial parts of your presentation, the audience not buying your story, and so on. If your motive is to avoid the loss of self-esteem, you would probably choose not to present at the conference. But if your motive is to enhance your self-esteem, presenting your research may not be such a bad idea.

The motive that is most likely to prevail could depend on level of self-esteem with low self-esteem individuals focusing on avoiding the loss of self-esteem and high self-esteem individuals focusing on enhancing their self-esteem. This implies that low and high self-esteem individuals may have different behavioral tendencies when dealing with situations that are a potential threat to the self. In this dissertation I will explore the attitude-protective strategies of low and high self-esteem people with respect to value-relevant attitudes.

Overview of this dissertation

In this dissertation I will investigate how chronic levels of self-esteem relate to attitude-protective behaviors. More specifically, I will investigate if self-esteem is related to avoiding or dealing with threatening, counter-attitudinal information that is targeted at a value-relevant attitude. In Chapter 2, three studies are reported that investigate the relationship between self-esteem and memory for pro- and counter-attitudinal information. Since memory is the result of the way information was processed earlier on, participants’ memory can reveal how attitude-relevant information was processed. In Chapter 3, the focus is on earlier stages of information processing. More specifically, the use of distraction as a means to avoid processing counter-attitudinal information is investigated. In Chapter 4 the effectiveness of different processing strategies on attitude maintenance is investigated. Finally, in Chapter 5 the main empirical findings and their implications for future research are discussed.