Taking it personally : self-esteem and the protection of self-related attitudes
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Summary

We hold attitudes towards objects (cars, tulips), persons or groups (Jan-Peter Balkenende, vegans), institutions (The University of Amsterdam, the Catholic Church) and ideas (gay-marriage). Attitudes guide behavior; a positive evaluation of French fries and hamburgers will result in frequent visits of fast-food restaurants. Besides attitudes guiding behavior, an important characteristic of attitudes is their stability and flexibility. Some attitudes remain stable throughout our life-span while others change easily. The stability of attitudes is noteworthy, especially in a society that floods us with information that challenges our attitudes. Luckily, most of this information is unsuccessful, otherwise we would buy three new cars every week. This dissertation focuses on the stability of attitudes and the ways in which people accomplish this stability.

Chapter 1 provides a description of the theoretical framework that the research described in this dissertation is based upon. Not all attitudes are stable and resistant to change. This stability depends, in part, on the psychological function attitudes fulfill. Especially attitudes that reflect who we are and what we stand for, the so-called value-expressive or value-relevant attitudes, are characterised by high levels of stability. Examples of such attitudes are attitudes regarding gay-marriage, the death-penalty and organ-donation.

Previous research has shown that value-relevant attitudes are highly resistant to change. This suggests that people are motivated to protect their value-relevant attitudes. It seems plausible that this defense-motivation is induced by the direct link between the attitude and the self-concept. Because of
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this link, information that is a threat to the attitude, is a threat to the self. The question that is addressed in this dissertation is which strategies people employ for defending their value-relevant attitudes. A distinction is made between people with high and low levels of self-esteem.

Self-esteem can be defined as a global evaluation of the self. Prior research has established it to be an important predictor of the ways in which people deal with self-threats. Generally, people with high self-esteem are motivated to (further) enhance their self-esteem. This motivation to enhance self-esteem results in high self-esteem individuals taking on challenges that offer them the chance to heighten their self-esteem. People with low self-esteem are motivated to prevent their self-esteem from dropping. Because of a lack in confidence in their capacity to succeed, they tend to avoid situations that could challenge their self-esteem. I expect these two general foci to also affect how low and high self-esteem individuals protect their value-relevant attitudes and how they deal with counter-attitudinal information. The next three chapters of this dissertation explore this idea from different angles.

In Chapter 2, two different strategies of attitude-protection are introduced, an active-defensive and a passive-defensive strategy, that correspond roughly with the above mentioned differential foci of low and high self-esteem individuals. I expected high self-esteem individuals to use the active-defensive strategy of attitude-protection. The essence of this strategy is refutation of counter-attitudinal information. Low self-esteem individuals were expected to use the passive-defensive strategy aimed at avoiding information that is incongruent with their attitude. Furthermore, these modes of attitude-protection were predicted to be activated predominantly when the attitude under attack is high in value-relevance. The research presented in Chapter 2 investigates how self-esteem and the two strategies of attitude-protection relate to memory for information that is counter-attitudinal and pro-attitudinal.

An important hypothesis in research on memory for attitude-relevant information is the congeniality hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that people have better memory for information that matches their attitude relative to information incongruent with their attitude. This implies that people employ a
passive-defensive processing mode in dealing with counter-attitudinal information. In this mode, counter-attitudinal information is avoided and given less attention. This results in degraded memory for this information relative to pro-attitudinal information. However, research inspired by the congeniality hypothesis has resulted in mixed findings. I argue that these mixed findings can be explained by the fact that low and high self-esteem individuals employ different strategies of attitude-protection. If this is the case, the memory of low self-esteem individuals should correspond with the congeniality hypothesis (i.e. better memory for pro-attitudinal information) while their high self-esteem counterparts should demonstrate an opposite effect due to the active-defensive processing mode where counter-attitudinal information is given more attention. Results of three studies confirm that high self-esteem individuals have better memory for counter-attitudinal information while their low self-esteem counterparts demonstrate better memory for pro-attitudinal information. Moreover, this pattern is found predominantly when the attitude is high in value-relevance. The results also show that these biases in memory for attitude-relevant information are the result of processes taking place at the encoding stage and not at retrieval.

I assume that the differences in memory for attitude-relevant information between people low and high in self-esteem, result from them employing different modes of information-processing. The goal of the research presented in Chapter 3 of this dissertation is to gain a more detailed understanding of these two modes. The emphasis is on the passive-defensive mode of processing.

The passive-defensive mode of processing is aimed at avoiding information that is incongruent with the attitude. One potential means to accomplish this is by distraction, for instance by using cues in the environment that are irrelevant to the attitude. Study 3.1 showed that participants with low self-esteem tended to delay reading a counter-attitudinal essay as opposed to high self-esteem participants if their attitude was high in value-relevance. In stead of choosing to read the counter-attitudinal essay, low self-esteem participants chose to engage in other research experiments first. The tendency
to delay confrontation with the counter-attitudinal message by engaging in other tasks first can be understood as a means of distraction. Results of Study 3.2 showed that low self-esteem participants performed better on a distracting task than high self-esteem participants if they thought they had to read a counter-attitudinal essay immediately after this task. This effect was found only when the attitude was rated as high in value-relevance. The degraded performance of high self-esteem participants is argued to be caused by the fact that these participants were focused on the expected counter-attitudinal information, for instance by already counter-arguing expected counter-attitudinal statements. This fits the active-defensive strategy of attitude-protection. In Study 3.3, low self-esteem participants relative to high self-esteem participants had better memory for distracting information that was presented simultaneously with counter-attitudinal information. Since memory is a reflection of the amount of attention given to information earlier, the better memory of low self-esteem participants is indicative of them allocating more attention to the distracting information. Again, this effect was found only when the attitude was high in value-relevance.

The results of the three studies presented in Chapter 3 together strongly support the idea that distraction is part of the behavioral repertoire of low self-esteem individuals for dealing with information that threatens a cherished attitude. High self-esteem individuals do not shun away from this information. This fits the profile of the active-defensive strategy that aims at counter-arguing persuasive content.

The goal of both the active-defensive and the passive-defensive strategy is assumed to be the maintenance of the attitude. The question remains, which of these strategies is more successful in accomplishing this goal. The research presented in Chapter 4 shows that the attitudes of participants with high levels of self-esteem change less after confrontation with counter-attitudinal information, than those of participants with low self-esteem. This suggests that the active-defensive strategy of rebutting counter-attitudinal information is the more effective one of the two. When high self-esteem participants’ capacity to engage in counter-arguing was diminished by means of
a second task that had to be performed simultaneously, their attitudes changed more. For participants low in self-esteem, the dual-task condition did not affect their attitudes in the same way. Their attitudes changed less under these conditions. I suggest that this is the case because the second task helped them to distract their attention away from the counter-attitudinal information.

In Chapter 5, I provide a summary of the most important findings of the research presented in this dissertation, and discuss some implications and possible routes for future research. The findings show that low and high self-esteem individuals use different strategies to protect cherished attitudes from changing and that this affects memory for attitude-relevant information and the stability of their attitude. Also, this dissertation has contributed to a more detailed understanding of the passive-defensive strategy by showing that distraction is part of this strategy.