Social Judgment Theory

Social Judgment is an objective communication theory developed by Muzafer Sherif, a Turkish social psychologist that studied at Harvard and Columbia University. Social Judgment can be defined as the “perception and evaluation of an idea by comparing it with current attitudes (Griffin, 2012, p. 195). There are a variety of concepts that, when combined, make up the social judgment theory. Ego-involvement, judgment of the message, discrepancy and attitude change all play roles in the idea of the theory. Overall, social judgment can be applied to many different facets of the world today.

To begin with, one must understand the basic concept of social judgment. There are three different zones that apply to a person’s opinion. The first zone is called the latitude of acceptance, which is basically the degree to which a person is willing to see a new idea or opinion as reasonable. In contrast, latitude of rejection is a range of ideas that a person is not willing to consider. Lastly, latitude of noncommitment is the range of ideas that a person is neutral—they neither reject, nor accept the idea (Griffin, 2012). These latitudes simply demonstrate that people hold opinions—oftentimes, these opinions are pretty strong and one can see examples of this acceptance and rejection in daily life. For example, if one sees a news report that disagrees with his or her political ideology that has been deeply rooted, it is likely that he or she will reject it. As a result, that person will probably form a negative view on the report and possibly believe that the news is biased simply because it did not match up with his or her opinion.

Multiple research studies have been done to explain ego-involvement in social judgment. It is a complicated concept that cannot easily be defined. Basically, ego-involvement is an individual’s interest or commitments to a specific belief or idea. It was thought to deal with attitude intensity (Wilmot, 1971). Kenneth Sereno, an associate professor, and Edward Bodaken,
an assistant professor of Speech Communication—both at University of Southern California—did a research study that revolved around ego-involvement. They wanted to do a more in-depth test of ego-involvement construct by focusing on the persuasive effects in changing attitudes. Sereno and Bodaken were most interested in highly involved people in regard to latitude of acceptances and rejection. There is a range of large and small latitudes of both acceptance and rejection—basically, how strongly one feels and whether they believe something at extremities. They gave 39 college students a pretest, which helped measure attitudes in regard to ego-involvement. The students were asked to rate a message topic, which revolved around the elimination of draft deferments for college students. Then, they were to state their position of acceptance. 21 of those students were found to have a high level of involvement on the topic. Ten days after the original test, those same students had to read a message in support of elimination of draft deferments. Next, they had to complete a protest questionnaire. Two of the hypotheses originally stated that “highly involved subjects who are presented with a belief-discrepant communication will exhibit a decrease in their latitudes of rejection” and “highly involved subjects presented with a belief-discrepant message demonstrated significant increases in their latitudes of noncommitment” (Sereno & Bodaken, 1972, pp.152-4). Both were found to be accurate through the experiment. Also, Sereno and Bodaken found that after a student was exposed to the belief-discrepant message, the opinion of the highly involved person changed. One of the most significant things learned was that “highly involved subjects still have what must be described as extreme, negative, most acceptable positions” (Sereno & Bodaken, 1972, pp. 155-6). Also, the study suggested that possible “pattern of change in latitudes, which may necessarily be required prior to obtaining dramatic changes on the most acceptable position”
(Sereno & Bodaken, 1972, p.158). All of this information can help one to further understand the role that ego-involvement has on social judgment.

Another concept of social judgment is the actual judgment of a message. This deals with how deeply a person is anchored in their belief in correlation to evaluating a new message. A term called contrast deals with deeply anchored beliefs. According to Griffin, contrast is “a perceptual error whereby people judge messages that fall within their latitude of rejection as further from their anchor than they really are” (Griffin, 2012, 197). In other words, people can become so caught up with an idea that they are unwilling to listen to anything else—even if it somewhat agrees with what they believe. They are stubborn and refuse to take any idea that is not exactly like their own. For example, someone might hold a particular political belief—let us say that they are completely against abortion. Another person might be against abortion unless it deals with rape. If that person who is mostly against abortion tries to explain to the reasons why a rape victim should not have to go through the pregnancy, the person who is completely against abortion would not listen at all. Budging his or her opinion would be fairly close to impossible even if both opinions are highly similar. In opposition to contrast, assimilation is “a perceptual error whereby people judge messages that fall within their latitude of acceptance as less discrepant from their anchor than they really are” (Griffin, 2012, 198). Basically, this is when a person finds a message tolerable and agreeable even if it is not at the same level of his or her opinion. It is all about the way a person perceives a message.

Discrepancy and attitude change both play a role in social judgment. Several research experiments have been done to explore their impact on people in regard to the theory. One experiment in particular was done by Stephen Bochner, a psychologist at University of New South Wales, and Chester Insko, a psychologist at North Carolina Chapel Hill. Basically, they
wanted to see if they could shape and persuade some people’s opinions. Bochner and Insko
decided to try to convince college students about the number of hours needed to sleep. Prior to
the study, a majority of the college students said that the body functions best with eight hours of
sleep. Then, the 517 students were given material written by an expert that said that they could
function fine with less. As a result, research found that “the order effect indicates that
communication disparagement was greater when disparagement was measured after rather than
before opinion, and the discrepancy effect indicates a tendency for communication
disparagement to increase with increasing discrepancy (Bochner & Insko, 1966). Many students
were convinced that they needed less sleep than what they originally perceived. In addition, it
was found that credibility played a role in convincing these students. There was a YMCA and
Nobel condition. Some students thought that the research came from the YMCA, which lessened
their belief in the credibility of the study (Bochner &Insko, 1966). If the message is delivered in
an eloquent way, people are more likely to agree, especially if they have wide latitudes of
acceptance. Credibility is a key in changing attitudes.

The formation of attitudes is very important to understand in regard to social judgments.
It is crucial to understand how people develop ideas and opinions. In another experiment,
researchers want to understand attitude formation and change in regard to the social judgment
theory. The study was done by Hee Sun Park, Timothy Levine, Catherine Kingsley Westerman,
Tierney Orfgen, and Sarah Foregger—all from the Department of Communication at Michigan
State University. They used papers with strong and weak arguments that college students were to
answer questions about in a survey—the experimenters wanted to “examine the effects of
persuasive messages on attitude modification using multiple topics” (Foregger, Levine, Orfgen,
Park, Westerman, 2007, pp. 85-7). Some of the topics were familiar, while others did not have as
much awareness. Overall, the most crucial finding was the fact that the delivery and credibility of the message was what swayed readers the most. When the argument was strong and nicely written, people based their opinion more on the argument made (Foregger et al., 2007). In other words, the results show that quality of message plays the biggest role in swaying someone’s opinion.

To look deeper into how the formation of opinions works, one must apply it to everyday life. For example, one could look at the media, which is everywhere through television, magazines, computers, phones, and more. The opinions of the media are based on the way Americans perceive the coverage, especially in regard to politics. In numerous studies, it has been found that conservative Republicans tend to believe that the media is more liberally-opinionated, while liberal Democrats believe that the media has a more right-side agenda leaning towards the support of big business corporations (Lee, 2010). One might question how one forms such strong, close-minded political opinions on either side. Most of the time, beliefs are formed by other people impacting another person positively or negatively and life experience that one goes through. For example, if someone is raised in a sheltered, conservatively Christian home, it is likely that the person will have very strong conservative opinions. His or her parents have instilled morals and values that they believe to be important for their child to possess. The way a person is raised has a huge role in the beliefs that people form. If the belief is strong enough, a person will often respond negatively to anything that seems to challenge it. When this happens, it can be defined as a boomerang effect. A more clear definition of the concept would be an “attitude change in the opposite direction of what the message advocates” (Griffin, 2012, p. 199). So, this concept means that those listening to the message are driven further away from the idea. This is a fairly common result when dealing with someone who holds beliefs very strongly.
While the social judgment theory is very useful in explaining why people believe things the way that they do and why it is so hard to persuade someone, it does have some flaws. For one thing, the theory deals with mental structures and processes—one does not know what is actually going on in the mind. Also, research for social judgment is very limited. There is not much data on all of the many facets that make up the theory, so if more were to be done, it would probably be easier to understand and explain (Griffin, 2012). Overall, it is nicely put together and can help people understand a lot about themselves and others.

Social judgment theory is very useful in explaining the way that one thinks. Some people are more open-minded while others will not budge on an issue. People are different—social judgment does a good job of applying to all types of people. This theory can also help people learn to persuade more effectively and change attitudes. As a result, there is more understanding and techniques in trying to explain one’s perspective to another person.
References


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