Attitudes: Evaluating and Responding to the Social World

From Chapter 5 of *Social Psychology*, Thirteenth Edition. Robert A. Baron, Nyla R. Branscombe. Copyright © 2012 by Pearson Education, Inc. All rights reserved.
Attitudes
Evaluating and Responding to the Social World
WHAT IS THE BASIS OF PEOPLE’S ATTITUDES TOWARD President Barack Obama? Might how people feel about him affect what they believe about him? What if an attitude is formed based on beliefs that are “disproven”? Let’s consider these questions in terms of an issue we hear about frequently in the blogs, as well as legitimate news outlets—is President Obama a Muslim? In analyzing attitudes toward President Obama, the Pew Research Center reports that, as of August 2010, 18 percent of the U.S. population believes that Obama is a Muslim, a new high. How does such a belief get formed? And why does that belief, despite attempts to deny or correct it, apparently have such staying power?

First of all, Obama’s well-known personal history has some unusual features. He was born in 1961 in Hawaii to a white American mother, but his biological father was a Muslim from Kenya. Although Obama had little contact with his father during his childhood, the young Barack lived for 4 years with his mother and stepfather in Indonesia, which is the largest Muslim country in the world. For these reasons, people might expect that Obama was introduced early on to the teachings of Islam. On the other hand, when Barack was 10 years old he returned to Hawaii to live with his Christian grandparents, and after that he attended universities on the mainland. As an adult, Obama and his wife went to church and had a close relationship for 20 years with Jeremiah Wright, a Christian preacher in Chicago, although amazingly some say he did this while simultaneously (and secretly) attending a mosque!

The idea that beliefs persist, and continue to be held onto by people—even when strong disconfirmation is provided—is not a new issue to social psychologists. Leon Festinger and colleagues, in their 1956 book, When Prophecy Fails, provides us with an inside look at this seeming mystery. In this early investigation of attitudes, Festinger describes a certain Mrs. Keech, a Utah woman of deep faith, who believed that the world was going to end on the morning of December 21, 1954. Festinger details his realization that there was very little that could displace either the woman’s or her followers’ ardent belief that, indeed, the end of the world was nigh.

This early research revealed several characteristics that are likely to cause people to ignore disconfirming evidence (factual evidence that proves a strongly held belief to be wrong). One such characteristic illustrates our true believer situation rather
perfectly: If Mrs. Keech could convince others of her basic premise, then the magnitude of her discomfort following disconfirmation of her belief would be reduced. Indeed, these researchers found that the inevitable disconfirmation of the belief that the world would end was followed by an enthusiastic effort at proselytizing others to join her group. If true believers can find others who provide social support by sharing their beliefs, then the pain of exposure to disconfirming evidence is lessened. As we discuss in this chapter, there is considerable evidence that people hold beliefs that help them make sense of their emotions, even in the face of evidence that strongly disconfirms those beliefs (Boden & Berenbaum, 2010).

Nowadays, with the aid of the Internet, attitude formation can be facilitated from the beginning by the knowledge that other people share one’s beliefs. People on the Internet can find each other and begin to build up a store of “evidence” such as Obama’s father’s religion or his early years in Indonesia, which they collectively agree points to Obama’s Muslim identity, even if that evidence is circumstantial at best. And, when additional facts point to Obama’s Christian faith, true believers are likely to embrace their belief in his Muslim identity even more strongly! That is, disconfirming evidence can fuel true believers’ adherence to their belief, and sharing it with others can further cement that belief in place (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1  How Are Attitudes Toward President Barack Obama Formed?
Do our beliefs (cognitions) shape our attitudes (feelings)? Or, is it the other way around—do our feelings shape our beliefs? Do attitudes change when we are confronted with information that disconfirms our beliefs, or are those beliefs likely to be maintained to the extent that we can find others who share those beliefs?

In this chapter we explore the factors that shape the attitudes we hold, and address the key question of whether our attitudes are simply a product of rational thought. We consider how other people affect the attitudes we form, and what happens when we react against their attempts to influence us. How people respond to explicit attempts to persuade them is a complicated issue involving several different processes. We consider when, for example, people closely scrutinize the arguments presented in a message and when communicator credibility is not closely examined (see Figure 2 for an amusing take on this issue). We also address the important issue of when and how we manage to persuade ourselves—why our behavior can lead us to change our own attitudes. Along the way we consider whether all attitudes are equal, or if some attitudes are more strongly linked to behavior than others. Lastly, we examine the process by which our attitudes guide our behavior.

Social psychologists use the term attitude to refer to people’s evaluation of almost any aspect of the world (e.g., Olson & Kendrick, 2008; Petty, Wheeler, & Tormala, 2003). People can have favorable or unfavorable reactions to issues, ideas, objects, actions (do you like white water rafting), a specific person (such as Barack Obama) or entire social groups (Muslims). Some attitudes are quite stable and resistant to change, whereas others may be unstable and show considerable variability depending on the situation (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). We may hold some attitudes with great certainty, while our attitudes toward other objects or issues may be relatively unclear or uncertain (Tormala & Rucker, 2007).

What is your attitude toward the legalization of marijuana, an issue currently on the agenda of many state legislatures—(see Figure 3)? Is your attitude toward marijuana