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ATTITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE ON UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

Junior lecturer PhD. Aura CODREANU

Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies, Braşov, Romania

Abstract:

Taking into account the roles played by an individual within an organisation as a subordinate, peer, manager/ superior and the attitudes and behavior triggered by this, it becomes more than an obvious necessity to conduct a literature review on the relationship between attitudes, beliefs, behavior within an organizational context. Thus, a clear understanding of the aforementioned can be of further use in undertaking organizational processes such as: recruitment, employment, induction, and herein in aligning individual behaviour to group and organisational behaviour. Consequently, the aim of this article is to carry out such an investigation by highlighting those aspects pertaining to a better understanding of individuals' behaviour within organizations.

Key words: *organisational roles, organisational behaviour, attitudes, values, individual behaviour*

1. Introduction

According to Ilut (2004: 43) the concept of ‘attitude’ is highly used not only within the socio-psychological field [1], but also in other social sciences because individual attitudes represent ‘the unifying principles of the individual-society relationship’. Consequently, an analysis of organizational behaviour with a view to identifying and properly managing the issues related to the human resource management needs to have as a starting point a complete understanding of the role(s) played by individuals within organizational environments. Thus, a careful analysis of behaviour requires not only time but also clear- cut terminology, which this article will focus on.

2. Attitudes: some working definitions

A definition often resorted to in sociology and psychology when attempting to give an insight into what attitudes are and to the relationship between them and individual behaviour is the one provided by Allport [2]. Thus, according to him, an attitude is generated by experience and represents a mental state of readiness that influences an individual’s reactions to the objects s/he comes into contact. Another definition that comes and brings a shade of grey to the previous one is provided by Stoetzel [3] who describes an attitude as the way an individual relates oneself to objects of value.

Moreover, Popescu-Neveanu [4] defines the concept of attitude as a ‘relatively steady manner of the individual or of the group to relate to certain aspects of social life and to oneself’. Connected to this view of individual relation with society, but also with oneself, the American social psychologists Baron and Byrne [5] take the definition of the

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concept of attitude even further and view it as individual '*assessments made about any aspect of social world, the extent to which favourable or unfavourable reactions to problems, ideas, persons, social groups or other elements of social life are expressed*'.

An attempt towards providing a unifying perspective on what attitudes are is made by Ilut [1]. Thus, the analytical definition of the concept of 'attitude' he offers covers three aspects that are summed up below in terms of their defining characteristics:

- Attitudes are gained psychological dispositions which usually reflect the influence of the socio-cultural environment
- Attitudes are a merger of cognitive (i.e. information about an object), affective (i.e. assessment, approval, disapproval of an object based on the information about it) and cognitive (i.e. the predisposition to act) processes
- Attitudes are covert, stable assessment systems, resistant to change

Concerning the first aspect highlighted by Ilut, Mullins [6] emphasizes the fact that organisations are part of this socio-cultural environment. Consequently, they are not only a result of the influence of such an environment, but they are also '*reinforced or reshaped by the organisation*'.

Moreover, the same author adds up another characteristic of attitudes which consist in the fact that attitudes can only be inferred and the most employed techniques to do that are direct observation of the verbal and non-verbal communication style and self-reporting techniques.

Another working definition distinguishing between attitudes and values and set out with the purpose of better approaching the roles played by individuals within organisations is provided by Cole [7] and it goes as follows:

'An attitude is a predisposition to make certain kinds of judgments about people, issues and events, usually in specific situations. Personal attitudes are a reflection of the broad values held by the individual. Attitudes lead to the development of personal opinions and prejudices, as well as contributing positively to an individual's exercise of judgement. Some attitudes are held firmly, and are unlikely to be changed in a person's lifetime; others are held less firmly and are subject to change (...). Attitudes are narrower in concept than values, and tend to be focused on specific elements of the individual's external world.'

Besides this definition, Cole provides more information about the relationship between attitudes, perceptions and action detailing thus some aspects already mentioned in the definition provided above. Hence, by drawing on specialized literature, the author points out that attitudes are the result of personal values formed under the influence of the external world (i.e. parents, teachers, etc) and of the internal world (i.e. personality, intelligence), as well as of moral principles emerging from these values, and of social norms and collective values. Once attitudes formed through the merger of the above elements, they become the springboard for perceptions, opinion/judgments and actions.

3. Two major characteristics of attitudes

Allport [2] identifies two characteristics of attitudes that have great importance when drawing up the instruments to measure them and these characteristics are bipolarity or ambivalence and unipolarity. According to the researcher, bipolarity points out the fact that an individual may be for or against an object. However, in between these for and against poles there are degrees of intensity which represent the basis for the drawing up of

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scales of intensity like the Likert or Thurstone scales usually employed in surveys and questionnaires investigating the attitudes of a larger group of people.

On the other hand, the unipolarity characteristic of attitudes refers to the fact that at an individual level, namely at the level of the personal space of each and every individual attitudes are either for or against an object and usually reflect the tendency of the individual to ignore one of the two poles in favour of the other.

However, as it results from the literature review provided by Eagly and Chaiken [8], individuals may display both bipolar attitudes such as those triggered by socially controversial problems, or unipolar ones. Thus, at a personal level, the individual is unipolar, whereas there are situations when people are ambivalent by agreeing with certain aspects while, at the same time, disagreeing with others. In this respect, Radu [9] highlights, through the literature review he makes, the fact that ambivalence, namely the individuals' choice to position themselves in terms of the attitudes held in the middle of the strongly agree-strongly disagree continuum does not indicate indifference, neutrality or lack of knowledge of the object under scrutiny. On the contrary, the ambivalent answers have to be viewed as the mean of both the positive and negative attitudes of an individual and the interpretation has to go towards viewing the ambivalent answers as expressing uncertainty, ambiguity, and indecision.

3.1. Functions of attitudes

According to Katz [10] attitudes have four major functions as follows: knowledge, expressive, instrumental and ego-defensive.

The **knowledge function** is viewed by Katz as one of the most important because attitudes provide the basic framework for the interpretation and classification of new information by establishing either bipolar or unipolar relationships between the individual and the surrounding social reality. Thus, attitudes are in the end a sum up of the assessment of an object as carried out by an individual.

The **instrumental function** of attitudes is the result of past experiences. Hence, due to previous knowledge about an object, negative or positive attitudes may be held by individuals. In this respect, if individual need were met in the past, then the attitude is likely to be a positive one. However, if an object was the cause of fear or frustration, then the individual will have unfavourable attitudes towards that object. Based on these positive/negative assessments, individuals tend to express attitudes that maximise rewards, benefits within the social context and minimise sanctions from the others.

Another function identified by Katz is the **expressive** one and refers to the possibility of describing attitudes as means of expression. Consequently, attitudes help individuals display their values and thus express their self-concept or adopt and internalise the values of a group.

One last function that actually encompasses the other three previously presented is the **ego-defensive function**. Thus, attitudes allow individuals to increase or to protect their self-esteem from disturbing, undesirable truths or realities.

4. Attitudes- beliefs relationship

Since the underlying reason for carrying out this theoretical investigation is the influence that individual attitudes and behaviour have on and within organizational

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behaviour, a clear cut distinction between the concepts of attitude and belief is more than necessary (1).

In the terms of the basic differences between attitudes and beliefs, Mullins [6] provides a definition according to which beliefs are concerned with what individuals know about reality. However, this definition is insufficient in clarifying what the relationship between attitudes and beliefs is.

Thus, a further investigation into the literature needs to be carried out and the most adequate explanation emerging from a fine analysis of the literature on this issue seems to be provided by Ilut [1]. Hence, as it results from his analysis, attitudes are similar with beliefs when it comes to interrogations, conclusive statements and assessments, or social values. However, the fine difference between the two lies in the fact that attitudes become beliefs only when they are given specificity by linguistic acknowledgement on behalf of the individuals of the ideas and information they hold about persons, things, situations. Moreover, the concept of belief includes the concept of attitude.

In this respect, Gross [11] underlines the fact that for an attitude to become a belief it is necessary to be associated with a value, namely with what the individual perceives to be desirable, good, etc. Furthermore, the ratio of beliefs, attitudes and values an individual may hold is not equal: 'adults may have thousands of beliefs, they may have only hundreds of attitudes and a few dozen of values.'

5. Attitudes - individual behaviour relationship

Based on Cole's observations presented in the sub-chapter aiming at providing a working definition of attitudes and which highlighted the cause-effect relationship between attitudes and actions and correlating it with Gross' emphasis on the imbalance in number between beliefs, attitudes and values, the question that arises is how can the relationship between an individual's attitudes and behaviour can be better accounted for?

In this respect, Mullins is very categorical in denying the possibility of predicting behaviour based on a researcher's knowledge of an individual's attitudes. The arguments he provides in supporting his opinions are that there is not always a correspondence between what an individual believes and says and what the same individual does. Thus, it is not only behaviour through which attitudes are revealed, but also individual's thoughts (revealed or not in public) and feelings.

However, as the above observations already highlighted, even if behaviour cannot be predicted, the latter is an effect of attitudes. Consequently, as Ilut [1] underlines, an attitude is a 'motivational force' triggering a specific action.

Thus, this perspective is to be taken in this article and any other dealing with the same issue since its aim is not to predict organisational behaviour as emerging from the attitudes held by individuals, but to draw some clear-cut conclusions on how individual attitudes inform on organisational behaviour. Nonetheless, the attempt to establish a connection between individual attitudes and behaviour has its share of risks that are to be further presented.

The risks of encountering no correlation or a biased correlation between attitudes and behaviour are posed by three factors outlined by Ilut:

- the methodology employed to analyse the attitudes-behaviour relationship;
- the personality of the individuals under investigation and
- the situation/context.

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As far as the methodology employed to investigate the correlation between attitudes and behaviour is concerned, three aspects need to be taken into account. The first one refers to the likelihood for the researcher to obtain distorted answers simply because in-between the individual's attitude and the opinion the latter expresses based on that attitude a number of factors are involved: the personality of the respondent or of the researcher, the topic under investigation, the type of instrument employed to carry out the investigation. Hence, 'social desirability' may influence the individual and make him/her depart from the real attitude s/he holds and express an opinion that conforms not to personal attitude(s) but to what is desirable from a social point of view. Consequently, individuals may not reveal their attitudes on purpose either because of self-defensive mechanisms, because of their desire to appear as conforming to group or society values or simply because of topic sensitivity.

The second aspect that needs to be taken into account when talking about the role played by methodology in yielding divergence between attitudes and behaviour is the degree to which answers related to attitudes and answers related to behaviour are kept separate. In this respect, Ajzen and Fishbein [12] draw the attention to the fact that any investigation dealing with the relationship between attitudes and behaviour also has to take into account the correlation between four entities: the action proper, the target of the action, the context and the moment of undertaking the action. Thus, if investigations maintain the symmetry of these entities, then the findings are to point out correlation between attitudes and behaviour.

The last aspect to be observed when trying to eliminate any divergence between individual attitudes and behaviour is related to what Gross was highlighting in terms of the number of attitudes, values and beliefs. Thus, similar to the imbalances underlined by Gross, there is also an imbalance between the number of attitudes subsumed to behaviour.

Thus, behaviour depends on several attitudes and the researcher's tendency to focus on only one attitude, not always the most telling of the behaviour analysed leads to discrepancies between the attitude held by individuals and the behaviour they display.

In terms of the way personality may lead to differences between individual attitudes and behaviour, an important role is played by how relevant and central within the individual attitudinal network that attitude is.

Thus, a well-defined attitude from a cognitive point of view enables individuals to operate with it on short notice. Moreover, an individual characterized by activism is more likely to act in accordance with the attitudes s/he holds.

As far as the situation/context has an influence on the attitude-behaviour relationship, in my opinion, even if Ilut includes social desirability among the aspects concerning the methodology employed in the analysis of attitudes-behaviour relationship, social desirability is more likely to be viewed as pertaining to the situation/context factor. The arguments supporting this are to be found in Ilut's presentation of the situation factor as reviewed in the paragraph below.

Thus, by drawing on specialized literature in the field, the author previously referred to concludes that the divergence between individual behaviour and attitudes is increased when there are well-defined, restrictive situational requirements which, if trespassed because of individual attitudes, may lead to social sanctions. Moreover, the same divergence may appear when only one alternative to act is available and the latter comes in contradiction with individual attitudes.

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6. Conclusions

Whenever dealing with issues and attempting to analyse them in a scientific manner in order to get a deeper insight into organization theory and practice the socio-psychological concepts delineated in this article may come not only handy but also useful. However, since the reading and interpretation paradigm should be a larger one if results are to be validated, what I see as a continuation of the literature review already done is to focus on symbolic interactionism, that is the analysis of the interactions among an organization's employees, co-workers, managers.

Moreover, the adequate understanding and application of the concept of attitude may be useful in contrasting managers' and employees' attitudes related to certain organizational issues. As a result, likely deficiencies, biases, communication breakdowns that may influence organizational behaviour.

Endnotes:

(1) The distinction is imposed not only by the topic under investigation, but also by the usual framework within which personality is analysed and with which individual behaviour is correlated: attitudes-values-beliefs.

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