Flattery and Persuasion: a Dual Attitudes Perspective

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The current research offers some new insights into flattery and its consequences. We draw on a dual attitudes perspective to show that even in the presence of a clear underlying motive which typically leads targets to discount the flattery, the original positive reaction (the implicit attitude) continues to be automatically manifested subsequently, rather than being replaced by the discounted evaluation (the explicit attitude). Further, the implicit attitude has greater impact on future consequences than the explicit attitude, highlighting the long-term influence that flattery can exert even when it is supposedly corrected for. We also clarify the underlying process by documenting relevant boundary conditions for the discrepancy between implicit and explicit attitudes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Several studies have shown that the target of flattery evaluates the flatterer positively, because people have a basic desire to believe good things about themselves (e.g., Vonk 2002). Recent research, however, suggests a caveat. Namely, when people are aware of an ulterior motive (e.g., the consumer who suspects that a salesperson is offering a compliment just to close the sale), they discount the flattery and correct their otherwise favorable opinions (e.g., Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Main, Dahl and Darke 2007).

The current research offers some new insights into flattery and its consequences. In particular, we use the dual attitudes perspective (Wilson, Lindsey and Schoolder 2000) to show that even when the target of flattery perceives an ulterior motive and corrects for it, the original positive reaction (the implicit attitude) co-exists with, rather than being replaced by, the discounted evaluation (the explicit attitude). The implicit attitude, which takes the form of a relatively automatic reaction, is then likely to be manifested upon subsequent exposure to the source of flattery if capacity is constrained at the point of measurement; otherwise, it is the explicit evaluation that is reported.

Second, we draw on the attitude strength literature (e.g., Krosnick and Petty 1995) to show that the implicit attitude, because of its relatively automatic activation, is more likely to persist over time and also resist negative information, compared to the explicit attitude. The implicit effects of flattery, therefore, can be particularly insidious. A third goal of our research is to establish theoretically-derived boundary conditions for the postulated discrepancy between the implicit and explicit attitudes produced by flattery, in order to illuminate the processes underlying this discrepancy.

Four experiments were run to test our hypotheses. Experiment 1A used a simple one factor between-subjects design (Implicit vs. Explicit attitudes measure) to examine the basic thesis that flattery induces two distinct attitudes. Participants were asked to imagine that they had received a leaflet from a new department store; the leaflet contained some store details and an invitation to visit, along with fulsome compliments on the participants’ fashion sense. The key dependent measures, administered on a computer, comprised a set of items assessing store evaluations. Responses were collected under either time-constrained (5 seconds per item; implicit measure) or unconstrained conditions (unlimited time; explicit measure). The predicted difference was observed between the two attitude measures ($M_{\text{implicit}}=5.71$; $M_{\text{explicit}}=5.02$, $F(1, 53)=4.03$, $p<.05$). Also of interest, a delayed behavioral intention measure (likelihood of visiting the store) which was collected three days after the main study, was correlated more strongly with the implicit attitude than the explicit attitude ($r_{\text{implicit}}=.75$; $r_{\text{explicit}}=.14$, $F=4.10$, $p<.05$). A follow-up study, Experiment 1B, was run to replicate these findings using within-subjects measurement. A similar procedure was used as before, except that all participants were asked to provide evaluations under both time-constrained (implicit attitudes) and time-unconstrained conditions (explicit attitudes). The order of these two measurements was counterbalanced, and the ordering had no influence on the results. Interestingly, as with the between-subjects method used in Experiment 1A, results again revealed that the implicit attitude resulting from flattery ($M=5.06$) was higher than the explicit attitude ($M=4.33$; $F(1, 64)=17.14$, $p<.001$). Further, this study obtained convergent evidence regarding the greater predictive validity of implicit attitudes: a lower difference score—and thus, greater similarity—was observed between a delayed attitudinal measure and the implicit initial attitude ($M_{\text{diff}}=.14$) vs. the explicit initial attitude ($M_{\text{diff}}=0.59$, $F(1, 64)=14.89$, $p<.001$).

Experiment 2 used a 3 (Flattery condition: store-noncontingent vs. unrelated-noncontingent vs. store-contingent) X 2 (Measures of store attitudes: explicit vs. implicit) design to provide further insights into these findings. In this study, the flattering comments were couched as positive feedback on a personality survey undertaken by participants. Participants in the non-contingent (contingent) conditions were made to believe that the feedback was sincere (sincere)—i.e., non-contingent (contingent) on their actual responses on the survey. Further, in the two “store” conditions, the flattery emanated from the store which was evaluated later; in the “unrelated” condition, the feedback source was the marketing department of the university—this can therefore be viewed as a no-flattery condition from the store’s perspective. Store evaluations were obtained under either time-constrained or unconstrained conditions. As expected, results in the store-noncontingent condition replicated our earlier findings ($M_{\text{explicit}}=4.41$; $M_{\text{implicit}}=5.44$, $F(1, 100)=9.46$, $p<.01$). However, in the unrelated-noncontingent case, since the feedback came from a different source, no difference was expected or found for implicit vs. explicit judgments of the store ($M_{\text{explicit}}=4.31$; $M_{\text{implicit}}=4.52$, $F<1$, $ns$), ruling out a simple mood-based explanation of our earlier findings. Also of interest, comparisons with this baseline condition showed that non-contingent flattery by the store exerts its effect by raising implicit attitudes ($M_{\text{store-flattery}}=5.44$; $M_{\text{department-flattery}}=4.52$, $F(1,100)=6.56$, $p<.05$), not by lowering explicit judgments ($M's: 4.41$ vs. 4.31, $F<1$). Finally, we expected no difference between explicit and implicit attitudes when the feedback by the store was perceived to be genuine (contingent condition), since participants should no longer discount the flattery in their explicit judgments. Results supported this view ($M_{\text{explicit}}=5.10$; $M_{\text{implicit}}=5.22$, $F<1$).

Experiment 3 used a 2 (Self-esteem: self-affirmation vs. threat) x 2 (Measures: explicit vs. implicit) design to identify another boundary condition for the discrepancy between the implicit and explicit attitudes induced by flattery. In the affirmation (threat) condition, participants wrote about a positive (negative) attribute of their own, before being exposed to the same flattery manipulation and dependent variables as in Experiment 1. Since the favorable implicit attitude is caused by a desire for self-enhancement, we expected that this effect would be diminished if participants were already feeling enhanced before exposure to flattery—i.e., in the affirmation condition. In accordance, while the threat condition produced the prior pattern of discrepancy ($M_{\text{explicit}}=4.32$; $M_{\text{implicit}}=5.14$, $F(1, 101)=5.66$, $p<.05$), this was no longer observed in the self-affirmation condition ($M_{\text{explicit}}=4.41$; $M_{\text{implicit}}=4.19$, $F<1$). Finally, this study also included a measure of resistance to negative information. After initial attitude measurement, all participants were exposed to negative information about the department store; attitudes were then measured again either implicitly or explicitly. Across conditions, the difference between initial and post-attack attitudes was lower—i.e., resistance was higher—for implicit vs. explicit attitudes ($M_{\text{implicit}}=.07$; $M_{\text{explicit}}=.61$, $F=4.09$, $p<.05$).

Taken together, results from our studies provide new insights as to the dual attitudes produced by flattery, and also shed light on...
the underlying mechanism by documenting informative boundary conditions for the duality. Finally, this research contributes to the dual attitude literature (and simultaneously documents the potentially insidious effects of flattery) by showing that the implicit attitude can have more far-ranging impact than the explicit attitude.

References


