

ABSTRACT ATTITUDE

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1. Core Definition

The **Abstract Attitude** refers to a sophisticated mental state or mode of cognitive operation in which an individual is capable of stepping back from the immediate demands and sensory data of a situation to grasp its inherent structure, meaning, and overall context. This cognitive ability allows a person to employ the capacity to be simultaneously aware of all elements within an environment or situation, organizing them into a coherent whole, while critically maintaining the separate identity of each constituent part. This simultaneous awareness permits the individual to fluidly shift attention between different specific elements without losing the overarching focus or conceptual framework of the totality. For example, as described in clinical psychology, an individual exhibiting a strong abstract attitude can maintain focus on an entire audience during a lecture while simultaneously directing individual attention and formulating responses to specific questions posed by various members.

Unlike merely reacting to stimuli, the abstract attitude involves **volitional behavior**--a conscious intent to organize, plan, and analyze. It is characterized by the ability to detach from the subjective, concrete experience and operate based on general principles, categories, and possibilities rather than immediate facts. This mode of thought involves reasoning, generalization, and conceptualization. It enables the comprehension of non-perceptible relationships, such as similarities, differences, and abstract categories (e.g., color, shape, number), independent of their physical manifestation in specific objects.

In essence, the abstract attitude is foundational to higher-order human cognition. It is the necessary prerequisite for tasks involving planning, foresight, symbolic thinking, and genuine creativity. When this capacity is compromised, particularly following certain types of brain injury, the individual defaults to a more primitive, automatic mode of thought known as the **Concrete Attitude**, which is stimulus-bound and incapable of generalization or conceptual detachment.

2. Historical and Theoretical Development (Kurt Goldstein)

The concept of the Abstract Attitude was systematically introduced and developed by the German neurologist and psychiatrist Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965), primarily through his extensive work with soldiers suffering from traumatic brain injuries (TBI) during and after World War I. Goldstein's seminal work, *The Organism* (1934), laid the groundwork for understanding the dichotomy between abstract and concrete modes of existence, viewing them not merely as cognitive styles but as fundamental modes of being that encompass the entire personality.

Goldstein observed that patients with frontal lobe damage often demonstrated an inability to perform tasks requiring categorization, planning, or conceptual shifting, despite retaining adequate sensory and motor skills. He realized that the damage did not simply remove specific functions but impaired the fundamental capacity for abstract thought--the ability to deal with possibilities and hypotheses. Goldstein posited that the **Abstract Attitude** represents the healthy organism's striving toward self-actualization and adaptation, allowing it to transcend immediate necessity. This hierarchical view of cognitive function placed the ability to abstract as central to integrated, voluntary human behavior.

His theoretical framework was heavily influenced by Gestalt psychology, emphasizing that the brain functions as a holistic unit (the organism). Goldstein argued that impairment of the abstract attitude impacts the individual's overall relation to the world, resulting in disorganized behavior, catastrophic reactions when faced with tasks requiring abstraction, and a pervasive inability to cope with uncertainty or novelty. Thus, the abstract attitude became a cornerstone concept in neuropsychological rehabilitation and clinical assessment throughout the mid-20th century.

3. Key Characteristics of Abstract Attitude

The Abstract Attitude is defined by a constellation of cognitive features that allow the individual to manipulate concepts independently of sensory input. These characteristics reflect the capacity for organizational thought and volitional control over mental processes. The presence of a healthy abstract attitude is indicative of intact executive functions.

Capacity for Conceptual Thinking: The ability to grasp the essentials of a situation, isolate common properties, and form general concepts. This includes understanding and employing symbols, language, and mathematical operations that stand for non-present realities.

Volitional Mental Set Shift: The ability to change one's cognitive approach or "mental set" flexibly and intentionally when the situation demands a new perspective or a transition between tasks. This allows for adaptability and non-rigid problem-solving.

Planning and Foresight: The capacity to operate based on future possibilities, formulate strategies, and mentally simulate outcomes before action. This characteristic involves temporal orientation that extends beyond the immediate moment.

Detachment from Subjective Experience: The ability to view oneself and one's actions objectively, reflecting on behavior and separating emotional responses from rational analysis. This characteristic is crucial for self-correction and accurate self-assessment.

Tolerance for Uncertainty: An acceptance of ambiguous or incomplete information, allowing the individual to suspend judgment or deal with possibilities without succumbing to the anxiety that forces an immediate, definitive (and often inaccurate) conclusion.

These characteristics work synergistically. For instance, successfully solving a complex ethical

problem requires both the conceptual thinking to understand the principles involved and the mental set shift to consider the problem from multiple perspectives. The ability to generalize--to apply a rule learned in one context to a novel, similar context--is perhaps the most immediate behavioral manifestation of a robust abstract attitude.

Furthermore, the abstract attitude is intrinsically linked to language use that goes beyond mere labeling. It allows the individual to use language hypothetically, metaphorically, and structurally, rather than simply referentially. The capacity for sustained, directed attention, which allows for simultaneous processing of global and local elements, is also a critical component, supporting the initial definition provided by the source content.

4. Differentiation from Concrete Attitude

The Abstract Attitude is best understood in contrast to its pathological counterpart, the **Concrete Attitude**. Goldstein viewed the concrete attitude not as an absence of thought, but as a lower, stimulus-bound mode of existence that becomes predominant when the higher abstract capacity is damaged. In the concrete mode, thought and action are entirely determined by the immediate sensory characteristics of the objects or situation.

The differences are profound: while the abstract individual deals with categories, possibilities, and hypotheses, the concrete individual deals only with specific, tangible objects and immediate facts. If asked to sort shapes, a person employing the abstract attitude might group them by "geometry" or "color category," but a person restricted to the concrete attitude might only be able to sort them based on functional use (e.g., "things I can pick up") or purely perceptual details (e.g., "this red square is here; this red circle is there").

The concrete attitude represents an inability to detach from the immediate sensory field. It is characterized by rigidity, impulsivity, and an inability to generalize. The individual cannot think about something that is not immediately present or react to a situation based on memory or principles; they react only to the stimulus that is currently impinging upon them. This dichotomy, established by Goldstein, remains a fundamental distinction in cognitive neuropsychology for understanding the effects of diffuse brain damage, particularly involving the prefrontal cortex.

5. Clinical Significance and Impairment

Impairment of the Abstract Attitude (often referred to clinically as a "loss of abstract capacity" or "concreteness") is a classic symptom observed in various neurological and psychiatric conditions. It is most prominently associated with damage to the **frontal lobes**, the brain region critical for executive functions and volitional control. Conditions exhibiting this deficit include traumatic brain injury (TBI), advanced schizophrenia, certain types of dementia (e.g., Alzheimer's disease), and severe developmental disorders.

For patients suffering from this impairment, daily life becomes challenging because routine activities often require implicit abstraction. They may struggle with: (1) Understanding proverbs or metaphors (interpreting "A rolling stone gathers no moss" literally), (2) Managing finances (which requires abstract planning and conceptualizing value), or (3) Social interactions involving complex emotional nuances and hypothetical scenarios. The inability to generalize means that every new instance of an old problem is treated as entirely unique, leading to exhaustion and repetitive failures.

The clinical assessment of this impairment is crucial for prognosis and rehabilitation planning. A catastrophic reaction--Goldstein's term for the emotional and behavioral collapse observed when a brain-injured patient is confronted with a task requiring abstraction they cannot perform--is a key diagnostic indicator. This reaction (characterized by anxiety, agitation, and withdrawal) is viewed not as a psychological reaction to failure, but as an inherent mechanism of the damaged organism attempting to protect itself from overwhelming internal disorganization caused by demands exceeding its remaining cognitive capacity.

6. Measurement and Assessment

The assessment of the Abstract Attitude typically employs standardized clinical measures designed to test generalization, categorization, and mental flexibility. These tests require the subject to shift conceptual frameworks based on abstract criteria, rather than concrete perceptual features.

The Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST): This is perhaps the most famous and widely utilized test derived directly from Goldstein's principles. Subjects must sort cards based on hidden rules (e.g., color, shape, or number) which change without warning. The inability to switch categories after being told the previous rule is incorrect is known as **perseveration**, a direct sign of concrete thinking and poor mental set shifting.

Proverb Interpretation: Subjects are asked to explain the meaning of common proverbs. A concrete response is one that interprets the proverb literally (e.g., explaining that people physically roll stones) rather than abstractly (e.g., explaining that lack of permanent residence prevents accumulation of experience or goods).

Similarities and Differences Subtests: Standardized intelligence batteries (like the WAIS) often include subtests requiring the subject to identify how two disparate items (e.g., a chair and a table) are alike, necessitating the formation of an abstract category (e.g., "furniture").

The results from these assessments provide quantitative data on the degree of conceptual impairment, helping clinicians localize potential neurological damage and gauge the severity of the cognitive deficit. Successful performance relies heavily on the frontal cortex's ability to maintain and manipulate working memory representations that are detached from external stimuli.

7. Significance in Executive Function

Modern cognitive science largely subsumes the Abstract Attitude under the broader umbrella of **Executive Functions** (EFs), which are the set of high-level cognitive processes necessary for controlling and regulating other behaviors and thoughts. The abstract attitude is essentially the conceptual engine driving key executive components, particularly cognitive flexibility and planning.

Without the capacity for abstract thought, true cognitive flexibility--the ability to adapt to novel rules or circumstances--is impossible, as the individual remains rooted in the currently perceived reality. Similarly, effective planning requires the ability to conceptualize future states, allocate resources symbolically (money, time), and prioritize goals based on their abstract value, none of which can occur if the concrete attitude prevails. Therefore, the abstract attitude functions as the metacognitive foundation upon which executive control is built, allowing the organism to regulate its own mental states and interactions with the environment in a goal-directed, non-automatic manner.

8. Further Reading

[Kurt Goldstein \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Executive Functions \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Gestalt Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)