

ATTITUDE MEASURE

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Psychometrics, Survey Methodology

1. Core Definition

An Attitude Measure refers to a formal, standardized **psychometric procedure** designed to assign quantitative values to an individual's evaluation, feeling, or response toward a specific object, person, event, or concept. This procedure operationalizes the abstract construct of an attitude, allowing researchers to study its direction (positive or negative), intensity (strength), and structure (cognitive, affective, and behavioral components). Historically rooted in the need to systematically quantify human opinion and sentiment, attitude measures form the empirical backbone of much of social and consumer psychology, providing the data necessary for prediction and intervention.

The central goal of any attitude measure is the translation of subjective psychological states into objective, numerical scores suitable for statistical analysis. For example, a person might be given an attitude measure to complete in order to determine how strongly he or she felt about a contentious social issue, such as abortion or climate policy. The reliability and validity of the measure--its consistency and accuracy, respectively--are paramount, ensuring that the resulting quantitative score accurately reflects the underlying attitude rather than measurement error or situational factors.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The formal measurement of attitudes gained prominence in the 1920s, driven by the desire to apply scientific rigor to the nascent field of social psychology. Prior to this period, attitudes were often assessed via anecdotal observation or informal polling. The critical shift came with the realization that attitudes, while internal, could be treated as psychological variables capable of being placed on a continuum.

Pioneering work by Louis Thurstone in 1928, with his method of equal-appearing intervals, marked the true beginning of modern attitude scaling. Thurstone proposed that attitudes could be measured just like physical dimensions, laying the groundwork for psychometric approaches. Shortly thereafter, Rensis Likert developed the simpler and more widely adopted method of summated ratings (the Likert scale) in 1932. This historical development established the core principle that agreement or disagreement with a set of carefully constructed statements could effectively capture the latent dimension of an attitude.

3. Key Characteristics and Psychometric Properties

Effective attitude measurement instruments must possess specific psychometric characteristics to be deemed scientifically sound. The most critical characteristics relate to the integrity and consistency of the scores produced.

Reliability: This refers to the consistency of the measurement. A reliable attitude measure should yield the same, or highly similar, results if the measurement is repeated under the same conditions (test-retest reliability) or if different items within the scale are used to assess the same construct (internal consistency).

Validity: This is the most crucial characteristic, determining whether the instrument truly measures the attitude it purports to measure. Types of validity include content validity (coverage of all aspects of the attitude), criterion validity (correlation with actual behavior or other relevant outcomes), and construct validity (alignment with theoretical expectations).

Sensitivity: A sensitive measure is capable of detecting subtle differences in attitude intensity or shifts in attitude over time. Measures with limited response options (e.g., simple "yes/no") often lack sensitivity compared to continuous or finely graded scales.

Freedom from Bias: Ideal measures minimize response biases, such as **social desirability bias** (the tendency to respond in a way that will be viewed favorably by others) or **acquiescence bias** (the tendency to agree with statements regardless of content).

4. Major Categories of Attitude Measures

Attitude measures are generally categorized based on whether they require conscious, explicit reporting from the individual or rely on indirect assessment that minimizes self-presentation concerns. The selection of the appropriate measure depends heavily on the nature of the attitude being studied (e.g., socially sensitive versus neutral attitudes).

Direct Attitude Measures (Explicit): These rely on self-report questionnaires where the individual knows their attitude is being assessed. These measures are straightforward to administer and analyze, and are highly effective for measuring attitudes that are consciously accessible. Examples include traditional surveys utilizing Likert scales.

Indirect Attitude Measures (Implicit): These procedures are designed to assess attitudes without the individual's full awareness or conscious control, typically used when researchers suspect that explicit measures might be distorted by social desirability or when studying automatically activated attitudes (implicit attitudes).

Behavioral Measures: While not strictly a mental measure, behavioral observations serve as an indirect assessment of attitude by recording actions, choices, or physiological responses (e.g., eye contact, proximity, purchasing decisions) that are theorized to reflect underlying sentiment.

5. Explicit Measurement Techniques

Explicit measures are the most common tools used in survey research and social science due to their ease of construction and high face validity.

Likert Scale: The most widely used technique. Respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement (typically on a five or seven-point scale, e.g., "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") with a series of statements related to the attitude object. The total or average score across all items is taken as the measure of the attitude.

Thurstone Scale: This method requires judges to rate potential statements for their favorableness toward the attitude object. Only statements that judges agree on regarding their scale position are included, ensuring that the intervals between scale points are perceived as roughly equal.

Semantic Differential Scale: Developed by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, this technique asks respondents to rate the attitude object using a series of bipolar adjectives (e.g., Good/Bad, Strong/Weak, Active/Passive) on a seven-point scale. This method effectively captures the affective and evaluative dimension of the attitude.

6. Implicit Measurement Techniques

The development of indirect measures revolutionized the study of sensitive topics, such as prejudice and stereotyping, by offering a window into automatic cognitive associations that individuals may not be able or willing to articulate explicitly.

The most significant example is the **Implicit Association Test (IAT)**, developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz. The IAT measures the strength of automatic association between a target concept (e.g., race) and an evaluation (e.g., good/bad) by measuring response times in categorization tasks. Faster pairing of Concept A with Evaluation B suggests a stronger implicit link. Other implicit measures include response latency measures in priming tasks, where the speed with which an individual responds to an evaluative word is influenced by a preceding attitude-relevant stimulus.

7. Significance and Impact

Attitude measures are indispensable tools in modern society, extending far beyond academic psychology. Their primary significance lies in their ability to provide quantified data that informs and predicts social behavior.

In **market research**, attitude measures determine consumer preferences, brand loyalty, and reactions to new products, directly influencing advertising strategies. In **political science** and polling, they gauge public opinion on candidates and policies. Crucially, in **social policy** and health interventions, attitude measures help identify key beliefs or prejudices that must be targeted

to promote behavioral change, such as improving health behaviors or reducing intergroup conflict. The ability to measure attitudes reliably allows researchers to test theories of persuasion and social cognition with empirical precision.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite their widespread use, attitude measures face continuous scrutiny, primarily concerning the relationship between measured attitude and subsequent behavior. This challenge is often referred to as the ****attitude-behavior gap****.

Critics argue that self-report measures often fail to predict actual behavior, highlighting issues like poor measurement specificity (measuring general attitudes when specific attitudes are needed for prediction) and the influence of situational factors that override internal attitudes. Furthermore, the inherent reductionism of assigning a single numerical value to a complex, dynamic psychological state is frequently challenged. The difficulty in constructing attitude scales that are perfectly culture-neutral and resistant to various forms of respondent bias remains a persistent psychometric hurdle, prompting ongoing research into improving both explicit and implicit measurement techniques.

Further Reading

[Attitude \(psychology\)](#)

[Likert Scale](#)

[Thurstone Scale](#)

[Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#)