

ATTITUDE

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October 14, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *ATTITUDE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=48496>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, General Psychology, Organizational Behavior.

1. Core Definition

An attitude, within the field of **social psychology**, is defined as a relatively enduring and generalized psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity--an object, person, group, issue, or abstract concept--with some degree of favor or disfavor. It represents a **cognitive schema** or organization of beliefs and feelings that predisposes an individual to respond in a certain manner toward that entity. Unlike fleeting emotions, attitudes possess a necessary degree of stability, though they are certainly mutable over time and through experience or persuasive communication. The generality aspect implies that attitudes are not limited to a single instance but apply across various contexts related to the attitude object. This fundamental structure allows psychologists to predict, albeit imperfectly, human behavior and response patterns within social settings.

The concept of attitude is central to understanding social cognition and interaction. It functions as a bridge between internal cognitive processes and observable behavior. Attitudes simplify the complex social world, allowing individuals to quickly process information and make decisions regarding approach or avoidance. They are not merely neutral observations but involve subjective belief systems and evaluations, indicating a person's level of agreement or opposition towards the attitude object. Consequently, attitudes serve multiple motivational functions, helping individuals maintain consistency in their self-perception (the ego-defensive function) and navigate their social environment efficiently (the adjustment function).

2. Tripartite Model of Attitude (ABC Model)

For decades, attitudes have been structurally analyzed using the **Tripartite Model**, often referred to as the **ABC Model**, which posits that attitudes are composed of three distinct yet interrelated components. This structural framework helps researchers delineate the specific psychological elements contributing to an overall disposition toward an attitude object. While these three components generally operate cohesively, research suggests that the relative importance or dominance of each component may vary significantly depending on the nature of the attitude object, the individual's personality, and the context in which the attitude is expressed.

Affective Component: This refers to the feelings or emotions associated with the attitude object. This component covers the positive, negative, or neutral emotional reactions one experiences when encountering the object, such as liking, fear, hate, or pleasure. For instance, strong positive feelings toward a specific political candidate, regardless of objective policy analysis, represent the

affective core of that attitude.

Behavioral Component: This involves past, present, or intended behaviors toward the attitude object. It is the action-oriented element, reflecting how an individual acts or intends to act based on their feelings and beliefs. This could include overt actions, such as signing a petition or boycotting a product, or verbal statements demonstrating support or opposition. The behavioral component is often the most visible manifestation of the attitude.

Cognitive Component: This encompasses the beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and knowledge a person holds about the attitude object. These beliefs are often factual, evaluative, or based on subjective interpretation, such as believing that a certain dietary practice is beneficial for health or that a specific group holds dangerous ideologies. This component provides the rational, often information-based, foundation upon which the affective and behavioral responses are built.

3. Key Characteristics: Valence and Strength

Attitudes are fundamentally distinguished and quantified by two crucial characteristics: their **valence** and their **strength**. Valence refers to the direction of the evaluation--whether the attitude is generally positive (favorable), negative (unfavorable), or ambivalent (mixed, holding both strong positive and strong negative components simultaneously). The source material explicitly notes that an attitude can range from strongly negative to strongly positive along this continuum, determining the individual's basic approach or avoidance tendency toward the attitude object.

Attitude strength is a complex measure of how firmly the attitude is held, how resistant it is to change, and how effectively it can influence behavior. Strong attitudes are typically highly accessible in memory, meaning they are recalled quickly and easily, often automatically, when the attitude object is encountered. They are held with great certainty and commitment and are frequently rooted in extensive direct experience, making them particularly resistant to counter-persuasion attempts. Weak attitudes, conversely, are often temporary, easily shifted by external factors, and are poor predictors of future behavior.

Factors contributing to attitude strength include **importance** (the personal relevance of the attitude object to the individual), **extremity** (how far the evaluation deviates from neutrality), and **interconnectedness** with other core values or belief systems. Attitudes that are strongly connected to self-identity or moral principles are almost universally stronger and more resilient than those based on fleeting information or social trends.

4. Measurement and Formation

The formation of attitudes is a complex developmental process influenced by a dynamic interplay of social learning, direct experience, and cognitive processes. Social learning, including modeling (observational learning) and classical or operant conditioning, plays a major role, particularly during

early socialization where individuals adopt the attitudes prevalent in their family and peer groups. Direct personal experience with an attitude object, whether positive (leading to liking) or negative (leading to disliking), often results in the development of highly specific and strong attitudes that possess high predictive validity regarding future actions.

Measuring attitudes is critical for social psychological research and involves both explicit and implicit methodologies. Early attempts at attitude measurement relied heavily on **self-report scales**, such as the widely used **Likert scale**, which quantifies subjective agreement or disagreement with statements about an attitude object. While straightforward, self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents adjust their answers to align with perceived social norms rather than their genuine beliefs.

To circumvent conscious biases, researchers increasingly utilize **implicit measures**, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which assesses the automatic strength of associations between an attitude object and evaluative concepts (e.g., good versus bad). Furthermore, physiological assessments, including measures of galvanic skin response, facial electromyography (EMG), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), are sometimes employed to capture involuntary emotional responses indicative of underlying attitude valence.

5. Significance in Social Psychology: Attitude-Behavior Link

The primary significance of attitudes in social psychology rests upon the foundational, though often debated, assumption that they should reliably predict and influence behavior. The initial expectation that a held attitude directly translates into corresponding behavior was challenged by early findings, most famously by LaPiere's 1934 study showing a marked inconsistency between stated attitudes toward Chinese patrons and actual behavior of service providers. This inconsistency led to decades of theoretical work dedicated to identifying the moderator variables that strengthen or weaken the attitude-behavior relationship.

It is now widely accepted that attitudes are better predictors of behavior when they are strong, highly accessible, formed through direct experience, and specifically measured to match the behavior being predicted (the principle of compatibility). Furthermore, the social context greatly influences this link; situational constraints and normative pressures can often cause individuals to act contrary to their private attitudes.

Theoretical frameworks have been developed to model and predict the attitude-behavior relationship more accurately. The **Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)** and its subsequent refinement, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), are particularly influential. TPB posits that behavioral intentions, rather than attitudes alone, are the immediate determinants of behavior. TPB specifically incorporates three critical psychological determinants of intention: the attitude toward the behavior (the evaluation of performing the behavior), **subjective norms** (perceived social

pressure to perform or not perform the behavior), and **perceived behavioral control** (the individual's belief in their ability to successfully execute the behavior). These models emphasize that attitudes function within a complex matrix of social and personal evaluations.

6. Debates and Criticisms

A primary criticism of attitude research centers on the inherent dualism between **explicit attitudes** (conscious, self-reported evaluations) and **implicit attitudes** (automatic, unconscious associations). Critics argue that traditional methods primarily capture explicit attitudes, which may be heavily influenced by self-presentation motives, failing to account for deeper, often contradictory, implicit beliefs. The resulting discrepancy between these two forms of attitude can lead to inconsistent predictions, particularly concerning sensitive topics like prejudice, where explicit attitudes may be egalitarian while implicit associations remain biased.

Another area of debate revolves around the causal direction between attitudes and behavior. While classical models assume that attitudes precede and cause behavior, the theory of **Cognitive Dissonance** proposed by Leon Festinger suggests the opposite: individuals often change their attitudes to align them with behaviors they have already performed, especially if those behaviors were freely chosen and inconsistent with their initial beliefs. This debate complicates the role of attitude as a purely predictive variable, suggesting a reciprocal relationship where experience and action also serve to shape and modify existing evaluations.

7. Further Reading

[Attitude \(psychology\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Tripartite model of attitudes - Wikipedia](#)

[Attitude measurement - Wikipedia](#)

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

[Theory of Planned Behavior - Wikipedia](#)