

BASES OF AN ATTITUDE

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 6, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *BASES OF AN ATTITUDE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=66786>

BASES OF AN ATTITUDE

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Attitude Theory, Consumer Behavior

1. Core Definition

The concept of the **Bases of an Attitude** refers to the fundamental psychological sources from which an individual's evaluation or judgment of an attitude object is derived and sustained. Research in social psychology identifies that attitudes are not monolithic constructs; rather, they are complex evaluations often underpinned by three distinct, though interrelated, types of information: cognitive (thoughts and beliefs), affective (feelings and emotions), and behavioral (past and present actions). These three components serve as the typical sources informing the overall valence (positive, negative, or neutral) and strength of an attitude toward any object, be it a person, idea, product, or social group.

Understanding the bases of an attitude is crucial because it dictates how attitudes are formed, how resistant they are to change, and which persuasive techniques will be most effective in modifying them. If an attitude is rooted primarily in emotional reactions, logic-based arguments may prove ineffective; conversely, if the attitude is based on deeply held factual beliefs, mere attempts to shift emotional response may fail. The three bases collectively define the structure of an attitude, acknowledging that while an individual might express a single, unified attitude, the psychological mechanisms fueling that evaluation are multifaceted.

The identification of these bases is central to the seminal Tripartite Theory of Attitudes, also frequently termed the ABC model (Affect, Behavior, Cognition). This model posits that an attitude is composed of these three components, which are intrinsically associated with the attitude object and contribute to the formation of personality and behavioral tendencies. While contemporary models of attitude sometimes focus on the primacy of the evaluative component (the overall positive or negative feeling), the tripartite approach remains essential for analyzing the underlying structure and genesis of the evaluation.

2. The Tripartite Model: Overview

The tripartite model provides the classical framework for conceptualizing attitude structure, suggesting that the components--Cognition, Affect, and Behavior--are the elemental building blocks of attitude. This framework highlights that attitude formation is seldom a purely rational process; instead, it is often a synthesis of rational assessment, emotional reaction, and habitual response. The relative importance or dominance of any one basis can vary significantly across different attitude objects, individuals, and contexts. For example, attitudes toward fundamental moral issues might be heavily rooted in the affective component, whereas attitudes toward complex scientific policies might lean more heavily on the cognitive component.

Historically, the tripartite approach was developed to categorize the informational inputs contributing to an attitude. It distinguishes between the purely mental representations (cognitions), the visceral or emotional responses (affect), and the observable interactions (behavior) regarding the attitude object. While early research sometimes struggled to demonstrate the independence of these components empirically, the theoretical distinction remains powerful for diagnosing the structure of resistance to attitude change. Furthermore, the model helps explain why attitudes persist even when one component is challenged; if the affective basis is strong, contradicting cognitive information may be rejected or minimized through defense mechanisms.

A key insight derived from the tripartite perspective is that the bases often operate in concert. When an attitude is highly consistent, the cognitive belief aligns with the affective feeling, and both predict the behavioral response. However, attitude complexity arises when the bases are discrepant--a phenomenon that often precedes attempts to achieve cognitive consistency, such as reducing dissonance by changing one of the bases or the overall attitude itself. The enduring utility of the tripartite model lies in its capacity to serve as a diagnostic tool for researchers and practitioners aiming to understand the depth and breadth of human evaluation.

3. The Cognitive Basis

The **cognitive basis** encompasses the thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, opinions, and factual information an individual holds regarding an attitude object. This component represents the rational, informational dimension of the attitude. It includes subjective probabilities that the object possesses certain attributes, and the evaluation of those attributes' significance. For instance, a consumer's attitude toward a specific brand of car relies heavily on cognitive information regarding fuel efficiency, reliability statistics, safety ratings, and cost-benefit analysis. These beliefs are often learned, sometimes verified through external sources, and are typically structured in a logical, schema-based manner.

Attitudes that are predominantly cognitively based are formed through processes of rational assessment, exposure to statistics, or systematic learning. They are generally responsive to evidence and logical argument. Persuasion aimed at a cognitively based attitude requires high-quality, verifiable information and structured reasoning--a core approach utilized in the central route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The strength of the cognitive basis is often determined by the number of beliefs held, the perceived importance of those beliefs, and the certainty with which the individual holds them. When an individual expresses, "I support this policy because data clearly shows it reduces unemployment," they are articulating the cognitive basis of their attitude.

Crucially, the cognitive basis includes not only verified facts but also subjective interpretations, stereotypes, and perceived truths. These beliefs structure the mental representation of the attitude

object and influence subsequent information processing. Individuals tend to seek out and favor information that confirms their existing cognitive structures (confirmation bias), reinforcing the stability of the attitude. Therefore, changing a strongly held cognitive basis often requires disrupting the underlying belief structure rather than merely introducing contradictory information.

4. The Affective Basis

The **affective basis** refers to the emotional reactions, feelings, moods, and values associated with an attitude object. Unlike the cognitive basis, which involves appraisal and calculation, the affective basis involves visceral, instantaneous, or deeply ingrained emotional responses. This component can be highly potent and is often difficult to articulate or justify rationally. Feelings such as liking, disliking, fear, anger, joy, or disgust constitute the affective core of an attitude.

Affectively based attitudes often originate from classical conditioning, mere exposure effects, or association with deeply held values. For example, a person might have a strong positive attitude toward a national flag (a symbol) because of the feelings of patriotism or nostalgia associated with it, rather than any cognitive assessment of the flag's physical properties. Similarly, phobias are extreme examples of strongly negative, affectively based attitudes formed through intense conditioning, which often resist logical attempts to dispel them.

Persuasion targeting the affective basis typically employs emotional appeals, aesthetic cues, humor, or associations with attractive sources--strategies often utilized in peripheral route processing in marketing and political campaigns. Because affective responses are often immediate and involuntary, they can bypass rational scrutiny. The strength of the affective basis is high when the emotional intensity linked to the object is great; a negative attitude fueled by intense fear, for example, will be extremely resistant to modification unless the underlying emotional association is neutralized, perhaps through systematic desensitization or counter-conditioning.

5. The Behavioral Basis

The **behavioral basis** encompasses past actions, current behavioral intentions, and observable responses related to the attitude object. This component operates on the premise that attitudes can be inferred from or even developed as a result of one's own interaction with the object. This idea is strongly supported by Self-Perception Theory, which suggests that when internal cues (like cognitions or feelings) are weak or ambiguous, individuals determine their attitudes by observing their own behavior.

For example, if an individual frequently volunteers at an animal shelter, they may conclude they hold a strong positive attitude toward animal welfare simply by observing their sustained commitment, even if their cognitive beliefs about the practical efficiency of the shelter are mixed. The behavioral basis is not just about what one has done, but also what one plans to do

(behavioral intentions). The expression, "I must like running because I run three times a week," is an observation based on the behavioral component.

The behavioral basis is particularly significant in the context of attitude-behavior consistency. Interventions focused on changing attitudes sometimes target behavior first, assuming that subsequent behavioral changes will lead to an internal shift in cognitive and affective bases (the "foot-in-the-door" technique). Furthermore, when individuals are compelled to engage in counter-attitudinal behavior, the need to reduce cognitive dissonance can lead to an internal attitude shift to align the cognitive and affective components with the observed behavior, thereby reinforcing the behavioral basis.

6. Interrelation and Consistency

While theoretically distinct, the three bases of an attitude rarely operate in isolation. In a well-formed, stable attitude, the bases are typically consonant, meaning the beliefs, feelings, and actions reinforce one another. This internal consistency contributes to the overall strength and predictive power of the attitude. For example, if a person believes smoking is dangerous (cognitive), feels disgust when near smoke (affective), and actively avoids smokers (behavioral), the attitude toward smoking is strong and unified.

However, attitude structures are frequently characterized by ambivalence or inconsistency, particularly in complex or controversial subjects. Ambivalence arises when a person holds competing beliefs or feelings--for instance, believing a certain food is unhealthy (negative cognition) but loving the taste (positive affect). When the bases are inconsistent, this often creates a state of psychological discomfort known as cognitive dissonance, as articulated by Leon Festinger. The pressure to reduce this dissonance often drives attitude change, compelling the individual to alter the weakest or least central component to restore equilibrium among the bases.

The specific relationship between the bases also dictates the susceptibility of the attitude to manipulation. For instance, research shows that affective attitudes are sometimes more resistant to cognitive counter-arguments than cognitive attitudes are to emotional appeals. The interplay between the bases highlights that attitude change is a dynamic process, and effective persuasion requires diagnosing which base is dominant and targeting that specific component with appropriate informational or emotional inputs.

7. Key Characteristics

Multidimensionality: Attitudes are typically structured by multiple sources of information--cognitive, affective, and behavioral--rather than being a single, undifferentiated evaluation.

Diagnostic Utility: Identifying the dominant basis (e.g., primarily affective vs. primarily cognitive) is essential for predicting the attitude's stability and determining the most effective strategies for

persuasion and attitude modification.

Source of Evaluation: The bases serve as the typical sources from which evaluative information is derived, encompassing both rational beliefs (cognition) and non-rational feelings (affect).

Consistency Drive: There is an inherent psychological drive toward consistency among the three bases; inconsistency often leads to tension (dissonance) and subsequent attempts to resolve the conflict by altering one or more components.

Component Weighting: The three bases rarely contribute equally to the final attitude; one component is usually dominant, and its dominance often determines whether the attitude is stable or easily shifted.

8. Further Reading

[Attitude \(psychology\)](#) - Wikipedia entry on the structure and theories of attitudes.

[Cognitive Dissonance](#) - Wikipedia entry detailing the theory of psychological inconsistency.

[Elaboration Likelihood Model \(ELM\)](#) - Information on how the cognitive and affective bases relate to persuasive routes.