

BOGARDUS SOCIAL DISTANCE SCALE

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November 8, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *BOGARDUS SOCIAL DISTANCE SCALE*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=65944>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Social Psychology, Race and Ethnic Relations

1. Core Definition and Purpose

The **Bogardus Social Distance Scale** is a pioneering socio-psychological instrument designed to quantify the degree of intimacy or acceptance that individuals feel toward members of various social, ethnic, or racial groups. Developed by American sociologist Emory S. Bogardus in 1925, the scale operates on the fundamental premise that attitudes toward diverse social groups are not uniform but rather vary along a continuum of social acceptability. The core purpose of the scale is to measure the preferred level of social distance--ranging from the highest degree of closeness (e.g., marriage or kinship) to the lowest degree of acceptance (e.g., exclusion from the country). By systematically assessing a person's stated willingness to participate in different levels of social interaction with a specific group, the Bogardus Scale provides a measurable index of prejudice or acceptance within a population.

Unlike simple attitude surveys which might ask general questions about feelings toward a group, the Bogardus Scale forces the respondent to consider concrete, behavioral interactions. The resulting score, often presented as a mean distance score for a given target group, provides sociologists and psychologists with critical data regarding intergroup relations and the prevailing societal climate regarding diversity. This measurement assumes that a person who is willing to accept a group member into a very close relationship (such as a family member) is inherently willing to accept them into all less intimate relationships (such as coworker or neighbor). This cumulative structure is central to its methodological strength and its enduring utility in social research.

The scale is robust because it taps into the specific behavioral implications of prejudice. A person may express tolerance generally, but the scale reveals if that tolerance breaks down when the interaction moves toward personal life spaces, such as housing or intimate association. The concept of **social distance** itself refers to the perceived separation or remoteness between individuals or groups, which is determined by the differences in their interests, culture, or social status. Bogardus sought to translate this abstract sociological concept into a standardized, quantifiable metric usable for comparative studies across time and geography.

2. Historical Context and Origin

The Bogardus Social Distance Scale emerged during a period of intense sociological inquiry into ethnic assimilation and intergroup conflict in the United States, particularly following large waves of immigration in the early 20th century. **Emory S. Bogardus** (1882-1973), a prominent sociologist

associated with the University of Southern California, sought a rigorous, quantitative method to study the shifting landscape of race relations. His work was highly influenced by the burgeoning field of social psychology and the methodologies being developed by the Chicago School of Sociology, which emphasized empirical research into urban social life.

First published in 1925, the scale represented a significant methodological advancement, moving away from purely descriptive accounts of prejudice toward systematic measurement. Bogardus's initial research involved surveying thousands of Americans regarding their attitudes toward 30 different racial and ethnic groups. This historical context reveals that the scale was fundamentally created to address the pervasive issue of ethnic stratification and the barriers to full inclusion faced by immigrant and minority groups in American society. The consistent application of the scale over subsequent decades, notably in major studies conducted in 1926, 1946, 1956, and beyond, has provided invaluable longitudinal data on the progression and decline of ethnic prejudice in the U.S.

The creation of the scale also laid foundational groundwork for later psychometric techniques, particularly those related to cumulative scaling. Although L. L. Thurstone's work on attitude measurement was concurrent, Bogardus's method offered a practical and easily deployable tool specifically tailored to measure acceptance along a social hierarchy. The success of the initial studies quickly established the Bogardus Scale as the standard instrument for measuring ethnic attitudes, influencing countless subsequent studies in sociology, political science, and social psychology worldwide.

3. Methodology: The Scaling Technique

The methodology of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale is characterized by its use of a fixed set of statements representing descending levels of social intimacy. Respondents are presented with a list of target groups (e.g., "Mexicans," "Jews," "Germans") and asked to check which of the standardized statements they would accept for members of that group. The scale traditionally consists of seven items, each assigned a numerical score, where a lower score indicates less social distance (greater acceptance) and a higher score indicates greater social distance.

The classic seven statements, moving from maximal acceptance to maximal rejection, are typically:

- (1) To admit to **kinship by marriage**.
- (2) To admit to my **club as personal chums**.
- (3) To admit to my **street as neighbors**.
- (4) To admit to **employment in my occupation**.
- (5) To admit to **citizenship in my country**.
- (6) To admit only as **visitors to my country**.
- (7) To exclude from my **country entirely**.

The key methodological innovation lies in the assumption of **unidimensionality** and **cumulativeness**. Bogardus posited that if a respondent agrees to Statement 1 (the most intimate), they would logically agree to all subsequent, less intimate statements (2 through 7). Conversely, disagreement with an item (e.g., Statement 3, neighbor) implies rejection of all items demanding closer intimacy (1 and 2). Although this structure closely resembles a Guttman scale, the Bogardus Scale was developed independently and often serves as a practical, if imperfect, measure of cumulative attitudes, providing a robust, single numerical score for comparison.

The final score for a target group is generally calculated as the arithmetic mean of the scale points checked by all respondents. This mean score--the **Social Distance Quotient**--allows researchers to rank different ethnic groups according to the average level of acceptance they receive from the sampled population. A mean score close to 1 indicates high acceptance and low social distance, while a score approaching 7 signifies high rejection and maximum social distance.

4. Interpreting the Results: Degrees of Distance

Interpretation of the results from the Bogardus Social Distance Scale is straightforward: the resulting scores quantify the societal boundaries perceived between the respondent group and the target group. The specific categories used by Bogardus delineate distinct spheres of social life, moving sequentially from the private (family/intimacy) to the semi-private (neighborhood/friendship) to the public (employment/citizenship).

A low social distance score (approaching 1.0) indicates that the group is perceived as fully accepted into the most intimate circles of the dominant society, suggesting assimilation or high levels of integration. Historically, groups scoring low often included long-established Northern European immigrant populations. Conversely, a high score (approaching 7.0) suggests that the group is strongly rejected, often facing systemic exclusion even from basic public interactions like citizenship or visitor status. These high scores are typical indicators of deep-seated **prejudice** and **xenophobia** directed toward specific racial or ethnic minorities.

Crucially, the differences in scores between items provide insight into the specific mechanisms of prejudice. For instance, a group might score moderately well on Item 4 (employment) and Item 5 (citizenship), suggesting public acceptance, but score poorly on Items 1, 2, and 3 (marriage, chums, neighbors). This pattern reveals that acceptance is conditional; the respondent is willing to interact in the impersonal, public sphere but erects strong barriers against interactions that might involve personal life, spatial proximity, or the dilution of their own group identity. This distinction between public tolerance and private exclusion is one of the most powerful interpretive features of the scale.

5. Application and Utility in Social Science

The Bogardus Scale has served as an essential tool in social science research for nearly a century, primarily fulfilling two major functions: providing cross-sectional comparisons and enabling longitudinal tracking of social change. In cross-sectional studies, researchers use the scale to compare the level of acceptance or rejection directed at dozens of different ethnic, racial, or religious groups simultaneously within a given population. This allows for the immediate identification of social hierarchies, revealing which groups occupy the most and least favored positions in the social structure at a specific point in time.

Its utility in longitudinal research, however, is perhaps its most significant contribution. By periodically reapplying the standardized scale (as Bogardus and his successors did for decades), researchers can accurately track how attitudes shift over time. For example, studies using the scale after World War II documented the decrease in prejudice toward certain European groups (like Germans or Italians) as they assimilated, while simultaneously tracking the persistent high distance scores associated with African Americans, Asian Americans, and other marginalized groups. This provided empirical evidence of changing patterns of **ethnic assimilation** and **racial inequality**.

Furthermore, the principles of the Bogardus scale have been adapted far beyond ethnic studies. Researchers have modified the scale items to measure distance toward various non-ethnic target groups, including individuals with mental illnesses, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or specific political affiliations. Regardless of the target, the scale provides a standardized, operational definition of social distance, allowing researchers to explore the differential acceptance of diverse social characteristics across populations, thereby contributing significantly to studies of stigma and deviance.

6. Evolution and Modern Variants

While the original seven-item scale remains a classic sociological reference point, modern research frequently employs adapted or truncated versions to address contemporary complexities and methodological challenges. One primary evolution has involved refining the target groups to reflect changing demographics and evolving social conflicts, such as adding categories for specific religious minorities (e.g., Muslims, Hindus) or focusing on distinctions within broad racial categories.

Methodologically, many researchers now treat the categories less strictly as a perfect Guttman scale and more as an ordinal ranking of preferences. Some variants expand the number of items or modify the statements to better reflect modern social interactions, such as replacing "admit to my club as personal chums" with references to social media connections or shared volunteer activities. The foundational idea--that acceptance should be measured along an intimacy gradient--

remains intact, but the specific operationalization has been modernized to enhance **ecological validity**.

Additionally, the Bogardus concept has heavily influenced implicit association testing and other indirect measures of bias. Researchers recognize that stated social distance might suffer from social desirability bias, prompting the development of tools that measure unconscious or implicit distance. Nevertheless, the explicit Bogardus model continues to be used in comparative international studies due to its historical reliability and ease of translation, making it a highly valuable benchmark against which newer, more complex measurements are often judged.

7. Criticisms, Limitations, and Methodological Debates

Despite its enduring influence, the Bogardus Social Distance Scale has faced several significant criticisms regarding its methodology and interpretation. The most prominent limitation is the gap between **stated attitude** and **actual behavior**. Critics argue that while the scale effectively measures a respondent's self-reported willingness to interact, it does not reliably predict how that individual will actually behave when confronted with a real-life situation involving the target group. Social desirability bias can lead respondents to check more accepting categories than they genuinely feel, especially in public survey settings, thus potentially deflating measured social distance.

A second major debate centers on the assumption of **interval data**. Although the scale items are ordinally ranked (i.e., marriage is closer than neighbor), it is statistically questionable whether the psychological distance between Item 1 and Item 2 is precisely the same as the distance between Item 6 and Item 7. Treating the numerical scores (1 through 7) as true interval data when calculating the mean score might violate statistical assumptions, leading to potential misinterpretations of the magnitude of acceptance differences between groups.

Furthermore, critics point out that the original categories are historically and culturally specific, often reflecting a mid-20th-century American context that may not universally apply. For example, the concept of kinship by marriage holds differing significance across various cultures. Modifying the scale to fit non-Western contexts can compromise the comparability of the data across time and space. Despite these critiques, the scale's simplicity and its focus on observable relational spheres ensure its continued relevance as a fundamental tool for mapping and monitoring intergroup attitudes.

Further Reading

[Bogardus Social Distance Scale \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Bogardus, E. S. \(1933\). A Social Distance Scale. In *Sociology and Social Research*.](#)

Emory S. Bogardus Biography (Wikipedia)

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