

Dual Attitudes

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Dual Attitudes

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Cognitive Psychology

1. Core Definition

The concept of **dual attitudes** posits that an individual can simultaneously hold more than one set of beliefs or evaluative stances concerning the same object, subject, or social group. This framework challenges the traditional view of attitudes as unitary constructs, instead suggesting a dynamic interplay between different levels of processing. Essentially, it describes the reality where an individual's conscious, deliberate opinions might diverge significantly from their automatic, often unconscious, reactions. This duality highlights the intricate nature of human cognition and social perception, where outward expressions and internal mental representations do not always align perfectly.

At the heart of dual attitudes lies the distinction between **implicit attitudes** and **explicit attitudes**. Explicit attitudes are those that are consciously held, deliberately formed, and readily accessible through introspection and verbal report. They reflect a person's declared opinions, beliefs, and evaluations, often shaped by social norms, personal values, and rational deliberation. In contrast, implicit attitudes operate at a non-conscious level; they are automatic, uncontrolled, and can influence behavior without the individual's full awareness. These implicit associations are often developed through extensive learning, repeated exposure, and cultural conditioning, forming deeply ingrained mental links that are difficult to suppress or alter through conscious effort alone. The coexistence of these two distinct yet related forms of attitudes is what defines the phenomenon of dual attitudes.

2. Implicit and Explicit Attitudes: A Detailed Distinction

To fully grasp dual attitudes, a deeper understanding of the characteristics that differentiate implicit and explicit attitudes is essential. **Explicit attitudes** are typically measured through self-report questionnaires, surveys, or direct interviews, where individuals are asked to openly state their preferences, opinions, or judgments. These attitudes are often influenced by a desire to present oneself in a socially desirable light, reflecting the individual's values, social identity, and conscious goals. They are subject to conscious control and can be modified through logical reasoning or persuasive communication that targets deliberative thought processes. For instance, a person might explicitly state a belief in gender equality because it aligns with their personal values and societal expectations.

Conversely, **implicit attitudes** are involuntary, spontaneous evaluations that occur outside of conscious awareness. They are often assessed using indirect measures, such as reaction-time

tasks (e.g., the Implicit Association Test - IAT) that gauge the strength of automatic associations between concepts and evaluations. These attitudes are thought to originate from early life experiences, cultural exposure, and the accumulation of associations over time, making them more resistant to conscious manipulation. For example, despite explicitly endorsing gender equality, an individual might implicitly associate men more strongly with leadership roles due to lifelong exposure to cultural stereotypes. The critical insight of dual attitudes is that these two systems can operate simultaneously and, crucially, can sometimes be in conflict, leading to discrepancies between what a person says or consciously believes and how they implicitly react or feel.

3. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of dual attitudes emerged within the broader field of social psychology, particularly as researchers began to explore the complexities of attitude formation and change beyond simple self-report measures. The intellectual roots can be traced to the late 20th century, building upon earlier work in cognitive psychology that distinguished between automatic and controlled processes. The recognition that people might harbor non-conscious biases or preferences, even when consciously endorsing egalitarian views, gained significant traction with the development of methodologies capable of assessing these implicit mental states.

Key developments in the understanding of dual attitudes include the rise of dual-process theories in social cognition. These theories, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model or the Heuristic-Systematic Model, proposed that persuasion and attitude change could occur through different routes: a deliberate, effortful route, and a more automatic, heuristic-based route. The formal conceptualization of distinct implicit and explicit attitudes, however, solidified with the advent of reliable indirect measures like the Implicit Association Test (IAT) in the mid-1990s. This methodological breakthrough allowed researchers to empirically demonstrate the dissociation between conscious and non-conscious attitudes, moving the concept from theoretical speculation to empirical verification. Researchers like Russell Fazio and Mahzarin Banaji were instrumental in popularizing and empirically investigating these distinct forms of attitudes, laying the groundwork for the dual attitudes framework.

4. Key Characteristics and Mechanisms

Coexistence: The most fundamental characteristic of dual attitudes is the simultaneous presence of two distinct evaluative responses towards the same attitude object within an individual's mind. These responses, implicit and explicit, are not mutually exclusive but rather operate in parallel.

Discrepancy: Often, the implicit and explicit attitudes will not be in perfect alignment. Discrepancies arise particularly in socially sensitive domains (e.g., prejudice, stereotypes) where individuals may consciously endorse socially desirable explicit attitudes while retaining less desirable implicit ones.

Differential Origins and Formation: Implicit attitudes are typically formed through associative learning, often from early and repeated exposures to stimuli, cultural messages, and experiences, making them more difficult to consciously control. Explicit attitudes, on the other hand, are more amenable to deliberate thought, social learning, and rational processing, evolving with education and conscious reflection.

Differential Accessibility and Control: Explicit attitudes are consciously accessible and subject to volitional control, allowing individuals to endorse or reject them. Implicit attitudes are largely non-conscious, automatic, and less subject to direct control, influencing behavior without deliberate intention.

Awareness Gap: A critical aspect is that an individual may not be fully aware of the disparity between their implicit and explicit attitudes. Recognizing this duality often requires significant self-examination, critical reflection, or feedback from indirect measures.

5. Measurement of Dual Attitudes

Measuring dual attitudes requires employing a combination of direct and indirect assessment techniques to capture both conscious and non-conscious evaluative responses. For **explicit attitudes**, self-report measures are predominantly used. These include questionnaires, Likert scales, semantic differential scales, and direct interviews where individuals are asked to explicitly state their opinions, preferences, or beliefs. For instance, to measure explicit attitudes towards a particular ethnic group, a researcher might ask participants to rate their agreement with statements like "I feel positively towards this group" or "This group contributes positively to society." While straightforward, these measures are susceptible to social desirability bias, where individuals might report attitudes they believe are socially acceptable rather than their true feelings.

To assess **implicit attitudes**, researchers rely on indirect measures that infer attitudes from automatic cognitive processes rather than direct introspection. The most widely used tool is the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The IAT measures the strength of automatic associations between concepts (e.g., "ethnic group X") and attributes (e.g., "good" or "bad") by observing response times to categorizing stimuli. Faster response times when pairing specific concepts and attributes are interpreted as stronger implicit associations. Other implicit measures include the Affective Priming Task, which measures how quickly participants categorize a target stimulus (e.g., positive or negative word) after being briefly exposed to a prime stimulus (e.g., a face from a particular ethnic group), and the Go/No-Go Association Task (GNAT). The combination of these explicit and implicit measures allows researchers to identify and quantify the presence of dual attitudes within individuals.

6. Applications and Implications in Social Behavior

The concept of dual attitudes has profound implications for understanding a wide range of social

behaviors, particularly those influenced by prejudice and discrimination. Consider the example of racial prejudice, as highlighted in the original content. An individual, due to their upbringing, regional influences, or early exposure, might develop deeply ingrained, non-conscious **implicit attitudes** that are prejudiced towards certain ethnic groups. These attitudes form automatically and are often outside their conscious control or even awareness. However, with societal shifts, education, and personal growth, this same individual may consciously choose to embrace an **explicit attitude** of non-prejudice. This explicit stance is often driven by a genuine desire to uphold egalitarian values, avoid social judgments, or prevent the negative ramifications associated with expressing prejudiced beliefs.

In such a scenario, the individual experiences dual attitudes: an underlying, automatic bias (implicit) coexisting with a conscious, deliberate commitment to fairness (explicit). This duality can manifest in complex ways. For instance, while explicitly advocating for diversity and inclusion, the individual might unknowingly exhibit subtle discriminatory behaviors, such as maintaining greater physical distance from members of the implicitly disfavored group, or favoring candidates from their own group in ambiguous hiring situations. These actions, often unintentional, stem from the influence of their implicit attitudes. The awareness of such a duality requires significant self-examination and a willingness to confront potentially uncomfortable truths about one's own automatic biases.

Beyond prejudice, dual attitudes are also relevant in areas such as consumer behavior, health decisions, and political preferences. A consumer might explicitly state a preference for environmentally friendly products, yet implicitly favor more convenient or less expensive options. Similarly, a patient might explicitly agree to adopt healthier lifestyle habits but implicitly struggle with self-control due to long-standing habits. Understanding dual attitudes provides a more nuanced lens through which to examine inconsistencies between expressed intentions and actual behaviors, revealing the powerful, often unseen, influence of automatic cognitive processes on human decision-making and social interactions.

7. Debates, Criticisms, and Future Directions

While the dual attitudes framework has significantly advanced our understanding of human cognition, it is not without its debates and criticisms. One primary area of contention revolves around the precise nature of the relationship between implicit and explicit attitudes. Are they truly distinct constructs, or do they represent different facets of a single underlying attitude? Some researchers argue that implicit measures merely tap into different aspects or strengths of a singular attitude, rather than entirely separate constructs. The debate also extends to the degree of dissociation: how often do implicit and explicit attitudes genuinely diverge, and under what conditions?

Another significant criticism concerns the validity and reliability of implicit measures. While tests like the IAT are widely used, their psychometric properties, including their test-retest reliability and their ability to predict behavior in real-world settings, have been subjects of ongoing scrutiny. Critics also question whether implicit measures truly capture "unconscious" attitudes, or if they are merely more subtle forms of conscious processing. Furthermore, the role of context is crucial; an individual's implicit attitude might change depending on the specific situation or priming cues, suggesting a degree of malleability that complicates their interpretation. Future research aims to refine measurement techniques, explore the neurocognitive underpinnings of implicit processes, and develop interventions that effectively address problematic implicit biases by fostering greater awareness and control over automatic responses.

Further Reading

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

[Implicit Association Test - Wikipedia](#)

[Dual-process theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Social cognition - Wikipedia](#)

[Attitudes and Persuasion - Noba Project](#)