

Explicit Attitudes

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1. Core Definition

Explicit attitudes represent the conscious, deliberative, and self-reported evaluations that individuals hold towards people, objects, ideas, or situations. These attitudes are directly accessible through introspection and are openly expressed when an individual is asked to state their beliefs or preferences. Unlike their implicit counterparts, explicit attitudes are within a person's volitional control, meaning they can be consciously chosen, modified, and displayed in social interactions. They encompass the publicly visible behaviors and articulated beliefs that an individual presents to the world, often reflecting their stated values and reasoned judgments.

The formation of explicit attitudes is a dynamic process influenced by a myriad of factors, including personal experiences, formal education, social learning, and cultural norms. These attitudes are typically formed through direct exposure to an attitude object, observational learning from others, or persuasive communication. For example, a person might develop a positive explicit attitude towards environmental conservation after learning about climate change in school and observing community efforts to reduce waste. This conscious engagement with information and social stimuli contributes to the construction of a clear and articulate stance that can be communicated to others.

Crucially, explicit attitudes are often what people refer to when discussing their "opinions" or "views." They are the product of cognitive processing, where individuals weigh information, consider consequences, and formulate a coherent position. This cognitive effort makes explicit attitudes relatively stable but also amenable to change when new information is encountered, or personal values are re-evaluated. Their explicit nature allows for direct assessment through self-report measures, making them a foundational concept in understanding social perception, decision-making, and intergroup relations (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

2. Characteristics and Formation

Explicit attitudes are distinguished by several key characteristics. First and foremost, they are **conscious**; individuals are aware of holding these attitudes and can articulate them when prompted. Secondly, they are largely **controllable**, meaning people can choose whether or not to express them and can actively work to change them. This controllability is particularly evident in situations where social norms or personal goals encourage the suppression or modification of certain attitudes. For instance, an individual might hold a private negative view but express a neutral or positive one to conform to professional expectations.

The formation of explicit attitudes is a multifaceted process. One significant pathway is through

direct experience with the attitude object. If a person has a consistently positive or negative experience with something, say a particular type of food or a political candidate, their explicit attitude towards it will likely reflect that experience. Another critical mechanism is **social learning**, where individuals acquire attitudes by observing and imitating others, or by internalizing the attitudes prevalent in their social groups, family, or culture. This can include parental influence, peer pressure, or media portrayals that shape conscious beliefs and values (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Furthermore, **persuasive communication** plays a substantial role in shaping explicit attitudes. Advertisements, political campaigns, educational initiatives, and public health messages are all designed to influence individuals' conscious beliefs and evaluations. Cognitive processes, such as elaboration likelihood, where individuals thoughtfully process message content, determine the strength and persistence of these attitude changes. Over time, through education and increased exposure to diverse perspectives, an individual who may have internalized prejudiced implicit attitudes from their upbringing can consciously choose to adopt and express an inclusive and non-prejudiced explicit attitude, reflecting a deliberate shift in their overt belief system.

3. Distinction from Implicit Attitudes

The concept of explicit attitudes is most clearly understood in contrast to **implicit attitudes**, a distinction that has profoundly influenced modern social psychology. While explicit attitudes are conscious and chosen, implicit attitudes are unconscious, automatic, and largely uncontrolled. The source content provides a vivid example: a person may harbor deeply ingrained, unconscious prejudice against certain ethnic groups (an implicit attitude) due to their upbringing, yet consciously choose to adopt and display an inclusive, non-prejudiced explicit attitude as a result of age, distance, and education.

This dichotomy highlights different levels of attitude processing and expression. Explicit attitudes are often measured through direct self-report, where individuals explicitly state their beliefs or feelings. In contrast, implicit attitudes are assessed using indirect measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which gauge automatic associations between concepts in memory (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). The divergence between explicit and implicit attitudes can lead to fascinating and sometimes contradictory patterns of behavior, where a person's stated beliefs do not perfectly align with their automatic reactions.

The disjunction between explicit and implicit attitudes is particularly significant in areas sensitive to social desirability, such as prejudice, stereotypes, and moral judgments. Individuals may genuinely believe they are non-prejudiced (explicit attitude) but still exhibit subtle, automatic biases (implicit attitude) that can influence their non-verbal behavior or split-second decisions. Understanding this distinction is crucial for developing effective interventions aimed at reducing bias and promoting

social harmony, as it acknowledges that addressing attitudes requires engaging with both conscious convictions and automatic associations.

4. Measurement and Methodologies

The primary method for assessing explicit attitudes involves **direct self-report measures**, where individuals are asked to directly articulate their feelings, beliefs, or evaluations towards an attitude object. These methods are straightforward and assume that people have conscious access to their attitudes and are willing to accurately report them. The most common formats include questionnaires, surveys, and interviews, which are widely utilized across social sciences, market research, and public opinion polling.

Several specific scales are frequently employed to measure explicit attitudes. **Likert scales** require respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements, typically on a 5- or 7-point scale (e.g., "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). For example, a statement like "I support environmental protection policies" would be rated on such a scale. Another popular tool is the **semantic differential scale**, which asks respondents to rate an attitude object on a series of bipolar adjective pairs (e.g., "good-bad," "strong-weak," "active-passive"), allowing for a nuanced understanding of affective and evaluative components.

While self-report measures are invaluable for their simplicity and directness, they are not without limitations. A significant concern is **social desirability bias**, where individuals may report attitudes that they perceive as socially acceptable or desirable, rather than their true feelings. This can lead to an underestimation of socially stigmatized attitudes (e.g., prejudice) or an overestimation of socially valued ones (e.g., altruism). Researchers employ various techniques, such as ensuring anonymity or using implicit measures in conjunction with explicit ones, to mitigate these biases and obtain a more comprehensive picture of individuals' attitudinal landscapes (Sudman & Bradburn, 1982).

5. Influence on Behavior

Explicit attitudes play a crucial role in guiding deliberate and conscious behaviors. When individuals have a strong, accessible, and consistent explicit attitude towards an object, it is highly likely to predict their volitional actions. This is particularly true for behaviors that are carefully considered, planned, and executed. For example, a person with a strong explicit attitude in favor of healthy eating is more likely to consciously choose nutritious food options and engage in regular exercise. This direct link forms the basis of many theories of reasoned action and planned behavior in social psychology (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The consistency between explicit attitudes and behavior is not always perfect, however, and is moderated by several factors. The **specificity** of the attitude and behavior is one such factor;

attitudes that are specific to a particular action are better predictors of that action than general attitudes. For instance, an attitude towards "donating blood" will better predict blood donation than a general attitude towards "helping others." Additionally, **perceived behavioral control**--an individual's belief in their ability to perform the behavior--and **subjective norms**--perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior--also significantly mediate the attitude-behavior relationship.

Furthermore, the influence of explicit attitudes on behavior is most pronounced when cognitive resources are available and individuals are motivated to act in accordance with their beliefs. In situations where decisions must be made quickly, or under cognitive load, implicit attitudes may exert a stronger influence. Nevertheless, for behaviors requiring reflection, public commitment, or sustained effort, explicit attitudes serve as a powerful internal compass, guiding individuals towards actions that align with their stated values and conscious intentions. This makes understanding explicit attitudes critical for predicting consumer choices, political preferences, and engagement in various social causes.

6. Challenges and Limitations in Research

Despite their evident utility, research into explicit attitudes encounters several challenges and limitations that researchers must carefully consider. One of the most significant is the aforementioned **social desirability bias**. When individuals are aware that their attitudes are being assessed, they may consciously or unconsciously alter their responses to present themselves in a favorable light, especially concerning sensitive topics like prejudice, political affiliation, or personal habits. This can lead to a discrepancy between reported attitudes and genuine beliefs or private actions, thereby compromising the validity of self-report data.

Another limitation stems from the inherent nature of introspection. Individuals may genuinely lack full conscious access to the origins or full complexity of their attitudes, even those they explicitly hold. Attitudes can be complex constructs, influenced by deeply embedded values, emotional experiences, and cognitive schemas that are not always readily articulated or fully understood by the individual themselves. This limitation suggests that self-report, while valuable for stated beliefs, might not capture the entire attitudinal landscape or the nuances of an individual's evaluative processes.

Moreover, explicit attitudes can be susceptible to contextual influences and temporary states, leading to variability in responses over time or across situations. Factors such as mood, the presence of others, or the framing of a question can subtly shift how an individual articulates their explicit attitude at a given moment. This highlights the dynamic nature of explicit attitudes and the need for researchers to employ robust methodologies, including repeated measures and triangulation with other data sources, to ensure reliability and generalizability of findings. The

interaction between explicit and implicit attitudes further complicates research, as their potential divergence requires a multifaceted approach to fully understand human judgment and behavior (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006).

7. Significance and Applications

The study of explicit attitudes holds immense significance across various fields, providing a fundamental framework for understanding human social behavior and guiding practical applications. In **social psychology**, explicit attitudes are central to theories of persuasion, attitude change, intergroup relations, and the formation of social norms. They help researchers predict voting behavior, consumer choices, and public responses to policy initiatives, offering insights into the conscious cognitive processes that drive these outcomes.

In practical domains, explicit attitudes are extensively utilized in **marketing and advertising** to understand consumer preferences and design effective campaigns. By measuring explicit attitudes towards products, brands, or services, companies can tailor their messages to resonate with target audiences' conscious beliefs and values. Similarly, in **public health campaigns**, understanding explicit attitudes towards behaviors like smoking, vaccination, or healthy eating is crucial for developing educational programs that encourage positive behavioral change through reasoned appeals and information dissemination.

Furthermore, explicit attitudes are vital in addressing **societal issues** such as prejudice, discrimination, and political polarization. While implicit biases may operate unconsciously, efforts to foster inclusivity and reduce prejudice often rely on changing explicit attitudes through education, intergroup contact, and the promotion of empathetic perspectives. By encouraging individuals to consciously adopt and express non-prejudiced attitudes, societies can work towards creating more equitable and tolerant environments, reflecting a deliberate commitment to social justice.

Further Reading

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