

# Attitudes and Behavior

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An attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols" (Hogg, & Vaughan 2005, p. 150)

"..a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly, & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1)

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## Structure of Attitudes

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Attitudes structure can be described in terms of three components.

- **Affective component:** this involves a person's feelings / emotions about the attitude object. For example: "I am scared of spiders".
- **Behavioral** (or conative) component: the way the attitude we have influences how we act or behave. For example: "I will avoid spiders and scream if I see one".
- **Cognitive** component: this involves a person's belief / knowledge about an attitude object. For example: "I believe spiders are dangerous".

This model is known as the **ABC model of attitudes**.

One of the underlying assumptions about the link between attitudes and behavior is that of consistency. This means that we often or usually expect the behavior of a person to be consistent with the attitudes that they hold. This is called the principle of consistency.

The principle of consistency reflects the idea that people are rational and attempt to behave rationally at all times and that a person's behavior should be consistent with their attitude(s).

Whilst this principle may be a sound one, it is clear that people do not always follow it, sometimes behaving in seemingly quite illogical ways; for example, smoking cigarettes and knowing that smoking causes lung cancer and heart disease.

There is evidence that the cognitive and affective components of behavior do not always match with behavior. This is shown in a study by LaPiere (1934).

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## Attitude Strength

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The strength with which an attitude is held is often a good predictor of behavior. The stronger the attitude the more likely it should affect behavior. Attitude strength involves:

**Importance / personal relevance** refers to how significant the attitude is for the person and relates to self-interest, social identification and value.

If an attitude has a high self-interest for a person (i.e. it is held by a group the person is a member of or would like to be a member of, and is related to a person's values), it is going to be extremely important.

As a consequence, the attitude will have a very strong influence upon a person's behavior. By contrast, an attitude will not be important to a person if it does not relate in any way to their life.

The **knowledge** aspect of attitude strength covers how much a person knows about the attitude object. People are generally more knowledgeable about topics that interest them and are likely to hold strong attitudes (positive or negative) as a consequence.

Attitudes based on direct experience are more strongly held and influence behavior more than attitudes formed indirectly (for example, through hear-say, reading or watching television).

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## The Function of Attitudes

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Attitudes can serve functions for the individual. Daniel Katz (1960) outlines four functional areas:

### Knowledge

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Attitudes provide meaning (knowledge) for life. The knowledge function refers to our need for a world which is consistent and relatively stable.

This allows us to **predict** what is likely to happen, and so gives us a sense of control. Attitudes can help us organize and structure our experience.

Knowing a person's attitude helps us predict their behavior. For example, knowing that a person is religious we can predict they will go to Church.

### Self / Ego-expressive

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The attitudes we express (1) help **communicate** who we are and (2) may make us feel good because we have asserted our identity. Self-expression of attitudes can be non-verbal too: think bumper sticker, cap, or T-shirt slogan.

Therefore, our attitudes are part of our identity, and help us to be aware through the expression of our feelings, beliefs and values.

### Adaptive

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If a person holds and/or expresses socially acceptable attitudes, other people will reward them with approval and **social acceptance**.

For example, when people flatter their bosses or instructors (and believe it) or keep silent if they think an attitude is unpopular. Again, expression can be nonverbal [think politician kissing baby].

Attitudes then, are to do with being apart of a social group and the adaptive functions helps us fit in with a social group. People seek out others who share their attitudes, and develop similar attitudes to those they like.

## Ego-defensive

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The ego-defensive function refers to holding attitudes that **protect** our self-esteem or that justify actions that make us feel guilty. For example, one way children might defend themselves against the feelings of humiliation they have experienced in P.E. lessons is to adopt a strongly negative attitude to all sports.

People whose pride have suffered following a defeat in sport might similarly adopt a defensive attitude: "I'm not bothered, I'm sick of rugby anyway...". This function has psychiatric overtones. Positive attitudes towards ourselves, for example, have a protective function (i.e. an ego-defensive role) in helping us reserve our self-image.

The basic idea behind the functional approach is that attitudes help a person to mediate between their own inner needs (expression, defense) and the outside world (adaptive and knowledge).

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## References

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