

# Attitudes

Attitudes are evaluations people make about objects, ideas, events, or other people. Attitudes can be positive or negative. Explicit attitudes are conscious beliefs that can guide decisions and behavior. Implicit attitudes are unconscious beliefs that can still influence decisions and behavior. Attitudes can include up to three components: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.

**Example:** Jane believes that smoking is unhealthy, feels disgusted when people smoke around her, and avoids being in situations where people smoke.

**Attitude components:** Attitudes consist of cognitive, behavioral, and affective components.

- The **cognitive component** is made up of the **beliefs** of an individual about the object of an attitude, for example, the belief that all old people are senile.
- The **behavioral component** consists of a predisposition to respond in a certain way to the object of the attitude, for example, talking to an old person as if talking to a child.
- The **affective component** refers to emotions aroused by the object of the attitude, for example, always feeling sorry for an older person.

## Dimensions of Attitudes

Researchers study three dimensions of attitude: strength, accessibility, and ambivalence.

- Attitude strength: Strong attitudes are those that are firmly held and that highly influence behavior. Attitudes that are important to a person tend to be strong. Attitudes that people have a vested interest in also tend to be strong. Furthermore, people tend to have stronger attitudes about things, events,
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ideas, or people they have considerable knowledge and information about.

- Attitude accessibility: The accessibility of an attitude refers to the ease with which it comes to mind. In general, highly accessible attitudes tend to be stronger.
- Attitude ambivalence: Ambivalence of an attitude refers to the ratio of positive and negative evaluations that make up that attitude. The ambivalence of an attitude increases as the positive and negative evaluations get more and more equal.

### **The Influence of Attitudes on Behavior**

Behavior does not always reflect attitudes. However, attitudes do determine behavior in some situations:

If there are few outside influences, attitude guides behavior.

**Example:** Wyatt has an attitude that eating junk food is unhealthy. When he is at home, he does not eat chips or candy. However, when he is at parties, he indulges in these foods.

Behavior is guided by attitudes specific to that behavior.

**Example:** Megan might have a general attitude of respect toward seniors, but that would not prevent her from being disrespectful to an elderly woman who cuts her off at a stop sign. However, if Megan has an easygoing attitude about being cut off at stop signs, she is not likely to swear at someone who cuts her off.

Behavior is guided by attitudes that come to mind easily.

**Example:** Ron has an attitude of mistrust and annoyance toward telemarketers, so he immediately hangs up the phone whenever he realizes he has been contacted by one.

### **The Influence of Behavior on Attitudes**

Behavior also affects attitudes. Evidence for this comes from the foot-in-the-door phenomenon and the effect of role playing.

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**The Foot-in-the-Door Phenomenon** People tend to be more likely to agree to a difficult request if they have first agreed to an easy one. This is called the foot-in-the-door phenomenon.

**Example:** Jill is more likely to let an acquaintance borrow her laptop for a day if he first persuades her to let him borrow her textbook for a day.

## **Social Norms and Social Roles**

Social norms are a society's rules about appropriate behavior. Norms exist for practically every kind of situation. Some norms are explicit and are made into laws, such as the norm While driving, you may not run over a pedestrian. Other norms are implicit and are followed unconsciously, such as You may not wear a bikini to class.

Social roles are patterns of behavior that are considered appropriate for a person in a particular context. For example, gender roles tell people how a particular society expects men and women to behave. A person who violates the requirements of a role tends to feel uneasy or to be censured by others. Role requirements can change over time in a society.

## **The Effect of Role Playing and the "Prison Study"**

People tend to internalize roles they play, changing their attitudes to fit the roles. In the 1970s, the psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted a famous study called the prison study, which showed how roles influence people. Zimbardo assigned one group of college student volunteers to play the role of prison guards in a simulated prison environment. He provided these students with uniforms, clubs, and whistles and told them to enforce a set of rules in the prison. He assigned another group of students to play the role of prisoners. Zimbardo found that as time went on, some of the "guard" students became increasingly harsh and domineering. The "prisoner" students also internalized their role. Some broke down, while others rebelled or became passively resigned to the situation. The internalization of

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roles by the two groups of students was so extreme that  
Zimbardo had to terminate the study after only six days.