

## Implicit Attitudes

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### Overview of Attitudes

Attitudes provide summary assessments that assist in decisions about how to interact with the world. An attitude is an association between a concept and an evaluation - positive or negative, favorable or unfavorable, or desirable or undesirable. Attitudes help guide our judgment and behavior. Should I approach the bear with the big claws or run away? Should I eat this cactus? Do I like members of that group? In short, is this thing good or bad?

One way that attitudes can be measured is by asking people to report their feelings. For example, to find out someone's attitude toward ice cream, we might ask her to rate her attitude on a response scale ranging from 1 (dislike ice cream very much) to 8 (like ice cream very much). Alternatively, attitudes might be inferred indirectly based on performance on a task designed to measure associations between concepts and evaluations. For example, imagine a deck of playing cards that, instead of four suits, had examples of flowers and insects, such as 'tulip' and 'beetle' and words with good or bad meaning such as 'wonderful' and 'horrible'. Someone with positive associations with flowers and negative associations with insects would probably sort these cards into two piles faster if "flowers" and "good" things have to go in one pile (and "insects" and "bad" words in the other), compared to sorting "flowers" and "bad" things into one pile (and "insects" and "good" things in the other). The ease of putting flowers and insects with good things compared to bad things is an indirect indication of attitudes. This example describes the logic of the Implicit Association Test (IAT).

The two ways of measuring attitudes described above are quite different. One requires that people self-assess their feelings and then provide a rating that summarizes the feeling (I like ice cream a '6'). The other does not require any direct thought about how one feels. Instead, a respondent sorts concepts as quickly as possible, and attitudes are inferred based on the performance. These two types of measurement approaches are interpreted to reflect different types of attitudes – explicit attitudes and implicit attitudes.

### Implicit Attitudes

Psychologists Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji defined implicit attitudes as "introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward a social object." What does that mean? The last part of the definition "favorable or unfavorable feeling... toward a social object" links the definition to attitudes – associations between evaluations and concepts. The phrase, "introspectively unidentified" means that implicit attitudes exist outside of conscious awareness. We cannot just search our minds for them, and in trying to find them, they may be "inaccurately identified." By this definition, people can have two types of attitudes - conscious, explicit attitudes that are experienced as our feelings, and implicit attitudes that are not part of our conscious experience. This implies that implicit attitudes could be quite different from explicit attitudes.

"Traces of past experience," in the above definition, refers to the presumed origins of implicit attitudes. Implicit attitudes are thought to reflect an accumulation of life experience.

For example, a person might regularly be exposed to negative ideas about old people and aging. Consciously, this person might disagree with the negative ideas and maintain a positive explicit attitude toward the elderly and aging. Implicitly, however, this negative information may be stored as associations between negativity and old age. As is evident in this example, implicit attitudes are not more ‘real’ or ‘true’ than explicit attitudes. Explicit attitudes reflect conscious values, beliefs, and desired responses. Implicit attitudes reflect experience – whether the person agrees with it or not. Both types of attitudes can be important in shaping thought, judgment, or action.

### **Consequences of Implicit Attitudes**

An active area of research seeks to identify when implicit and explicit attitudes predict behavior. The existing evidence suggests that explicit attitudes tend to predict deliberate behaviors that are fairly easy to control. For example, one’s explicit attitude toward ice cream might predict whether she chooses ice cream when given as much time as necessary to make a choice among snacks. Implicit attitudes, on the other hand, tend to predict behaviors that are more spontaneous and difficult to control. So, implicit attitudes might predict the snack choice when a person is in a hurry and just grabs the first snack item that seems appealing.

### **Relationship between Implicit and Explicit Attitudes**

Another research area seeks to identify when implicit and explicit attitudes will be related or unrelated, and why. The most extensively studied influence is self-presentation - whether people are motivated to adjust their explicit responses because they are unwanted or they are unwilling to make them public. For example, it is generally not socially acceptable to express negative attitudes about African Americans, people with disabilities, or children. So, if people feel negatively about these groups, they may resist reporting those feelings explicitly. However, implicit responses are relatively uncontrollable, so people may express negativity toward some groups implicitly even when they are trying to avoid it. Another predictor of consistency between implicit and explicit attitudes is attitude strength. Domains that are considered more important, or ones that people have thought about a lot, tend to show more consistency between implicit and explicit responses than those that are unimportant or rarely considered.

### **Open Questions**

Besides the issues described above there are a variety of questions that researchers are actively investigating to better understand the implicit attitude concept such as:

- To what extent are implicit attitude measures assessing the concept “implicit attitude” as it was defined? For example, is it unconscious, or more like a measure of ‘gut feelings’?
- How do implicit attitudes form?
- How stable are implicit attitudes?
- How do implicit attitudes change?

### **Further Reading**

- Greenwald, A. G., & Banaji, M. R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes. *Psychological Review*, 102(1), 4-27.
- Wilson, T. D., Lindsey, S., & Schooler, T. Y. (2000). A model of dual attitudes. *Psychological Review*, 107(1), 101-126.