

## SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND NATURE OF ATTITUDES

### Introduction: Explaining Social Behaviour

Social behaviour is an essential and inevitable aspect of human life. It is not limited to the mere presence of others, but includes behaviour that occurs in the **actual, imagined, or implied presence of other individuals**.

Social psychology, therefore, attempts to systematically study and explain how individuals think about, influence, and relate to one another.

It goes beyond everyday explanations and common sense, emphasising that understanding behaviour requires examining **social-cognitive processes** underlying human interactions.

In everyday life, individuals constantly form opinions about people, issues, and events. However, not all opinions qualify as attitudes.

Some opinions are superficial and lack emotional involvement, while others are deeply rooted and influence behaviour. When thoughts are accompanied by **emotions and readiness to act**, they take the form of attitudes.

### Nature and Meaning of Attitudes

An attitude can be defined as a **mental state or set of views regarding an attitude object**, which includes an evaluative dimension (positive, negative, or neutral), an emotional component, and a tendency to act in a particular way. Attitudes are not directly observable; rather, they are inferred from behaviour and expressions.

It is important to distinguish attitudes from related concepts:

- **Beliefs** represent the cognitive foundation of attitudes, such as belief in democracy or religion.
- **Values** are beliefs infused with moral significance, involving a sense of “ought” or “should,” and are highly resistant to change.

Thus, attitudes occupy a central position in understanding behaviour because they combine

cognition, emotion, and action tendencies into a unified psychological construct.

### Components of Attitudes: The A-B-C Model

Attitudes are composed of three interrelated components:

1. **Cognitive Component (C)**  
This includes beliefs, ideas, and knowledge about the attitude object. For example, believing that environmental protection is necessary reflects the cognitive aspect.
2. **Affective Component (A)**  
This involves feelings or emotions associated with the object. For instance, feeling happy when seeing greenery or sad when trees are cut reflects the affective component.
3. **Behavioural Component (B)**  
This refers to the tendency to act in a particular way. Participating in a tree plantation campaign demonstrates the behavioural component.

Although these components are expected to be consistent, real-life situations often reveal discrepancies. For example, a person may believe in environmental conservation (cognitive) and feel strongly about it (affective), yet fail to act accordingly (behavioural).

### Characteristics of Attitudes

Attitudes possess several important properties that influence their strength and impact:

#### 1. Valence

Valence refers to whether an attitude is **positive, negative, or neutral**. For example, liking or disliking nuclear research reflects the valence of the attitude.

#### 2. Extremeness

Extremeness indicates the **intensity of the attitude**. Highly extreme attitudes are strongly positive or negative and are more resistant to change.

#### 3. Simplicity or Complexity (Multiplexity)

Attitudes may be:

- **Simple:** involving few elements (e.g., attitude towards a person), or

- **Complex:** involving multiple interconnected beliefs (e.g., attitude towards health or world peace).

#### 4. Centrality

Centrality refers to the **importance of an attitude within the individual's attitude system**. Central attitudes strongly influence other attitudes and are more difficult to change.

#### Functions of Attitudes

Attitudes serve important psychological functions:

- They provide a **framework for interpreting new situations**.
- They act as a **mental blueprint**, guiding behaviour without requiring extensive deliberation.
- They simplify decision-making by offering ready-made evaluations.

For example, a person's attitude towards foreigners can determine how they behave when interacting with someone from another country.



  
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### ATTITUDE FORMATION AND CHANGE

#### Attitude Formation

Attitudes are primarily **learned through interaction with the social environment**. Although some biological predispositions may exist, learning plays the dominant role in shaping attitudes.

#### Processes of Attitude Formation

##### 1. Learning by Association

Attitudes may develop through association with positive or negative experiences. For instance, liking a subject because of a favourable teacher reflects associative learning.

##### 2. Learning by Reward and Punishment

When behaviour is reinforced, the associated attitude is strengthened. For example, receiving praise for healthy habits encourages a positive attitude towards health.

##### 3. Learning through Modelling

Individuals observe others' behaviour and imitate it, especially when it is rewarded. Children often adopt attitudes by observing parents and peers.

##### 4. Learning through Group or Cultural Norms

Social norms act as unwritten rules guiding behaviour. Over time, these norms become internalised as attitudes.

##### 5. Learning through Exposure to Information

Media, books, and communication channels play a significant role in shaping attitudes by providing information and influencing both cognition and emotions.

#### Factors Influencing Attitude Formation

- **Family and School:** Primary sources of early attitude development.
- **Reference Groups:** Groups that provide norms and standards.
- **Personal Experiences:** Direct experiences often produce strong attitudes.
- **Media Influences:** Modern media significantly shape attitudes, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively.

#### Attitude Change

Attitudes are not fixed; they can be modified over time. However, attitudes that are deeply rooted or part of one's value system are more resistant to change.

## Processes of Attitude Change

### 1. Balance Theory (Heider)

This theory suggests that individuals strive for **consistency among related attitudes**. When inconsistency (imbalance) occurs, it creates discomfort, leading to attitude change.

### 2. Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger)

Cognitive dissonance arises when an individual holds **contradictory beliefs or behaviours**, resulting in psychological discomfort. To reduce this discomfort, individuals modify their attitudes or behaviour.

For example:

- "Pan masala causes cancer"
- "I consume pan masala"

To resolve dissonance, one may stop consuming pan masala or alter the belief.

### 3. Two-Step Concept (Mohsin)

Attitude change occurs in two stages:

- **Identification with the source**
- **Imitation of the source's behaviour**, leading to change in attitude

## Factors Influencing Attitude Change

### 1. Characteristics of the Attitude

- Central and extreme attitudes are harder to change.
- Simple attitudes change more easily than complex ones.

### 2. Source Characteristics

- Credibility and attractiveness of the source enhance persuasion.

### 3. Message Characteristics

- Effective messages balance **information and emotional appeal**.

### 4. Mode of Communication

- Direct, face-to-face communication is more effective than indirect methods.

### 5. Target Characteristics

- Personality traits such as openness, self-esteem, and intelligence influence susceptibility to change.

## ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOUR RELATIONSHIP AND PREJUDICE

### Attitude-Behaviour Relationship

Although attitudes are expected to guide behaviour, the relationship is not always consistent. Behaviour may differ from attitudes due to situational constraints or social pressures.

### Conditions for Consistency:

- Strong and central attitudes
- Awareness of attitude
- Absence of external pressure
- Lack of social evaluation
- Expectation of positive outcomes

Interestingly, behaviour can also influence attitudes. For instance, in experiments, individuals altered their attitudes to align with their behaviour.

### Prejudice and Discrimination

#### Prejudice

Prejudice is a **negative attitude towards a group**, often based on stereotypes. It includes:

- Cognitive component → stereotypes
- Affective component → dislike or hatred

#### Discrimination

Discrimination is the **behavioural expression of prejudice**, involving unequal treatment of groups.

Although related, prejudice and discrimination may not always occur together.

### Sources of Prejudice

1. **Learning**  
Prejudices are learned through socialisation and media influences.
2. **Social Identity and Ingroup Bias**  
Strong identification with one's group leads to negative attitudes towards outgroups.
3. **Scapegoating**  
Blaming weaker groups for societal problems.
4. **Kernel of Truth Concept**  
Belief that stereotypes contain some truth.
5. **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**  
Behaviour of the target group confirms existing stereotypes.

- Meaningful engagement

### 3. Reducing Ingroup Bias

Encouraging broader, inclusive identities.

### 4. Emphasising Individual Identity

Focusing on individuals rather than group membership.



### Strategies for Handling Prejudice

Effective strategies include:

#### 1. Education and Awareness

Correcting stereotypes through accurate information.

#### 2. Increasing Intergroup Contact

Promoting interaction under conditions of:

- Cooperation
- Equal status