



Functions of attitudes

Module 2 11.1.1 attitudes: function & measurement

This activity will help you to...

- Understand Katz' (1960) views of the functions of attitudes
- Consider the functions different attitudes might serve
- Apply psychological ideas to everyday examples

What are attitudes for?

The functional view of attitudes (as opposed to the structural one) emphasises the ways in which attitudes might be useful to the people who hold them. Generally, the functional view holds that the purpose of attitudes is to mediate between a person's internal needs (e.g. for safety, self expression etc.) and the external environment, full of people and information. Each attitude a person holds, then, can be expected to help that person meet their needs in some way or other. According to Katz (1960), the needs fulfilled by attitudes, and hence the functions of attitudes, fall into four broad categories:

- The **adaptive** (or *instrumental*) function;
- The **knowledge** function;
- The **value-expressive** (or *ego-expressive*) function;
- The **ego-defence** function.

Any particular attitude may satisfy one or more of these functions. The most important function of any attitude can only be ascertained by considering it in relation to the person who holds it and the environment in which they operate. Consequently, what is apparently the same attitude may serve rather different purposes depending on who holds it and where/when it becomes salient to them.

The adaptive function

Some attitudes serve to enable people to attain particular, desired goals or avoid undesirable circumstances. The holding/expressing of certain attitudes may bring about direct rewards. For example, a young child whose parent holds strong attitudes about football might learn that expressing support for, say, Aston Villa (or distain for Birmingham City) brings parental approval. Alternately, some attitudes allow a person to access circumstances where rewards are available, as when expressing liking for particular music or ways of dressing allows some adolescents to join particular social groups and obtain the benefits of group membership (friendship, social support and so on). Furthermore, expressing other attitudes may help some people avoid negative circumstances.

Identify at least one attitude you hold (or have held) that serves an adaptive function. What is/was the content of the attitude? What is/was its adaptive function (i.e. what do/did you get out of holding it)?

The knowledge function

Some attitudes are useful because they help to make the world more understandable. They help people ascribe causes to events and direct attention towards features of people or situations that are likely to be useful in making sense of them. Consequently, they help to make the world more understandable, predictable and 'knowable', as well as increasing the efficiency of information

processing (cognitive economy). Stereotyping is an example of the knowledge function of attitudes. Stereotypes are mental structures that allow us to predict the characteristics a person will have based on the group they belong to. Using stereotypes to make sense of people is quick and requires minimal mental effort – both significant advantages in a complicated and fast-moving world. Of course, the down side of this type of thinking is that the inferences we make about people based on stereotypes may be unhelpful and wildly inaccurate.

Broadly, this view of attitudes predicts that the way a person processes information presented to them will be influenced by the attitudes they already hold. **Martin & Halverson (1983)** investigated this idea by showing 5 and 6 year-old children a series of images that either fitted their gender stereotypes (e.g. a girl playing with a doll) or conflicted with them (e.g. a girl playing with a gun). One week later, the children were asked to describe the images they had been shown and to say how confident they were in what they remembered.

What might we predict the results of such an experiment to be? Why?

The value-expressive function



Some attitudes are important to a person because they express values that are integral to that person's self concept (i.e. their ideas about who they are). The attitude is, consequently, 'part of who they are' and the expression of that attitude communicates important things about that person to others.

How might this person's attitudes to clothing express their values?
Think of some examples of attitudes that you or your friends hold that might be said to serve a value-expressive function.

The ego-defence function

Some attitudes serve to protect the person that holds them from psychologically damaging events or information by allowing them to be recast in less damaging or threatening ways. This inevitably may involve a degree of bias or distortion in the way the world is interpreted but people will readily do this in order to preserve a particular (usually favourable) view of themselves or the world.

How could you use the ego-defence function of attitudes to explain the following findings?

- If a person holds prejudiced attitudes towards minority groups these tend to increase when they have just suffered a misfortune such as losing their job (**Erwin, 2001**).
- People who believe that the world is a fair place tend to blame the victims of crime for being victimized (**Putwain & Sammons, 2001**).

Structure or function?

We have looked at two approaches to attitudes, the structural and the functional. Neither gives a complete picture of attitudes – they are like two sides of the same coin – and neither is inherently more valid than the other, but a researcher might choose one over the other depending on what interested them.

Which approach would you choose if you were (a) trying to measure people's attitudes towards smoking; or (b) trying to change people's attitudes towards smoking to help them give up? Why?