



Measuring attitudes: watch or ask?

Module 2 11.1.1 measuring attitudes; also modules 1 & 3 (methods)

This activity will help you to...

- Consider some of the problems associated with measuring attitudes
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of observational and question-based research methods

Finding out what people think

Psychologists face the problem that many of the processes they wish to investigate can not be directly measured or observed. Attitudes, for example, are **hypothetical constructs**.

Psychologists use the idea of attitudes to explain apparent consistencies in the ways people act towards various aspects of their world. But you can't take a person's attitudes out and look at them to find out what they are like – attitudes don't have an independent existence in that way.

Consequently, attitudes (like many other phenomena) can only be measured **indirectly**. That means using a person's behaviour to make **inferences** about their psychological processes.

The secret life of Year Seven

Professor Fakedata and Dr Fraud are investigating peer groups in young adolescents. Specifically, they want to investigate the attitudes of year seven pupils towards their classmates. However, whilst they agree on what they want to find out, they disagree on how to obtain the data they need.

Professor Fakedata thinks that the best measure of a person's attitudes is what they do. She plans to carry out observations of the pupils' behaviour towards each other (1) in their classrooms and (2) in the playground. Her view is that the ways in which the pupils interact with each other will indicate their attitudes.

- Of the two locations chosen by Professor Fakedata, which do you think is the most likely to yield valid data? Why do you think this?
- What sorts of problems might the professor encounter when gathering and interpreting her data?

Dr Fraud disagrees with the professor about attitude measurement. His view is that you get a more valid measurement by asking people questions about their attitudes. He is planning to interview the students but has not decided between (1) interviewing groups of students in a classroom and (2) interviewing individual students in an office.

- Which of the two strategies would you recommend to Dr Fraud? Why?
- What sorts of problems might Dr Fraud encounter when gathering and interpreting his data?

Whichever method – observation or questioning – is chosen to measure people's attitudes, one big problem is that different researchers may ask questions or make observations in different ways.

- Why do you think inconsistency of this sort is a problem in psychological research?
- How could you ensure consistency between researchers' observations or questions?