



What are attitudes?

Module 2 11.1.1 attitudes: function & measurement

This activity will help you to...

- Understand what psychologists mean by the term 'attitude'
- Identify some of your own attitudes
- Analyse your attitudes in terms of their cognitive, affective and behavioral components

Attitudes

Before the 20th Century, the term 'attitude' referred to the physical position of one's body. For example, to take an aggressive attitude to someone meant to adopt a threatening stance or pose towards them. In the early 20th Century, psychologists appropriated the term to refer to hypothetical 'mental positions' that people might have towards the people, objects and situations that make up their world. Attitudes were defined in many different ways. The most influential definition was put forward by Gordon Allport (1954) who defined an attitude as:

“A learned predisposition to think, feel and behave towards a person (or object) in a particular way.”

Allport's definition captures several points that social psychologists would generally agree on regarding attitudes:

- They result from past experience;
- They encompass a range of processes including thinking, feeling and acting;
- The psychological aspects of attitudes incline people to behave in particular ways towards particular people or things;

Allport and others would add to this list the assumptions that attitudes **persist** over time (if you had an attitude towards sports last week you are likely to still have it next week) and that they are relatively **stable** (unless affected by some other process or event, your attitude towards sport – favourable or unfavourable – will likely be the same next week as it was last week).

In the boxes below, note down your attitudes towards one person and one issue or activity about which you feel strongly. Choose one you feel positive about and one you feel negative about.

person

issue or activity

Taking either of the attitudes you have identified as a starting point, come up with some answers to the following questions:

- Why do you think you have this particular attitude?
- How does this attitude affect your behaviour?
- What would it take for you to change this attitude?

Attitudes, thought about in these terms, have the potential to influence many different aspects of thinking and behaviour. It follows that an understanding of how attitudes work would be very helpful in understanding, predicting and changing what people do. This is why the study of attitudes is so important to social psychology.

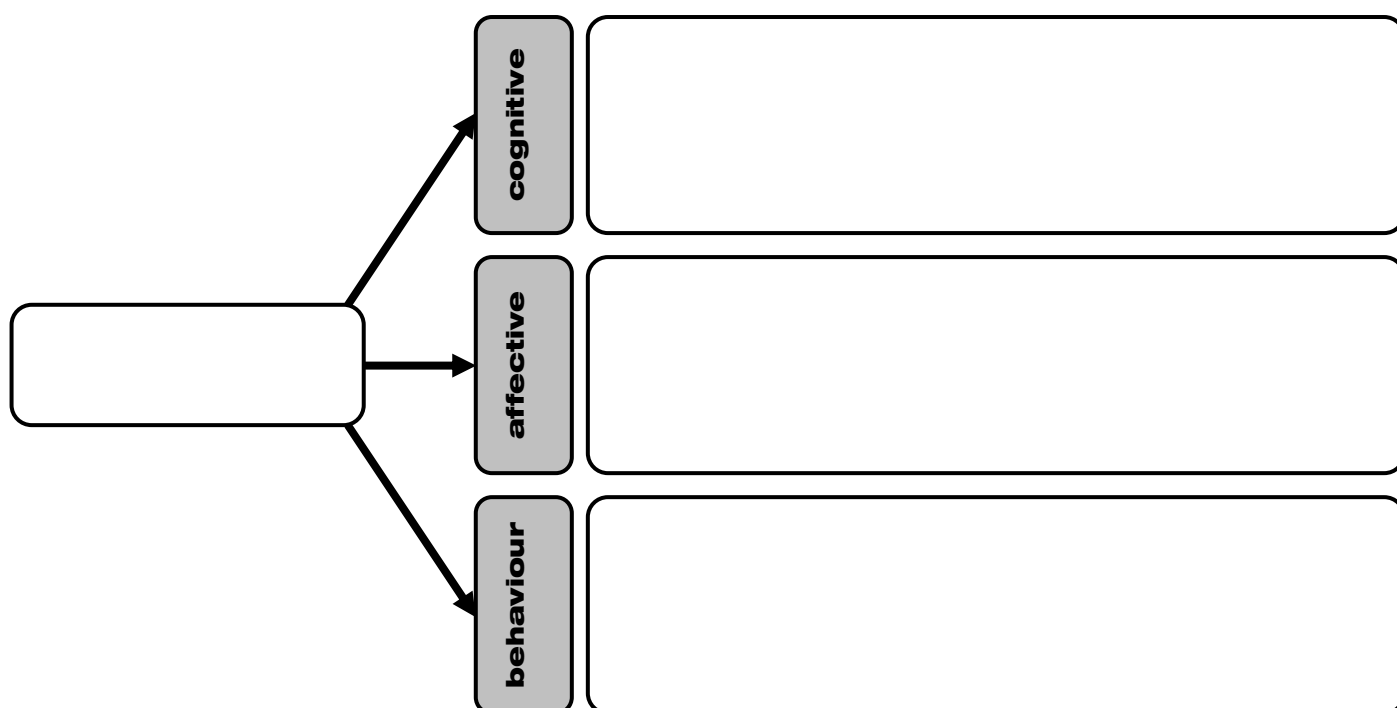
Structure of attitudes

Following Allport's (1954) definition, most social psychologists agree that attitudes have three distinct but inter-related components:

- The **cognitive** component: this is what people *think* about the attitude object;
- The **affective** (or emotional) component: this is what people *feel* about the attitude object;
- The **behavioural** component: this is how people *act* towards the attitude object.

For example, most students have a positive attitude towards psychology. They think it is a very interesting and useful branch of knowledge and contemplating or doing psychology produces positive emotional responses of enjoyment. Most students behave consistently with this and do things relating to psychology like read and talk about it, apply it to their everyday lives and study hard for exams in it.

Take one of the attitudes you described earlier and analyse it in terms of its cognitive, affective and behavioural components.



- Which (if any) component of this attitude would you say is the most important?
- Why?