

Excerpt from: “Dispositions: Attitudes, Values, & Personality”

by

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[Note: The reference cited in *White as Sin*, Chapter 23, endnote 1 is no longer available on the web, but I have preserved the relevant portion of its content here. – Scott Garber]

The Role of Attitudes

Attitudes are an all-encompassing part of everyday life as well as organizational life. We are bombarded with attitude surveys and we commonly talk about our attitudes and the attitudes of others. We also often describe individuals behaving in a way we find undesirable as having “bad” attitudes. We are advised to maintain a positive attitude and sometimes told that we have an attitude problem, but what is really meant is that we have a behavioral problem. Our attitudes are a complex collection of feelings, beliefs, and expectations regarding the people, organizations, and things we encounter. In order to study attitudes, will address a number of important questions. What are attitudes? How are attitudes formed, maintained, and changed? How are attitudes related to work behavior?

What are attitudes?

An attitude is a mental state that exerts influence on a person's response to people, objects, and situations. Our attitudes are the “mental folders” in which we store our perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and expectations about the elements in our environments (which we will refer to as attitude objects). Attitudes contain four separate, but related, components: Cognition, Affect, Evaluation, and Behavioral Intention.

The Cognitive component of an attitude consists of an individual's perception of facts, mental models (cause and effect beliefs), and opinions regarding the attitude object. Cognitions are often thought of as the rational and logical component of the attitude.

The Affective component of an attitude represents our feelings and emotions associated with the attitude object. These feelings are actually physiological responses to the people and situations. Some attitude objects evoke a strong emotional response, while others evoke little or no physiological change. For more about this emotional component see the [Affective Motivation WebNote](#).

The Evaluative component of attitude is the summary component of the attitude in that this is where our cognitions and affect are combined to form an overall positive or negative orientation towards the attitude object. For example, a belief that Professor Jones is a “good” teacher

represents a positive evaluation of Professor Jones that is based upon our cognitions (beliefs about her) and our affect (feelings that she evokes) regarding her. Like vs. dislike, satisfaction vs. dissatisfaction, good vs. bad, effective vs. ineffective O. K. vs. not O. K. are all forms of overall evaluation of an attitude object. We often store and remember an evaluation long after you forgotten the cognitions and affect upon which the evaluation was based.

The Behavioral component of an attitude is composed of our intentions to act toward the attitude object. These might take the form of goals, plans and expectations regarding a particular person, organization, or object. For example, statement “I plan to look for another job,” is a statement of behavioral intent.

How are attitudes formed, maintained, and changed?

Attitudes are often viewed and reflected in terms of the evaluative component of the attitude. As stated earlier, this is a summary component that is often stored and remembered after specific cognitions and affect are forgotten. The evaluation is formed as a combination of cognitions (information, facts, opinions, beliefs, etc.) regarding the attitude object and affect (feelings) about the attitude object. These are all the function for experiences, interactions, research, and observations about the attitude object. While attitudes are relatively stable, they are subject to change based on changing information and perceptions of facts (cognitive approach). Public speakers, colleagues, supervisors, and friends are constantly attempting to change your attitudes by changing your cognitions about things. Their ability to influence your cognitions is a function of their credibility. A very important element of credibility is trustworthiness.

Our feelings often anchor an attitude, that is, attitudes that are based on strong positive or negative feelings (affect) are often very difficult to change, especially through argument and debate (cognitive approach). Individuals seek congruence among their cognitions and between their cognitions (beliefs) and affect (feelings). Given this need for congruence, attitude change depends on changing either an individual's feelings (affective approach) or beliefs (cognitive approach). When components are inconsistent or instable, cognitive dissonance results. This instability, or dissonance, creates a negative affective state that the individual is motivated to eliminate. Dissonance can be reduced by:

1. Changing one of the inconsistent elements. This involves attitude change
2. Discrediting the information source creating the dissonance
3. Consensual validation, that is, seeking others to support your initial attitude
4. Developing a more complex mental model that allows the individual to hold both beliefs (introduction of moderate variable)
- 5 Leaving or avoiding a situation that creates dissonance

People encounter hundreds of attitude objects in a day. Evaluation of each and every one would be extremely difficult and mentally taxing. In order to deal with this information overload, we develop a mental filing system, which is called categorization. We develop categories of objects

such as men & women, students & faculty, athletes & non-athletes, to name a few. These only represent categories involving people. We also have categories involving cars, tools, and computers, as well as every type of attitude object imaginable. As we develop these categories, we also develop attitudes about these categories. Generally, we attribute these attitudes (cognitions, affect, and evaluations) to all elements (e.g., people, equipment, etc.) that we assigned to a category. While this is a very important and functional process, it is also the basis of incorrect attributions about people. Stereotyping is a form of categorization.