

# Attitude: Construction versus Disposition

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## Abstract

Although Charles Darwin conceptualized attitudes as things that organisms *do*, many psychologists and laypeople today make the fundamental attribution error of conceptualizing attitudes as dispositions people *have* that make them do what they do. Recent attitudes research, however, has begun to explore the basic process by which people construct attitudes—a process that operates in the same way when answering general attitude questions as for any other evaluative response to an attitude object. In the basic evaluation process, the evaluator activates associations to the attitude object, perceives the implications of those associations, and bases evaluative responses at least in part on those implications. Instead of trying to measure a relatively stable disposition that predicts future behavior, the emerging research investigates influences on which associations get activated (e.g., chance, recency, and priming) and influences on how the activated associations are perceived (including subjective ease, the perceived source, and their perceived relevance). Interestingly, the two steps in the basic evaluation process parallel the two strategies that people use when they try to change their own attitudes. Emerging research directions that were suggested by conceptualizing attitudes as things people *do*, not what they *have*, include understanding the effects of evaluation goals on activating and perceiving associations, assessing attitude accuracy according to how adaptive are the attitudes that people take, and applying network theory to the basic evaluation process.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the word “attitude” entered the English language in the early 1700s (Fleming, 1967), the first major scholarly treatise in which the concept of attitude played a central role was Charles Darwin’s (1872/1955) *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Darwin did not define the term, but he used “attitude” consistently to describe things that people and animals do. When a dog sees another dog at a distance, for instance, it “lowers its head, generally crouches a little, or even lies down; that is, he takes the proper attitude for concealing himself and for making a rush or spring” (Darwin, 1872/1955, p. 43). In those days, taking an attitude meant doing something

measurable that was positive or negative toward an attitude object. Organisms clearly constructed the attitudes that they took to cope with the contingencies of specific attitude objects in specific situations.

In the 1900s, psychologists started using the word “attitude” in a different way, to refer to a relatively stable disposition people *have* that makes them do what they do. They viewed an attitude as “exerting a directive and dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (Allport, 1935, p. 810). Viewed this way, attitudes could not have been constructed online, because the attitude came first, and informed subsequent behavior. Even today, leading journals publish many articles in which attitudes are said to “guide,” “direct,” “drive,” or “cause” people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. Many contemporary psychology researchers and laypeople routinely commit the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977; Schwarz, 2006). They confuse something that people *do* with something they *have*.

#### FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

This historical change in use of the word “attitude” affected the types of research questions that psychologists asked. For almost a century, researchers have tried to measure “attitude–behavior consistency.” The investigators in approximately 1000 published studies asked participants to report their attitudes toward an object and then let them treat that object either favorably or unfavorably. This procedure seems reasonable when you start from the assumption that people *have* a stable disposition that affects their relevant actions. Finding better ways to measure that stable disposition allows more confident prediction. It would be useful if people had within them some directive force we could measure, that would allow us to know in advance how they would vote, which products they would buy, and whom they would fight. Despite these researchers’ best efforts, however, answers to general attitude questions predicted only 16% of behavioral variance (Wallace, Paulson, Lord, & Bond, 2005).

Many researchers reacted to this disappointing level of prediction by asking additional and/or more specific attitude questions. These efforts increased prediction, but predicted a smaller range of behaviors, with increased costs of initial measurement. Other researchers distrusted participants’ answers to general attitude questions and used elaborate ruses (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980) or sophisticated computer techniques (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003) to measure attitudes. These indirect or implicit measurement techniques often detect different dispositions than the participants report when answering explicit attitude questions, with implicit measures predicting better in some situations and explicit

measures predicting better in others (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2007; Payne, Burkley, & Stokes, 2008).

Recently, however, some researchers have embraced the original conception of attitudes as describing something that people *do* rather than a stable disposition they *have* that causes them to do what they do. With this different conception of “attitude” in mind, these researchers have begun asking a different set of research questions. To understand this different research agenda, consider the issue of predicting behavior from attitudes. If attitudes are things that people *do*, then those 1000 studies of “attitude–behavior consistency” have been mislabeled. What actually happened in those studies was that participants evaluated an attitude object twice, at two different times, and usually in two different ways.

One evaluation typically consisted of reporting, on one or more scales, what they thought their attitude was. The other evaluation typically consisted of actions or intentions toward the same object. Participants might, for example, report their attitudes toward politicians on attitude scales and later be asked to donate money to a political action group. The researchers would call the correlation between these two evaluations “attitude–behavior consistency.” A more accurate operational term might be “evaluation–evaluation consistency.” The two evaluations are both measurable things that people *do* that are favorable or unfavorable toward the attitude object. There is no need to treat one of these evaluations as though it is different from the other, or to claim that one of them measures an underlying disposition that affects the other (Schwarz, 2006).

If we consider the two measures in studies of “attitude–behavior consistency” to be two separate evaluations that use the same underlying process, then we need to understand that process. We need to answer the question: How do people evaluate? Recent research along these lines suggests that regardless of whether the specific evaluation includes answering attitude questions or taking an action such as signing a petition, and people use the same basic evaluation process.

## CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

### BASIC EVALUATION PROCESS

In its simplest form, the basic evaluation process has two steps. First, the to-be-evaluated object (e.g., “politicians”) activates a small number of associations—not everything that is known about the object, but only enough to go by (Sia, Lord, Blessum, Thomas, & Lepper, 1999; Wilson & Hodges, 1992). The associations might be examples (members of congress), characteristics (they are egotistical), actions (they give speeches), feelings

(they make me angry), one's own actions (I protested the political convention), or anything else the person might connect with the attitude object (Lord & Lepper, 1999). Associations are said to be activated or "come to mind" when their heightened accessibility can be measured (e.g., by a lexical decision task), even if the person is not consciously aware of the activation (Higgins, 1996).

Second, the activated associations are perceived as implying favorable, unfavorable, or neutral treatment of the attitude object, such as approach, avoidance, help, or harm. Depending on situational factors, the perceived implications might or might not result in a measurable response to the attitude object. It is only through measurable responses that we can detect "taking an attitude." Nevertheless, researchers have developed many methodologically sound ways to investigate both steps of the basic evaluation process.

The basic evaluation process—activate associations and perceive their implications—underlies all types of evaluations, whether completing an attitude questionnaire or acting in any other measurable way that takes an attitude toward an attitude object (Lord & Lepper, 1999; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001; Tourangeau, 1992). An emerging understanding of this process has sparked new research directions that start by assuming that the attitudes people construct and take are flexible and adaptive. Completely random responding would not serve an organism well, but neither would completely consistent responding. Fortunately, the basic evaluation process has built into it two components that allow for adaptive attitude flexibility. Attitude flexibility—evaluating the same object differently on two separate occasions—is made possible both by changes in the associations that are activated and by changes in perceived implications of those associations.

### ACTIVATED ASSOCIATIONS

It has long been known that attitude change depends heavily, if not exclusively, on the types of thoughts that people themselves generate (Janis & King, 1954; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Self-generated thoughts take precedence when people's own thoughts conflict with what they are being told (Briñol & Petty, 2003). Thus, the associations that come to mind have considerable impact on how an attitude object is evaluated, and it is important to understand the factors that influence their activation. Relatively recent research has shown that the subset of associations activated by an attitude object on any given occasion can be affected by chance, by recency, and by priming.

#### CHANCE

Spontaneous activation of associations is a probabilistic event. Even without changes in the attitude object itself, we would expect fluctuations from one time to the next in which specific subset of possible associations gets activated. When people are asked what vegetables, tools, or other natural objects come to mind on two separate occasions, the probability that the same associations will come to mind is less than 0.70 (Bellezza, 1984). When they are asked what politicians, foreign leaders, or talk show hosts come to mind on two separate occasions, the probability that the same ones will come to mind is also less than 0.70 (Sia, Lord, Blessum, Ratcliff, & Lepper, 1997). For many attitude objects, the activated associations differ spontaneously from one occasion to the next. The same person will evaluate an attitude object differently from one time to the next merely because associations of different valence happen to come to mind (Lord & Lepper, 1999).

#### REGENCY

Beyond this baseline of spontaneous flexibility, though, people are sensitive to subtle contextual cues that can alter which associations to an attitude object get activated at any given time (Schwarz, 2007). One general principle is that associations are more likely to get activated when they have come to mind recently (Wyer & Srull, 1989). “Abraham Lincoln” and “Richard Nixon” may each have a 0.05 chance of coming to mind when evaluating “politicians,” for instance, but if only one of them comes to mind when evaluating politicians today, then the likelihood of that same one coming to mind tomorrow is likely to be increased beyond 0.05. If we visualize all possible associations to an attitude object as forming a “push-down stack,” then an association activated from the middle of the stack gets put back on the top of the stack, which temporarily increases its probability of activation (Wyer & Srull, 1989). This last-in-first-out principle might matter for evaluating “politicians,” because most people would take a different attitude toward “politicians” if Lincoln came to mind than if Nixon came to mind.

#### PRIMING

To show how flexible people can be in the attitudes that they take, consider studies of priming effects (Loersch & Payne, 2012). In many studies, psychologists have experimentally increased the likelihood of activation for one versus another association by requiring that study participants think about one of them immediately before evaluating the attitude object (Schwarz, 1999). If you ask people how tall Abraham Lincoln was just before you ask them to evaluate “politicians,” they will likely evaluate politicians more positively

than they would have had you not first got them thinking about Lincoln (Sia *et al.*, 1997).

These priming effects, in which researchers use subtle contextual cues to increase the probability of activation for specific associations to an attitude object, illustrate how finely people can tune their evaluations. Although it is not always true that responses to an attitude object are more likely to be adaptive when you give greater importance to the last instance you encountered than to an instance you have not encountered in a long time, more times than not following the last-in-first out rule will be beneficial rather than harmful (Schwarz, 2007).

### PERCEIVED IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACTIVATED ASSOCIATIONS

If the basic evaluation process had only one step—activating associations to the attitude object—then evaluations might follow invariably from the combined valence of the activated associations. Indeed, this is the usual outcome. There are, however, exceptions to this general rule that highlight the importance of how the activated associations are perceived. The same associations can be perceived as having either positive or negative implications for evaluating the attitude object depending on the subjective ease with which they came to mind, their perceived source, and their perceived relevance to the attitude object.

### SUBJECTIVE EASE

The activation of associations to an attitude object carries with it more information than is contained in their valence. People who activate associations get a feeling for how easily those associations came to mind, and this subjective ease or difficulty can have implications opposite to the valence of the associations themselves. In a relevant study, German students named either 1 or 10 reasons for buying a BMW automobile (Wänke, Bohner, & Jurkowitsch, 1997). You might think that people who generated 10 positive associations to an attitude object would take a more positive attitude toward it than people generated only 1, but just the opposite was true. Students who had recently generated 1 reason said they were more willing to buy a BMW than were students who had recently generated 10 reasons.

These counterintuitive results occurred because the students found it relatively easy to generate 1 positive association—implying that BMWs must have many positive attributes—whereas they found it relatively difficult to generate 10 positive associations—implying that BMWs must have few positive attributes. The informational importance of subjective ease reinforces the

idea that people are sensitive and flexible in taking attitudes. Some dangerous activities have both positive and negative associations that might come to mind, but avoiding them when the negative associations come more quickly to mind than the positive ones is likely to prove adaptive in the long run.

### PERCEIVED SOURCE

In perceiving implications of the activated associations, people are also sensitive to *why* they came to mind. The default assumption when we think of something is that we made it happen. If we are evaluating “politicians,” for instance, and “Romney” comes to mind, we tend to assume we thought of Romney spontaneously. Studies of priming and context effects rely on this assumption (Higgins, 1996). It would be unusual to suspect “I only thought of Romney because I had recently answered a question about large corporations,” even when researchers can show empirically that this specific association had been experimentally primed.

Sometimes, though, the eternal influences become so obvious that we either discount or react against the prime, perceiving implications exactly opposite to the valence of the activated association. If we like Romney and conclude that thoughts of Romney were forced on us, we might evaluate politicians more negatively than otherwise—a contrast effect. When we are aware of external influence on the associations that we generate, we tend to evaluate the attitude object opposite to the valence of the activated associations (Bless & Schwarz, 2010; Strack & Hannover, 1996).

### PERCEIVED RELEVANCE

People also tend to assume that the activated associations are relevant to the attitude object. When a disliked politician such as Nixon comes to mind, we might consider him representative of “politicians,” which would imply an unfavorable evaluation. This normal assumption suggests, however, that the perceived implications of a particular association might be different if we did not perceive it as representative of the attitude object—if, for instance, we took Nixon to be so atypical and unrepresentative that he established a standard to which other politicians should be compared.

People who evaluate an ambiguous politician are likely to treat that politician more favorably if they have recently been thinking about Adolph Hitler, compared to whom the politician in question might look like a statesman, than if they have recently been thinking about Franklin Roosevelt, compared to whom the politician in question might look like a political hack (Bless & Schwarz, 2010).

## PARALLELS IN DELIBERATE SELF-PERSUASION

This description has highlighted two principles of the basic evaluation process that allow people to take flexible, adaptive attitudes. First, if people usually activate only a subset of all their possible associations to the attitude object, they might be able to control which specific associations get activated at any given time to give preference to the ones most likely to be useful on that occasion. Second, if people can perceive the same associations as having different valence, they might be able to modify those perceptions so as to take desired rather than undesired attitudes.

Interestingly, research on deliberate self-persuasion has shown that, although people may not be consciously aware of when or why they are doing it, they use the same two principles when they try deliberately to change their own attitudes (Maio & Thomas, 2007). People who want to take a more positive attitude toward their lives, their spouses, their jobs, or themselves do it by controlling which associations get activated and/or by altering implications of the activated associations. People who want to take a less positive attitude toward self-detrimental behaviors such as smoking, binge drinking, or overeating also do it by controlling which associations get activated and/or by altering the perceived evaluative implications of the associations that get activated.

Many people have successfully changed the attitudes that they take toward important attitude objects by using one or both of these two strategies that attack the two components of the basic evaluation process. To change which associations get activated, people concentrate on the associations they want to be activated, preempt unwanted associations, suppress unwanted associations, and/or distract themselves by thinking about something else (Maio & Thomas, 2007). These tactics are not always successful (Wegner, 1994), but they all involve efforts to intervene in the activation part of the process, without necessarily working on their evaluative implications.

To change perceived implications of the associations that get activated, people interpret activated associations to be more in line with their desired attitude, convince themselves that undesired associations also have desired attributes, try to explain away undesired associations, question their validity, adopt new standards of comparison, and/or convince themselves that the undesired associations are relatively unimportant (Maio & Thomas, 2007). Again, these tactics are not always successful, but they all involve efforts to intervene in the part of the process that involves perceiving different implications of the activated associations, without necessarily working on the activation process itself.

The striking parallels between how the basic evaluation process works and how people deliberately change their own attitudes suggest that research on

the basic evaluation process has identified two important components of how people successfully navigate a complex animate and inanimate environment. By working on the two components of the basic evaluation process, people can take positive attitudes toward objects beneficial to them, and can also take negative attitudes toward objects detrimental to them.

### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Conceiving of attitudes as things that people *do* also offers the prospect of exciting new research avenues that might not have been pursued otherwise. One direction, just described, involves investigating parallels between the basic evaluation process and deliberate self-persuasion. Other possible directions for future research include goals, accuracy, and networks.

#### ATTITUDE GOALS

The way Darwin used the term “attitude” involved a readiness for action. In Darwin’s example quoted earlier, a dog who spots another dog at a distance might take an attitude equally useful for concealment, attack, or defense. Most times, we evaluate attitude objects for a purpose, because accurate evaluation is inherently adaptive. To quote William James (1890, p. 333), “My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing.” It seems reasonable to assume, then, that aspects of the basic evaluation process might be affected by attitude goals. As one example, different associations might be activated depending on the goal of the moment.

When considering a political nominee who has worked for lobbying firms, thoughts of politicians who have been involved in influence peddling might be especially useful, come readily to mind, and suggest taking a negative attitude. When considering a politician who might become the first woman President, in contrast, activating thoughts of male politicians who have been involved in sex scandals might be especially useful, come readily to mind, and suggest taking a positive attitude. In both cases, the associations most likely to be activated would be those most relevant to the specific evaluation (Gonsalkorale, Sherman, Allen, Klauer, & Amodio, 2011).

Similarly, holding the associations that are activated constant, goals might affect how those associations are perceived. Activating thoughts of a politician telling jokes on late night TV might carry different implications for inviting him to dinner than for supporting him as leader of the country. People are often biased in how they perceive new information about an attitude object (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), so it seems plausible that they might also be biased by their goals in how they perceive old information that they brought to mind in the service of accurate evaluation.

## ATTITUDE ACCURACY

The adaptive importance of evaluation suggests also a need for further research on attitude accuracy. If an attitude is conceived as something people *do*, not something they *have*, then they can do it well, but they can also do it poorly. They can pick up a poisonous snake whose bright colors activated thoughts of Mardi Gras, or invest their life savings with a swindler whose beard activated thoughts of Honest Abe. People are not always accurate in their evaluations, and evaluation errors might reasonably be traced to one or the other steps within the basic evaluation process.

Cognitive processes are “situated” in that they are influenced by the situation in which they occur (Barsalou, 2005; Smith & Semin, 2004), and the basic evaluation process is no exception. Some people might be better than others in activating the right number of associations—not too few and not too many—or at activating relevant rather than irrelevant associations. One of the benefits of experience with an attitude object, in fact, might be improvement at activating associations useful for the evaluative goal of the moment. Fortunately, the basic evaluation process is malleable rather than fixed (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). People can learn to manage the process so that they take more adaptive attitudes.

Attitude accuracy should be assessed not as answering attitude questions in ways that predict future behavior, but instead as accuracy in taking adaptive attitudes—treating attitude objects in ways that are beneficial rather than detrimental to the evaluator. People can be wrong when they report their own attitudes. If they happen to activate unusual associations when completing the psychologist’s attitude scales, then they can easily report “having” an attitude that is deviant from the attitude that they usually take. It is currently unclear what aspects of the basic evaluative process promote versus inhibit accuracy, although we might speculate that factors such as ability to control cognitive associations and giving appropriate weight to subjective ease, perceived source, and perceived relevance might prove important.

## ATTITUDE NETWORKS

As described, the possible associations to an attitude object differ in their probability of being activated during the basic evaluation process, but they are also interdependent. A citizen who is deciding how to vote on a state referendum making it easier to recall office holders might activate associations to both political sex scandals and political bribes. Activating instances of one increases the likelihood that the other association of the same type will also be activated, because cognitive associations operate on a network principle (Smith & Queller, 2004).

When people activate cognitive associations, they tend to do so in clusters of interrelated ideas. Thus, network theory offers potential insights into the basic evaluation process. The Internet, epidemics, power grids, scientific collaborations, and brain neurons all have network structures that differ in their density, transitivity, reciprocity, clustering, and other measurable network properties (Newman, 2010). Similarly, individual nodes within networks differ in their centrality, closeness, similarity, and other measurable properties (Newman, 2010). These network metrics could be used to examine more precisely the activation of associations that occur as part of the basic evaluation process (Bressler & Menon, 2010). In addition, network analyses could enhance understanding of changes in the associative network that correspond with changes in evaluating an attitude object (Boyasso, Loran, & Vincent, 1993; Smith & DeCoster, 1998).

Finally, activation of associations from a cognitive network may be not just probabilistic, but also somewhat chaotic—a desirable, adaptive feature. Human hearts are more resistant to disease when heartbeats are slightly chaotic rather than perfectly regular (Goldberger, 1996). Similarly, brain waves during sleep and spontaneous firings of brain neurons are more adaptive when they are slightly chaotic rather than perfectly rhythmic (Golbin & Umantsev, 2006). Nature tends to favor unpredictable variation over absolute predictability (Bak, 1996), so it is possible that this aspect of the basic evaluation process—cross-temporal variation in the spontaneous associations that come to mind for an attitude object—might provide adaptive flexibility in the attitudes that people construct and take.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Because the high-probability associations to an attitude object are, by definition, likely to be activated across times and situations, and because their evaluative implications usually change only slowly, the attitudes that people take are likely to be reasonably stable. Because activation of specific associations to an attitude object is probabilistic and possibly chaotic, and sensitive and flexible enough to reflect subtle changes in the social or nonsocial context, the attitudes that people take are also likely to vary in ways that are usually adaptive. The way the system works is probably preferable to having organisms with relatively stable dispositions that somehow cause them to do what they do. Even if conceptualizing attitudes as stable dispositions did not constitute what Ross (1977) called the fundamental attribution error (see also Ryle, 1949; Schwarz, 2006), conceptualizing attitudes as things people and animals *do* has already informed exciting research programs and will inspire future research.

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### CHARLES G. LORD SHORT BIOGRAPHY

**Charles G. Lord** earned a BA from the University of Rhode Island in 1976 and a PhD from Stanford University in 1980. His first academic position was at Princeton University, where he served as an Assistant Professor from 1980 to 1987. From Princeton, he went to Texas Christian University in 1987, with the rank of Associate Professor. He served as Chair of the Department of Psychology at TCU from 1990 to 1994, and was promoted to Full Professor in 1992. During his career at TCU, he served as Associate Editor of the journal *Social Cognition* for 12 years and served on the National Science Foundation social psychology panel for 3 years. After another turn as department chair in 2001, he became Director of Graduate Studies for the psychology department at TCU. During his career so far, he has mentored 23 successful PhD students, and is currently mentoring 5 more. Over the past 33 years, his research has continued to investigate attitude processes.

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