

ASSIMILATION AND CONTRAST IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edited by
Diederik A. Stapel and Jerry Suls

"The psychological processes of assimilation and contrast are critical to, and pervasive in, human functioning. What is surprising is that no overview of these processes and their implications has been available—until now. Stapel and Suls are to be congratulated for bringing together such an eminent collection of experts across a broad range of issues regarding assimilation and contrast. This volume provides a treasure trove of significant research and insights on these fundamental processes. This is a must-read volume for anyone who is fascinated with how people get along in the social world."

E. Tory Higgins, PhD, *Stanley Schachter Professor of Psychology and Director of the Motivation Science Center, Columbia University*

"Assimilation and contrast represent one of the thorniest issues that psychology has faced over the past several decades. To put it bluntly, if you can't predict whether someone will assimilate the self to a judgmental standard or distance themselves from it, then it is hard to make sensitive predictions about human behavior. This volume represents the very best research on this long-term tricky issue, and includes all of the leaders in the field. This is clearly the book to read for a cutting-edge picture of the issue."

Shelley E. Taylor, PhD, *Distinguished Professor, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles*

Despite the importance and amount of research activity devoted to assimilation and contrast processes by social psychologists, there has been no volume that is dedicated to this topic. *Assimilation and Contrast in Social Psychology* consists of original essays on classic and contemporary developments concerning assimilation and contrast. The editors have invited a set of leading researchers who represent a wide range of theory, evidence, and application of these phenomena.

The book includes a chapter presenting a historical survey of relevant developments in psychophysics and social and cognitive psychology. The closing chapter provides a synthesis and suggests future directions. This volume is suitable for professionals, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates.

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Assimilation and Contrast in Social Psychology

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Contents

About the Editors	vii
Contributors	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Jerry Suls and Diederik A. Stapel</i>	
Section I: Classic, Perceptual, and Judgmental Perspectives	7
1 Psychological Magnetism: A Brief History of Assimilation and Contrast in Psychology	9
<i>Jerry Suls and Ladd Wheeler</i>	
2 Contrasting Models of Assimilation and Contrast	45
<i>Douglas H. Wedell, Susanne K. Hicklin, and Laura O. Smarandescu</i>	
3 Stereotypes and Shifting Standards: Assimilation and Contrast in Social Judgment	75
<i>Monica Biernat and Melvin Manis</i>	
4 Assimilation and Contrast Effects of Affect on Judgment	99
<i>François Ric and Paula M. Niedenthal</i>	
Section II: Social Cognitive Perspectives	117
5 Mental Construal Processes: The Inclusion/Exclusion Model	119
<i>Norbert Schwarz and Herbert Bless</i>	
6 In the Mind of the Beholder: The Interpretation Comparison Model of Accessibility Effects	143
<i>Diederik A. Stapel</i>	

7	Assimilation and Contrast as Comparison Effects: A Selective Accessibility Model	165
	<i>Thomas Mussweiler</i>	
8	Assimilation and Contrast in Counterfactual Thinking and Other Mental Simulation-Based Comparison Processes	187
	<i>Keith D. Markman, Jennifer J. Ratcliff, Nobuko Mizoguchi, Ronald A. Elizaga, and Matthew N. McMullen</i>	
9	Set/Reset and Self-Regulation: Do Contrast Processes Play a Role in the Breakdown of Self-Control?	207
	<i>Leonard L. Martin and Steve Shirk</i>	
Section III: Motivational Perspectives		227
10	Contrast Effects in Automatic Affect, Cognition, and Behavior	229
	<i>Jack Glaser</i>	
11	Complementary Contrast and Assimilation: Interpersonal Theory and the Social Functions of Contrast and Assimilation Effects	249
	<i>Larissa Z. Tiedens, Rosalind M. Chow, and Miguel M. Unzueta</i>	
12	Contrast Effects in Knowledge Activation: The Case of Inhibition Effects Due to Competing Constructs or Goal Fulfillment	269
	<i>Jens Förster and Nira Liberman</i>	
13	Contrast and Assimilation in Upward Comparison: The Intragroup Dimension	289
	<i>Michael L. W. Vliek, Colin Wayne Leach, and Russell Spears</i>	
14	Several Answers to Four Questions: Reflections and Conclusions	313
	<i>Diederik A. Stapel and Jerry Suls</i>	
	Author Index	328
	Subject Index	341

Introduction

JERRY SULS and DIEDERIK A. STAPEL

There was a girl beside him. Her hair was a lovely shade of dark red and she had a distant smile on her lips and over her shoulders she had a blue mink that almost made the Rolls Royce look like just another automobile. It didn't quite. Nothing can.

(Raymond Chandler, 1953, *The Long Goodbye*, p. 1)

Assimilation and contrast are pervasive phenomena in social perception, social judgment, and social behavior. For example, Western religions espouse a common humanity—an assimilative vision. Racism and xenophobia, however, seem to stem in part from the tendency to perceive members of other groups as more different from ourselves than they are in reality—a contrastive outcome. Many real-life examples and empirical demonstrations of assimilation and contrast are described in this volume. Although contrast and assimilation were first investigated by psychological researchers of sensation and perception in the 19th century, they have been a continual source of theoretical and empirical interest to psychologists since that time. One of the fundamental contributions of the social sciences has been its recognition, appreciation, and delineation of the important role of context. In recent years, the study of assimilation and contrast has been especially active among social psychologists (Biernat, 2005).

This seemed to be an appropriate time to create a contemporary compendium of social psychological perspectives on assimilation and contrast by the leading researchers in the field. Not surprisingly, researchers from across the globe are represented—another indication of the significance and interest of this topic. Classic issues in social psychology have recently been reinvigorated with the increased recognition of the roles of assimilation and contrast and new areas of relevance and application are being discovered. As building blocks of social psychology and with connections to many other areas of psychological science, assimilation and contrast were perceived by us to deserve a volume of their own.

The book is organized into three major sections with the first presenting “Classic, Perceptual, and Judgmental Perspectives.” Suls and Wheeler begin by surveying the history of assimilation and contrast with its cross-cutting traditions in early experimental psychology, sensation and perception, cognitive psychology, and

social psychology. Important contributions of the Gestalt psychologists, psychophysicists, Sherif and Asch, social cognition, and social comparison are reviewed, and two “lessons” acquired by the authors, while assembling this challenging history, also are presented.

Wedell, Hicklin, and Smarandescu provide a tutorial on the psychophysics of assimilation and contrast. The authors’ treatment is guided by the idea that examination of the basic constituent processes hypothesized by the different psychophysical models to produce contrast or assimilation should provide insight into the applicability of the models across different situations and the boundary conditions under which they operate.

Biernat and Manis describe their “shifting standards model,” with its strong roots in psychophysics, and with significant implications for understanding stereotyping. The authors elaborate upon and review research evidence relevant to this shifting standards model of judgment, with a particular emphasis on what the model predicts about assimilation and contrast effects in judging individual members of stereotyped groups. Biernat and Manis’ general perspective is that social judgments may show evidence of assimilation to *or* contrast from social stereotypes, depending on the nature of the judgment at hand. Contrary to common belief, they demonstrate that stereotyping is not strictly an assimilative phenomenon.

The first section concludes with Ric and Niedenthal’s contribution. In this chapter the authors present their perspective on emotion and assimilation–contrast effects beginning with discussion of *direct* assimilation and contrast effects of affect on mood judgments. These effects are described as *direct* because the judgment is made with direct reference to the affect currently experienced by the judge. The authors then review their studies showing that these “direct” effects can be fundamentally modified when other information, such as the target’s category membership, is provided. These are considered *indirect effects* of affect on judgment that are consistent with recent “information-as-affect” theory (Clore et al., 2001). Ric and Niedenthal also consider whether assimilation and contrast effects of affect are specifically due to affective state or to a more general kind of conceptual priming. The authors propose that the effects of affect can be reduced neither to evaluative nor to conceptual priming—leading to their proposal for a discrete affective states level of analysis.

The second section presents “Social Cognitive Perspectives,” beginning with the influential inclusion/exclusion model originally introduced by Schwarz and Bless. According to their perspective, how representations of the target and standard are mentally represented determines whether assimilation or contrast effects result. Certain kinds of information used in construing the target give rise to assimilation, while certain kinds of information used in construing the standard give rise to contrast effects. Schwarz and Bless also describe the implications of mental construal processes for three applied issues: asymmetries in public opinion, the dynamics of stereotype change, and brand extensions.

Whereas the inclusion/exclusion perspective represents a broad spectrum approach to social judgment, the next two chapters by Stapel and by Mussweiler focus on judgment effects through processes like interpretation, comparison,

and hypothesis testing. These models share a social cognitive perspective and emphasize the importance of cognitive accessibility, but highlight different fundamental processes and draw somewhat different conclusions and implications for self-evaluation.

Stapel describes his Interpretation Comparison Model (ICM) and reviews pertinent empirical evidence. The ICM attempts to give a comprehensive perspective on the effects of accessible knowledge by focusing on the way such knowledge is used during impression formation. A major assumption is that when people are unaware of the influence of such information, using accessible information as an interpretation frame is more likely to result in assimilation, whereas using such information as a reference frame is more likely to result in contrastive comparison effects—given that the primed information is sufficiently extreme and that there is prime–target similarity.

In the next chapter, Mussweiler outlines his Selective Accessibility Model of social comparison. His perspective also suggests that comparisons may lead to assimilation as well as contrast. However, which is the outcome depends on whether similarity or dissimilarity with the comparison target is expected. Similarity testing leads to assimilation, whereas dissimilarity testing leads to contrast. As a consequence, any factor that induces judges to focus on similarities between target and context information fosters assimilative context effects. Any factor that induces judges to focus on differences fosters contrast.

In the next chapter, Markman and his co-authors, Ratcliff, Mizoguchi, Elizaga, and McMullen, examine when and how *mental simulation*—the consideration of alternatives to present reality—produces emotional responses that reflect either contrast or assimilation. The chapter begins with a description of a comparison domain that is most commonly associated with mental simulation—counterfactual thinking. Then the authors consider how mental simulation plays a critical role in determining assimilative and contrastive responses to other type of comparisons. Markman et al. conclude with presentation of a model of mental simulation-based comparison processes and describe its relationship to other contemporary comparison models.

In the concluding chapter of the second section, Martin and Shirk review the major tenets of the Set/Reset Model of assimilation–contrast and then describe how it may lend insight about failures in self-regulation. In reset contrast, individuals attempt to partial out from their judgment of the target stimulus any reactions they perceive to be coming from nontarget sources (e.g., contextual stimuli, their mood). Because this “partialling” can be difficult to calibrate precisely, it sometimes leads to overcorrection. That is, people partial out aspects of their genuine reaction to the target and turn what would have been a judgment biased toward the implications of the inappropriate reaction (assimilation) into one that is biased away from that reaction (contrast). Martin and Shirk note that there is a similarity in the area of self-control (e.g., dieting) where shifts from self-control to overindulgence frequently can be observed. Both assimilation–contrast and self-regulation reflect a kind of overcorrection. In their chapter, the authors examine this similarity and the implications for both phenomena.

Motivation is not ignored in the previous sections, but the third section of this

volume is more focused on motivated influences. Glaser considers the role of automatic evaluation and contrast effects in stereotyping, noting there has been the presumption that for contrast effects to occur, via some adaptation or correction, there must be a degree of awareness of the potentially biasing prime or context. Evidence of contrast in measures of automatic processes, however, challenge this assumption and provide evidence of a more comprehensive unconscious. Glaser reviews evidence of contrast (i.e., reverse priming) effects in sequential priming automatic evaluation studies and that people seem capable of correcting for an evaluation (of the prime) of which they are not consciously aware. The evidence reviewed by Glaser indicates that humans are capable of being nonconsciously vigilant for biasing information and can take proactive, and yet unconscious, action to redress such bias.

Tiedens, Chow, and Unzueta describe how Interpersonal Theory (Kiesler, 1983; Wiggins, 1982) can inform and extend understanding of assimilation–contrast. In particular, they argue that assimilation and contrast can help people to achieve their goals. The authors draw connections between contrast and assimilation to the phenomenon of interpersonal complementarity. They then argue from various forms of evidence that when people engage in perceptual or behavioral complementary contrast and assimilation (contrast for control and assimilation for affiliation) their social relationships are facilitated. The relationship becomes more enjoyable, more comfortable, and more sustainable, and coordination between relationship partners is facilitated.

Förster and Liberman observe that, like the operation of correction and adjustment in producing contrast (described in earlier chapters), inhibition at an early stage of information processing can play an important role. In particular, the strength of the motivation to work on a task, the completion of a goal, or the parallel operation of competing goals can render certain kinds of information inaccessible so it is not used for judgments and behavior. Such (unconscious) inhibitory processes may prevent assimilation effects. Also, because different factors mediate inhibition than anchoring or correction, failures to find assimilation effects in the laboratory may be due to the fact that the process of inhibition was given insufficient consideration.

In their chapter, Vliek, Leach, and Spears seek to integrate research on interpersonal assimilation–contrast and its role in individual self-evaluation with research on intergroup assimilation–contrast and its role in group self-evaluation (Pettigrew, 1967). The authors' reintegration of these traditions involves a focus on a level of analysis at which interpersonal and intergroup assimilation–contrast intersect—the “intragroup dimension.” This “meso” level of analysis between the interpersonal and intergroup is irreducible to either the interpersonal or intergroup level. By adopting this distinctive level of analysis, Vliek et al. present a better understanding of how individuals assimilate and contrast themselves in relation to the successful others who are most relevant to self-evaluation.

In volumes of this kind, it is common to conclude with a commentary by the editors or a widely respected sage. The editors decided, however, to adopt a different approach. As Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* said, “What's the use of a book . . . without pictures or conversations?” (Carroll, 1865/1898).

Although we did not provide pictures (excepting scientific figures), we devised four key questions and asked each of the contributors to share their thoughts and reactions via e-mail. In this way, we tried to approximate the kind of conversation we would hope for if we discussed these four questions with all of the authors assembled. Only the reader can decide whether this “virtual” commentary in the final chapter improves upon the more conventional format.

It is the hope of the editors that by the time the reader has read all of the chapters, he or she should have a much better idea about the factors that shift perceptions, evaluations, and emotions toward or away from the immediate context, that they gain a greater appreciation of the connections to other social psychological domains, and that some readers pursue those connections in future research.

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Section I

Classic, Perceptual, and Judgmental Perspectives