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# Contrast Effects (SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY) - IResearchNet

6-8 minutes

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## Contrast Effects Definition

Most judgments in everyday life are evaluative in nature. People may want to know whether a particular grade is good or bad, whether a person is trustworthy, how well someone performed on a test, or what a person's athletic abilities are like. Rarely can such questions be answered in absolute terms (e.g., running 1 mile in 5 minutes). Rather than absolute, judgments are usually relative and result from comparisons. That is, judgments are mostly evaluations of a target with respect to some comparison standard. For example, having a C in a class is considered very differently depending on whether everybody else has an A or whether all others failed.

Moreover, the C is evaluated very differently depending on whether an A or a D was expected. Or, consider a temporary headache that feels quite bad—in comparison to a chronic migraine, it probably appears less severe. As these examples demonstrate, judgments may differ significantly depending on the comparison standard they are contrasted to, a phenomenon that social psychologists refer to as contrast effects. More formally, a contrast effect reflects a negative relation between the implications of a standard and the resulting evaluation of a target, that is, the more positive (negative)

the standard, the more negative (positive) the evaluation of the target.

## Comparison Standards

### *Standards Are Not Fixed*



Comparison standards are not fixed but rather are highly flexible. They may vary from one situation to another and due to a mere change of the standard, things appear differently although they factually haven't changed at all. For example, in job interviews the interviewer may evaluate the candidates in relation to an ideal perfectly fitting the job. Alternatively, in the course of several interviews, the interviewees could be compared to prior candidates, presumably resulting in very different evaluations. Or, as in the above example, grades can be evaluated referring to the performance of others, one's own expectations, and so forth.

### *Selection of Standards*

If comparison standards are not fixed, a crucial question pertains to what influences their selection. First, relative accessibility of standards determines the likelihood of a comparison standard to be

selected. Accessibility means how easily something comes to mind. Imagine you are watching a model contest on television and are suddenly asked to evaluate a partner's or friend's attractiveness. As research has shown, it is likely that your friend would score badly in this situation, just because a particularly high standard (a model) was made accessible through the television show. In most other situations, you would probably rely on more average, less attractive comparison standards (like people on the street or in your class). In more general terms, the likelihood of any piece of information to serve as a comparison standard depends on how easily it comes to mind; that is, how accessible it is in a given situation.

Second, the applicability of a comparison standard also determines its likelihood of selection. For example, imagine you evaluate the size of a person, asking yourself whether this person is tall or small. Obviously, you could apply many different comparison standards, for instance, depending on the person's sex. If the person being evaluated is a female, the average height of the general population is not really meaningful; what would be more meaningful is to refer to the average height of females. But what would happen if the person being evaluated is a professional basketball player? These examples demonstrate that to be used as a comparison standard, the respective piece of information has to be applicable, or meaningful. Interestingly, individuals apply different standards to the social behavior of different groups. As a result, the mildly aggressive behavior of a female is evaluated as more aggressive than the same behavior of a male because, based on existing stereotypes, a higher standard for aggressiveness is applied to men than to women.

Note, however, that in many situations, the selection based upon

accessibility and applicability is quite use-fill. Malleability of evaluative judgments, therefore, is not a bad thing, but rather a highly adaptive feature.

## **Contrast Effects and Social Comparison**

Judging something with respect to some comparison standard is a common phenomenon in daily life, regardless of whether situations, objects, or persons are evaluated. Nevertheless, comparisons of yourself to other people (social comparisons) are a special case, because at least one other prominent criterion is available: the similarity between you and the comparison standard. In general, similar people are more likely to be used as comparison standards than are dissimilar people, supposedly because comparisons to similar people convey more valid information. For example, comparing your own running speed to a person 20 years younger or older may be less informative than comparing it to someone of your own age. Importantly, whether the contrast resulting from your comparison will be positive or negative depends on whether you choose a worse or better standard, a phenomenon termed downward (standard is worse) or upward (standard is better) social comparison.

## **Contrast Effects Practical Implications**

Just as evaluations are predominant in people's lives, so too are contrast effects. Apart from their occurring in many judgments people make, contrast effects also are used to influence our judgments. For example, a reduced price looks much cheaper than it actually is only because the cancelled original price tag is still clearly visible. Compared to the original price, the new one is

cheaper—regardless of whether it is actually cheap. Or assume you just decided to buy a new suit. Quickly, the smart salesperson offers you a somewhat expensive tie that goes nicely with the suit. In comparison with the price of the suit, the tie does not seem too expensive, but without the comparison standard elicited by the suit, you may never have considered buying such an expensive tie.

### **References:**

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