

Rebound Effects in Impression Formation: Assimilation and Contrast Effects Following Thought Suppression

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Active suppression of a thought can lead to preoccupation with that thought. This *rebound effect* can be conceptualized as an increase in cognitive accessibility. If so, then the effects of suppression-induced accessibility should be moderated by variables (such as cognitive load) that moderate the effects of accessibility produced by other priming procedures. Participants were asked to talk about people they knew, and some were asked *not* to think about specific favorable or unfavorable personality traits (e.g., honesty or dishonesty). Control participants were instead passively exposed to the same traits. Participants then formed an impression of an ambiguous target person, and half did so while also engaged in a distracting task. As predicted by Martin and Achee's (1992) set/reset model, when impressions were formed with no cognitive load, suppression led to contrast: Participants avoided using the suppressed traits to characterize the target. When cognitive load was increased, however, suppression led to assimilation: Participants reported that the target possessed the suppressed traits. Suppression is not only a poor strategy for avoiding thoughts, but the results of this study suggest that it can also have significant interpersonal consequences. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

People spend a great deal of time trying to control their behavior. Unfortunately, they are not always successful, because self-regulation of behavior is a complex undertaking consisting of multiple interrelated processes (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). One subset of those processes involves controlling one's thoughts (see Wegner & Pennebaker, 1993, for a review). To successfully

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enact the behaviors appropriate for different situations—be they parties, funerals, job interviews, or psychology experiments—attentional resources and interpretive activities must be preferentially directed toward certain features of the environment. In short, mental control often involves efforts to think about particular people, places, things, and ideas. But there is another, complementary aspect of mental control: that is, trying *not* to think about particular people, places, things, and ideas. Thought suppression (see Wegner, 1992, for a review) may occur as part of an attempt to avoid unwanted behavior (e.g., suppressing thoughts of food while on a diet). At other times, people may suppress thoughts simply because those thoughts make them feel bad (Pennebaker, 1988; Wolpe & Lazarus, 1966). Either way, research reveals that while thought suppression is possible, it is far from easy and often strikingly ineffective.

Wegner and his colleagues have shown how efforts to avoid a specific thought lead to later preoccupation with that same thought. In the first and most well-known of these demonstrations, Wegner, Carter, Schneider, and White (1987) found that asking participants to try not to think about a white bear led to *rebound effects*. Wegner et al. asked participants in their experiments to talk continuously for 5 min while trying to suppress the forbidden thought. Recordings of these monologues revealed that participants were reasonably (if not totally) successful in avoiding thoughts about white bears. In a second phase of the study, however, these same people were asked instead to *purposely* think about white bears. Participants who had previously engaged in suppression verbalized more such thoughts than did others who had never attempted suppression. In other words, attempts to actively avoid a thought paradoxically led to a rebound of that thought (for replications of these findings, see Clark, Ball, & Pape, 1991; Clark, Winton, & Thynn, 1993; Kelly & Kahn, 1994, Experiment 2; and Lavy & van den Hout, 1990).

Another way of describing the rebound effect is in terms of the increased cognitive accessibility of suppressed thoughts (Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Newman & Baumeister, 1994). Although a number of different models of construct accessibility have been developed (e.g., Higgins, Bargh, & Lombardi, 1985; Smith & Zarate, 1992; Wyer & Srull, 1989), in all cases the term denotes “an activation readiness or an activation potential of stored information” (Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995, p. 41). In other words, accessible constructs are those that for any number of reasons are very likely to come to mind in the circumstances for which they are relevant (Higgins & King, 1981). For example, constructs that have multiple associations with others in long-term memory (see Collins & Loftus, 1975) are likely to be accessible due to the many cues that could lead to their activation. Perhaps an even more basic determinant of accessibility is frequency of activation. The sheer number of times a construct is encountered or otherwise activated will be positively correlated with its accessibility.

The explanation of the rebound effect favored by Wegner et al. (1987) specified the first determinant of accessibility discussed above—a construct’s relationship to other accessible ones—as the important mediating variable. According to

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