



## Attitude accessibility as a determinant of object construal and evaluation

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Attitude accessibility affects the construal of multiply categorizable objects.
- ▶ Enhancing accessibility of attitudes toward a construal makes its use more likely.
- ▶ This effect extends to a series of objects that vary along multiple dimensions.

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### ABSTRACT

Attitude accessibility, the ease with which a given attitude comes to mind, has been demonstrated to affect attention. The current experiments focus on the construal of multiply categorizable objects. They seek to provide evidence that (a) construals toward which individuals have more accessible attitudes, i.e., those that are more attitude-evoking, are more likely to influence the evaluation of related objects and that (b) this effect of attitude accessibility on construal processes can be extended to a whole series of objects which vary along multiple dimensions. Experiment 1 provides evidence that construals whose related attitudes were made more accessible via attitude rehearsal were more likely to influence the evaluation of a related target. Experiments 2 and 3 extend these findings to the domain of foods, which vary along two potential construal continua (healthiness versus tastiness), and demonstrate that if participant attitudes toward fitness are made more accessible, participants' judgments about eating a variety of specific foods are guided more by the healthiness of the foods.

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### Introduction

We often encounter objects, people, or events that can be categorized in multiple ways. Imagine for a moment two people waiting in line for a flu shot at the local pharmacy. The first person is completely relaxed at the prospect of the flu shot. She knows that getting a shot will immunize her for the rest of the season and keep her healthy while others are suffering miserably in their beds. The second person has quite a different reaction while waiting in line. His face is pale, he's sweating profusely, and he looks altogether like he's about to throw up. He can't focus on anything other than the fact that a cold, metal needle will soon be jabbed under his skin.

Both of these people are waiting for the very same event — a flu shot. But by their responses, it is apparent they are not viewing the event in the same way. This anecdote highlights two relevant issues. First, it suggests the possibility that seemingly objective events or objects may not be so objectively perceived or construed. What the perceiver brings to the table when viewing an event or object can be just as important as the objective qualities of that event/object. Second, it compels us to explore the possible processes by which one person views, or

interprets, a given object or event (such as a flu shot) differently than another person. In other words, what factors contribute to these starkly different interpretations of the very same event/object?

The idea that objective events or objects may not be so objectively construed is certainly not a new one. Researchers who subscribed to the “New Look” movement in the 40s and 50s argued that even the seemingly impartial act of perception is not a truly objective process. Indeed, Bruner, one of the leaders of the movement, asserted that the way people view, or construe, real-world objects or events is necessarily colored by their own needs, desires, attitudes, etc. The perceiver, in other words, does not robotically take in objective information — he or she is not, as Bruner and Goodman (1947) put it, a “passive recording instrument of rather complex design.” Rather, all perception is an inherently constructive process in which an observer identifies what he or she sees as something (Bruner, 1957). Bruner himself labeled this constructive process categorization, but his usage is synonymous for our purposes with the term construal. Both terms connote not only an identification process but also the idea that an individual's experiences, needs, desires, and the like play a role in that identification.

Because object identification is constructive, Bruner argued, it is not merely a function of sensory input, but is also influenced by the accessibility of potentially relevant categories to which that object might be assigned. The greater this category accessibility (that is, the easier it is for a particular construal to be brought to mind), the

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less input is needed to identify the object as belonging to that category and the wider the range of input characteristics that are seen as ‘fitting’ that category. In other words, assuming a given object can be construed in multiple ways, the more accessible category will be more likely to be used to disambiguate the object.

Bruner postulated many possible determinants of category accessibility, among them expectancies based on context. A spherical object is more readily identified as a baseball in the context of Wrigley Field because the category baseball is made so accessible by the context. Similarly, the state of the observer can increase the accessibility of a given category. Studies have found, for example, that needs (e.g., hunger: Radel & Clément-Guillotin, 2012; or poverty: Bruner & Goodman, 1947) and desires (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) can lead to very different construals of the exact same object or event. More recent research has demonstrated that the construal of even seemingly objective physical characteristics such as the slope of a hill (Bhalla & Proffitt, 1999) or one’s distance from a bottle of water (Balcetis & Dunning, 2010) are influenced by such things as one’s inherent ability to climb said hill or one’s level of thirst.

One of the basic principles to emerge from the last few decades of research on social cognition is that the frequency and recency of activation of a category also influences its accessibility. A large body of research in the realm of priming demonstrates this (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977; Srull & Wyer, 1980; see Higgins, 1996 for a review). Returning to our flu shot example, one reason the first person easily categorizes the shot she is about to receive as an immunization might be that the concept of immunization had been primed repeatedly earlier in the day (perhaps through advertisements or discussions with colleagues). Because the category ‘immunization’ is now more accessible for her, it is more likely to carry over to the specific ‘flu shot’ object and influence its construal.

More pertinent to the current research is the possibility that a person’s attitude toward a given object influences how he or she views that object. Historically, attitudes, especially those that are more accessible from memory, have been shown to function as a lens through which people see the attitude object and information related to it (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2010; Fazio, 2000; Fazio, Ledbetter, & Towles-Schwen, 2000; Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). In other words, once activated, attitudes toward an object can influence the construal of that object (and related information) directly. For example, Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) found that participants who had positive attitudes toward the death penalty evaluated a study that claimed to provide support for the deterrent efficacy of the death penalty as of higher quality than a study that concluded the opposite. Houston and Fazio (1989) found that this effect of attitudes toward capital punishment on perceptions of the quality of empirical evidence was moderated by the accessibility of the attitudes. Attitudinally-biased processing was more evident for people with more accessible attitudes toward the death penalty. Thus, attitudes toward an object – particularly if they are easily brought to mind – affect our construals of information related to the object.

Consider again our flu shot example. According to this idea, the second, anxious person might be anxious because thinking about flu shots automatically activates a negative attitude. In other words, this person could have an accessible negative attitude towards flu shots. Because this attitude is activated whenever this person thinks about getting a flu shot, the person is more likely to consider aspects of a flu shot that imply negativity. Information that fits with a negative attitude (such as the pain associated with someone piercing one’s arm with a needle) is more likely to influence the current construal – the person sees the flu shot through negative glasses.

### Accessibility of attitudes toward the competing categories

In the current research, however, the person’s attitude toward the object itself is not the focus. Although it is true that the valence of one’s attitude toward a given object has consequences for the way

one construes that object, there is another potential mechanism by which attitudes influence construals: via the accessibility of one’s attitude towards a particular category. As is the case with our flu shot example, objects or events are often “multiply categorizable” – that is, they can be construed in multiple ways. In cases such as these, potential categorizations or construals can be viewed as essentially competing for attention. Certainly, the accessibility of a particular category (injection versus immunization) will influence whether that category will be brought to bear in the construal process. However, another potential determinant of the use of one category over another is the accessibility of a person’s attitude towards that category – in other words, how attitude-evoking the category (injection versus immunization) is.

In our flu shot example, the person who is anxious about getting a shot may have a highly accessible negative attitude toward one of the potential categorizations of that object (injection). This person may have a negative attitude toward the fact that a flu shot involves having a metal needle painfully pierce his skin. Because his negative attitude towards injections (one potential categorization) is so accessible, “injection” is the category that dominates the construal process. Although both “immunization” and “injection” may receive some degree of activation upon the individual’s consideration of the flu shot, the attitude-evoking nature of the “injection” categorization calls attention to this construal. The person who is relaxed about the shot, on the other hand, might have a highly accessible positive attitude toward another potential categorization – the fact that the shot will immunize her against future sickness. Here, because it is attitude-evoking, “immunization” is the category that dominates the construal process.

To elaborate on our reasoning regarding the accessibility of attitudes toward the competing categorizations, it is useful to consider previous research concerning the effects of attitude accessibility on attention and categorization. Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio (1992) found that more attitude-evoking objects (either measured via the latency of participants’ responses to an attitude query or manipulated via attitude rehearsal) attracted attention when presented in the visual field. Given a brief presentation of an array of six objects, objects towards which participants had more accessible attitudes were more likely to be noticed. Moreover, even when these attitude-evoking objects were presented as distracters, they were more likely to be incidentally noticed and to interfere with participants’ performance on a visual search task.

Based on these results, Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio made the argument that if an object’s related evaluation is particularly accessible, then that evaluation is likely to be activated at an early stage in the processing of the visual information. Because this early attitudinal activation signals hedonic significance, visual attention is more likely to be directed toward that object, and that object is thus more likely to be noticed (even, as Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio (1992) found, when that object appears in an area of the visual field participants are explicitly instructed to ignore). Put another way, their findings suggest that attitudes (especially accessible ones) have a functional value in directing attention. People are more likely to attend to and notice objects they care about – that is, objects that are hedonically relevant to them.

Given that attitude-evoking objects attract visual attention, might not attitude-evoking categories attract cognitive attention when they receive some degree of activation from memory? Smith, Fazio, and Cejka (1996) addressed this question. Drawing a parallel between multiple visual objects and multiple cognitive categories (or construals), Smith et al. (1996) generated a series of triads consisting of a target (e.g., yogurt) and two potential categorizations of that target (e.g., dairy product, health food). Just as an object in the visual field draws attention if it is attitude-evoking, they hypothesized that a category in memory is more likely to draw cognitive attention if the category is attitude-evoking. As a result, the category should be more likely to govern consideration of the target.

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