



## Social projection to liked and disliked targets: The role of perceived similarity<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Perceived similarity accounts for much of the effect of target valence on projection.
- Target valence does influence projection when targets are also perceived as similar.
- Positive mood increases the amount of projection (relative to stereotyping) for liked targets.
- Positive mood increases the amount of stereotyping (relative to projection) for disliked targets.

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### ABSTRACT

Some accounts of social projection view it as an essentially cognitive phenomenon, prompted by the need for a relatively low-effort way to arrive at inferences about others. Other accounts argue that projection is motivated by self-enhancement and self-protection concerns. This investigation evaluates these accounts by having participants make inferences about liked and disliked real-world targets. In Studies 1 and 2, participants projected more to liked than disliked targets, supporting a motivational account; however, when perceived similarity was accounted for, this difference disappeared, supporting the cognitive account. In Study 3 participants made inferences about targets who varied along both the valence and similarity dimensions; there was greater projection to all similar targets, but target valence only influenced projection if the targets were also seen as similar. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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When making social inferences, we have a host of possible strategies at our disposal. Some are relatively laborious, requiring judgments based on perceiving and interpreting information available in the situation; other options are usually less time- and labor-intensive, and allow us to make inferences based on more automatic processes. The focus of this investigation is the widely used technique of projection. In particular, we are concerned with the way in which target valence (whether the target is liked or disliked) affects the use of projection to individual real-world targets. In examining this issue, we will organize the paper around one basic question: why would target valence matter to the use of projection?

### 1. Why project?

Social projection generally refers to “the assignment of one’s own characteristics, attitudes, and behavioral preferences to other people or social groups” (Machunsky, Toma, Yzerbyt, & Corneille, 2014; p. 1).

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Considerable evidence attests to the ubiquity of projection defined in this way (see Nickerson, 1999), and explanations for such projection tend to fall into two broad categories. As described by Machunsky et al. (2014), some approaches can be described as *cognition-based*, and others as essentially *motivational*. Cognition-based accounts generally assume that the purpose of projection is to achieve a reasonably accurate inference about another person or group. It is essentially a tool for arriving at knowledge about others. According to this account, when making an inference about others, we are likely to begin with the knowledge most available to us—self-knowledge—and use this to construct an initial model of the target. This initial model may (or may not) then be modified by more specific information about the situation or the target (Krueger, 2007; Nickerson, 1999). The logic of this account is that most of the time it is a useful rule of thumb to assume that others are like us.

Considerable evidence supports the cognition-based view (see Krueger, 2007; Robbins & Krueger, 2005), and the vast preponderance of it has come from investigations in which the target is relatively neutral. Often this has meant that the target is completely hypothetical, often described in scenarios or vignettes, and about whom very little

is known (e.g., Ames, 2004a; Kawada, Oettingen, Gollwitzer, & Bargh, 2004; Sherman, Chassin, Presson, & Agostinelli, 1984). In almost all cases the targets are presented in a way that makes them neither especially liked nor disliked. Thus, the participants' positive or negative feelings about the target are irrelevant—there are no such feelings.

In the real world, of course, targets are often the subject of evaluative judgments; they are liked or disliked, loved or hated, venerated or tolerated. It seems entirely possible that in such cases projection (or its absence) may not result entirely from a desire for accuracy, but may be motivated by more hedonistic concerns. Thus, motivational accounts offer other reasons for projection. In general, such accounts assert that observers project (or refrain from projecting) in order to maximize their connectedness to positively valenced targets and minimize the connection to disliked or devalued ones. For example, Marks, Miller, and Maruyama (1981) proposed a self-enhancement explanation for the tendency to project more to physically attractive targets. Machunsky et al. (2014) have proposed a motivational account of social projection in which such projection regulates feelings of connectedness to others by decreasing the psychological distance to positively valenced targets and maintaining distance from negatively valenced targets. In a related vein, Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Schimel (1999) have argued that mortality salience can also activate a desire for connectedness to others, and that social projection can fulfill this desire.

## 2. Evaluating the two accounts

To date, support for the motivational account has relied upon a relatively small set of studies comparing the amount of projection that occurs for targets who are in some way positively or negatively valenced. In some cases the valence of novel targets was manipulated (Machunsky et al., 2014; Marks et al., 1981; Toma, Yzerbyt, & Corneille, 2010). In another, Weller and Watson (2009) examined projection to liked and disliked real-world targets (friends and “foes” nominated by the participants). In all of these cases, projection was greater for the liked targets. Thus, a small but consistent set of studies supports the position that observers are generally more likely to project to a positively-valued target than a negatively-valued one. This pattern can be taken as support for the motivational view.

At first blush, it would appear that findings such as these are not amenable to an information-processing explanation. If projection is a valid inference strategy for liked targets, why not disliked targets? Except for situations in which a disliked target is wildly and obviously dissimilar, it would seem that projection would almost always be a valid inference strategy. In the normal course of events the people we encounter, both liked and disliked, are likely to have more similarities with us than dissimilarities. Thus, projection should occur even for disliked targets (see Robbins & Krueger, 2005, p. 40–41). The cognitive account of projection therefore would seem ill-suited for explaining the results that have been found for valenced targets.

However, the cognitive account might be able to explain these findings if it is assumed that observers view positively valenced targets as more similar than the negatively valenced targets. If that is the case, then it may simply be that the positively valenced targets are seen as more appropriate targets for the use of an inference strategy like projection, and that this accounts for the relative absence of projection to disliked targets. There is considerable evidence that liking and perceived similarity do indeed covary (e.g., Byrne, 1961; Fehr, 2008). In fact, such a similarity-based judgment about the proper inference strategy is the heart of Ames' (2004a, 2004b) similarity-contingency model (SCM). This model focuses on two inference strategies—projection and stereotyping—and specifies when each will be used. According to the SCM, people make initial subjective judgments about how similar they are to any given target, and use this to determine the preferred inference strategy. When they perceive high similarity to a target, they are more likely to rely on projection; when they perceive low similarity

they are more likely to rely on stereotyping. In essence, perceptions of similarity signal which strategy is more likely to yield accurate assessments; the greater the similarity, the more likely it is that using the self as a template will be useful.

The SCM also highlights an important distinction that needs to be drawn. The term “similarity” is frequently employed in discussions of projection, but it is used in a variety of ways. Measures of projection—usually assessed for specific traits, thoughts, or values—can be said to represent a type of similarity. By virtue of imputing one's characteristics to others, we create a representation of the other that resembles our own. In contrast, “perceived similarity” refers to the holistic subjective perception that a target is similar. This global subjective impression is independent of the actual projection to the target of specific internal states, beliefs, values, and traits. (Of course, the two variables are likely to be correlated.) The SCM explicitly argues that the holistic “perceived similarity” construct determines the likelihood of projection of specific characteristics. This distinction between perceived similarity and projection is one made by other researchers as well (e.g., Machunsky et al., 2014; Weller & Watson, 2009).

The cognitive account's explanation of differential projection to valenced targets relies on the argument that it is perceived similarity—not valence—that is prompting the projection. At the present time, however, it is difficult to determine whether perceived similarity is responsible for the apparent effects of target valence on projection. In some of the relevant investigations, a direct assessment of perceived similarity was not made (e.g., Machunsky et al., 2014; Toma et al., 2010). In others, such an assessment was made but its mediating effect was not tested (e.g., Marks et al., 1981; Weller & Watson, 2009). Thus, it is possible that perceived similarity is responsible for the apparent effect of target valence on projection. As a result, there would be much value in research that examines the effect of target valence on projection while also assessing any differences in perceived similarity that might accompany target valence. That is the primary goal of the present investigation.

## 3. Present research

The general approach taken in the following studies is to have observers make inferences about liked and disliked targets, and to assess the degree of projection toward such targets. Importantly, perceived similarity to the targets will also be assessed. Thus, if simple effects of target valence on projection are found, it will then be possible to determine whether such effects persist when perceived similarity is controlled. In addition, and in contrast to most prior research, these studies will examine the use of projection to real-life targets. Most previous work has not used such real-life targets, instead using hypothetical individuals presented via scenario or still photographs. The benefit of that approach is added experimental control, but it comes at a cost of realism and generalizability. In addition, it is appropriate to ask whether projection—or any heuristic process—is as likely to be employed with real-world targets who are well-known. In such cases, the perceiver may possess enough information to render projection and stereotyping unnecessary. Ames (2005) has made this point, arguing that as behavioral evidence accumulates, the need for heuristic strategies will decline.

In addition, almost all prior research on target valence has employed an approach in which projection to the target is assessed in isolation; that is, no alternative inference processes are considered and assessed. Thus, because projection does not have to statistically “compete” with other possible processes, prior findings may overstate the amount of projection that occurs. In this investigation we employ a technique developed by Ames (2004a) in which both projection to and stereotyping of a target are simultaneously assessed, thus providing a somewhat more stringent assessment of each process. In Studies 1 and 2, we had participants nominate real-world targets from their lives (one liked; one disliked), and make inferences about each one. In Study 3,

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