

Abstract

This dissertation was initiated to test a connectionist model for group perception biases (Van Rooy, Van Overwalle, Vanhooissen, Labiouse & French, 2003). Specifically, the aim was to test if this neurally inspired model would be capable of accurately explaining and predicting the accentuation effect, the illusory correlation effect and the self anchoring effect.

In a replication of typical accentuation experiments and consistent with earlier theories, it was found that attitude positions expressed in behavioral statements were accentuated in a correlated condition (where the attitude position and the statements' source were correlated) as compared to an uncorrelated condition (with uncorrelated attitude position and source), and that memory for these attitude positions was also better (as measured by correct assignment of the original statements to their source). In contrast, as predicted by the connectionist model, behavioral (episodic) memory in this assignment task (as measured by decoys with reversed attitudinal position) and free recall of behavioral information showed better performance in the uncorrelated condition than in the correlated condition. Alternative models of accentuation predict the typical effect accurately, but do not make predictions about behavioral (episodic) memory, making the connectionist model the only satisfactory theory to account for all observed effects.

The results of two illusory correlation-experiments demonstrated that the distinctiveness of the undesirable minority-group behavior is not a crucial factor in creating the illusion, and that the illusion occurs when memory for behavioral information is enhanced rather than impaired. This suggests that illusory correlation is not directly related to differential memory as earlier distinctiveness or exemplar accounts suggested. In contrast to these earlier theories, the connectionist approach provides a parsimonious and elegant explanation for all the data, including the typical evaluative bias in which smaller groups are evaluated less favorable, and the memory effects found in free recall and assignment tasks (better behavioral memory for smaller groups and for undesirable behaviors).

Finally, the same connectionist approach is used to support the claim that ingroup favoritism is caused by self anchoring (i.e., projecting features of the self in defining the ingroup) and outgroup derogation by self competition (i.e., using opposite features of the self for defining the outgroup). In a minimal group context, this analysis accounted for all typical effects found in research including self anchoring, ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation. The present findings extend the earlier studies by exploring the role of self priming on these effects, and further demonstrate that outgroup derogation is a direct consequence of self competition rather than a result of contrasting the outgroup away from the ingroup.

After comparing the connectionist account to other theories of group perception regarding their capability of explaining all effects in the experiments, it is stated that the proposed connectionist model generally complies with the expectations, whereas other theories fail to provide a coherent framework to account for all observed effects. Moreover, the connectionist framework is the only one able to explain the three differing group perception biases using a single model.

Curriculum Vitae

Tim Vanhooissen graduated from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2000 as an experimental psychologist with a major in social psychology. Because of his interest in social cognition and passion for computers and software, Prof. Dr. Frank Van Overwalle engaged him at the Department of Personality and Social Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where he worked from January 2001 to November 2004.

As a member of the PESP-team, he conducted a series of experiments on group perception and supervised a number of students who collaborated with him as a part of their master thesis. For three years, Tim also taught a practical course of Social Psychology to second-year students at the VUB.

As a member of the Belgian Federation of Psychologists, he was the webmaster for this association during his four-year presence at the VUB. Being also a member of the Belgian Association of Psychological Sciences, he was part of the organizing committee for the BAPS 2003 Annual Meeting.

At present, Tim works at the Lessius hogeschool, where he hopes to extend his theoretical research to a more applied level, and teach students all subtleties of social psychological sciences.