

What Is Assimilation?

Part of Piaget's Adaptation Process

By Kendra Cherry

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Definition:

Assimilation is a term referring to another part of the adaptation process initially proposed by Jean Piaget. Through assimilation, we take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into our existing ideas. The process is somewhat subjective, because we tend to modify experience or information somewhat to fit in with our preexisting beliefs.

How Does It Work?

Piaget believed that there are two basic ways that we can adapt to new experiences and information.

Assimilation is the easiest method because it does not require a great deal of adjustment. Through this process, we add new information to our existing knowledge base, sometimes reinterpreting these new experiences so that they will fit in with previously existing information.

For example, let's imagine that your neighbors have a daughter who you have always known to be sweet, polite and kind. One day, you glance out your window and see the girl throwing a snowball at your car. It seems out of character and rather rude, not something you would expect from this girl. How do you interpret this new information? If you use the process of assimilation, you might dismiss the girl's behavior, believing that maybe it's something she witnessed a classmate doing and that she does not mean it to be impolite. You're not revising your opinion of the girl, you are simply adding new information to your existing knowledge.

She's still a kind child, but now you know that she also has a mischievous side to her personality.

If you were to utilize the second method of adaptation described by Piaget, the young girl's behavior might cause you to reevaluate your opinion of her. This process is what Piaget referred to as accommodation, in which old ideas are changed or even replaced based on new information.

More Examples of Assimilation

- A college student learning how to use a new computer program
- A sees a new type of dog that he's never seen before and he immediately points to the animal and says, "Dog!"
- A chef learning a new cooking technique
- A computer programmer learning a new programming language

In each of these examples, the individual is adding information to their existing schema. Remember, if new experiences cause the person to alter or completely change their existing beliefs, then it is known as accommodation

What Is Accommodation?

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Initially proposed by Jean Piaget, the term **accommodation** refers to part of the adaptation process. The process of accommodation involves altering one's existing schemas, or ideas, as a result of new information or new experiences. New schemas may also be developed during this process.

For example, a young child may have an existing schema for dogs. Dogs have four legs, so the child may automatically believe that all animals with four legs are dogs.

When the child learns that cats also have four legs, she will undergo a process of accommodation in which her existing schema for dogs will change and she will also develop a new schema for cats.

Accommodation does not just take place in children; adults also experience this as well. When experiences introduce new information or information that conflicts with existing schemas, you must accommodate this new learning in order to ensure that what's inside your head conforms to what's outside in the real world.

For example, imagine a young boy raised in a home that presents a stereotyped schema about another social group. When the young man moves away to college, he suddenly finds himself surrounded by people from this group. Through experience and real interactions with members of this group, he realizes that his existing knowledge is completely wrong. This leads to a dramatic change, or accommodation, in his beliefs about members of this social group.

Observations About the Accommodation Process

In their book *Educational Psychology* (2011), authors Tuckman and Monetti note that Piaget believed in the importance of balance between the accommodation and assimilation processes. Imitation is an important part of the learning process, but developing a stable sense of self is also essential.

Play is also critical, but children also must go through the process of assimilating and accommodating new information in order to learn.

"There must be enough accommodation to meet and adapt to new situations and enough assimilation to use one's schemata quickly and efficiently," Tuckman and Monetti suggest.

Reaching a state of equilibrium between the assimilation and accommodation processes is what helps create a sense of stability between the individual and his or her environment.

So what determines whether a new piece of information is accommodated or assimilated. In the *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology* (2008), Byrnes writes that the two processes actually work in opposition to each other. The goal of assimilation is to maintain the status quo. By assimilating information, you are keeping your existing knowledge and schemas intact and simply finding a place to store this new information. It's like buying a new book and finding a place to keep it on your bookshelves.

Accommodation, on the other hand, involves actually changing your existing knowledge of a topic.

This is like buying a new book, realizing it doesn't fit in any of your existing bookshelves, and buying a whole new shelving unit to store all of your books in. In any given situation, Byrnes suggests, either accommodation or assimilation will "win out," often depending upon what has been learned.

More Psychology Definitions: The Psychology Dictionary

References

Byrnes, J. P. (2008). Equilibration. In Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology, Volume 1. N. J. Salkind & K. Rasmussen (Eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Tuckman, B. & Monetti, D. (2011). Educational Psychology. Belmont,