

*See also* Evolutionary Psychology; Loss Aversion; Need to Belong

### Further Readings

Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology, 5*, 323–370.

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## BALANCE THEORY

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### Definition

Balance theory describes the structure of people's opinions about other individuals and objects as well as the perceived relation between them. The central notion of balance theory is that certain structures between individuals and objects are balanced, whereas other structures are imbalanced, and that balanced structures are generally preferred over imbalanced structures. Specifically, balance theory claims that imbalanced structures are associated with an uncomfortable feeling of negative affect, and that this negative feeling leads people to strive for balanced structures and to avoid imbalanced structures. An example for a balanced structure is when your best friend also likes your favorite rock band; an example for an imbalanced structure is when your best friend dislikes your favorite rock band. According to balance theory, the first case makes you feel good, whereas the second case creates an uncomfortable tension.

### Theoretical Assumptions

The original formulation of balance theory was designed to describe the pattern of relations between three individuals. Such relation patterns between three objects or individuals are often referred to as "triadic" relations. From a general perspective, a triadic relation between three individuals includes (a) the relation between a first person A and a second person O, (b) the relation between the second person O and a third person X, and (c) the relation between the first person A and the third person X (also described as A-O-X triad). In addition, it is assumed that the specific relations between two individuals can be positive (i.e., the two individuals like each other) or negative (i.e., the two individuals dislike each other). According to

balance theory, a triad is balanced when it includes either no or an even number of negative relations. In contrast, a triad is imbalanced when it includes an odd number of negative relations. For example, the resulting triad of relations between Peter, John, and Paul would be balanced if (a) Peter likes John, John likes Paul, and Peter likes Paul; (b) Peter likes John, John dislikes Paul, and Peter dislikes Paul; (c) Peter dislikes John, John likes Paul, and Peter dislikes Paul; or (d) Peter dislikes John, John dislikes Paul, and Peter likes Paul. However, the resulting triad would be imbalanced if (a) Peter dislikes John, John likes Paul, and Peter likes Paul; (b) Peter likes John, John dislikes Paul, and Peter likes Paul; (c) Peter likes John, John likes Paul, and Peter dislikes Paul; or (d) Peter dislikes John, John dislikes Paul, and Peter dislikes Paul.

Even though balance theory was originally developed to explain patterns of interpersonal relations, it has also been applied to study attitudes and opinions about objects. For example, a triad including Sarah, Alice, and country music would be balanced if Sarah likes Alice, Alice likes country music, and Sarah also likes country music. However, the resulting triad would be imbalanced if Sarah likes Alice, Alice likes country music, but Sarah dislikes country music.

Over and above these assumptions for personal sentiments, balance theory assumes that a positive relation can also result from the perception that two objects or individuals somehow belong together. Conversely, a negative relation can result from the perception that two objects or individuals do not belong together. Such kinds of relations are typically called "unit relations." Positive unit relations can result from any kind of closeness, similarity, or proximity, such as membership in the same soccer team, similar hair style, or same ethnic background. In contrast, negative unit relations can result from distance, dissimilarity, or distinctness, such as membership in different soccer teams, different hair style, or different ethnic background.

### Evidence

The distinction between balanced and imbalanced triads has been shown to have important implications for a variety of different domains. First, research has shown that the uncomfortable feeling associated with imbalanced patterns influences the formation of new attitudes. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that newly formed attitudes usually complete triadic relations in a manner such that the resulting triad is

balanced rather than imbalanced. For example, if Sarah learns that a yet unknown individual is liked by her friend Alice, Sarah will form a positive attitude toward this individual. However, if Sarah learns that the same individual is disliked by her friend Alice, Sarah will form a negative attitude toward this individual.

Second, research has demonstrated a general superiority in memory for balanced as compared to imbalanced information. For instance, people show higher accuracy in recalling balanced patterns such as “Peter likes John, John dislikes Paul, and Peter dislikes Paul.” However, people show lower accuracy in recalling imbalanced patterns such as “Peter likes John, John dislikes Paul, and Peter likes Paul.” This difference in memory performance is even more pronounced when the triad includes the perceiver (e.g., “I like John, John dislikes Paul, and I dislike Paul”).

Third, balance principles have been shown to have important implications for people’s identity and the way people feel about themselves. Research in this area has shown that mental associations between the self and a particular group, evaluations of this group, and personal evaluations of oneself typically show patterns that can be described as balanced rather than imbalanced. For instance, if a Black person has a strong mental association between the self and the category Black, and in addition shows a positive evaluation of the category Black, this person will also exhibit a positive self-evaluation (i.e., “I’m Black, Black is good, therefore I’m good”). However, if a Black person has a strong mental association between the self and the category Black, but shows a negative evaluation of the category Black, this person will likely exhibit a negative self-evaluation (i.e., “I’m Black, Black is bad, therefore I’m bad”). According to balance theory, this transfer of evaluations is due to the inherent “unit” between the self and the category Black.

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*See also* Cognitive Consistency; Cognitive Dissonance Theory

### Further Readings

- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Insko, C. A. (1984). Balance theory, the Jordan paradigm, and the Wiest tetrahedron. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 18, pp. 89–140). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

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## BARNUM EFFECT

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### Definition

The Barnum effect refers to personality descriptions that a person believes applies specifically to them (more so than to other people), despite the fact that the description is actually filled with information that applies to everyone. The effect means that people are gullible because they think the information is about them only, when in fact the information is generic.

### History and Modern Usage

The Barnum effect came from the phrase by the circus showman P. T. Barnum who claimed a “sucker” is born every minute. Psychics, horoscopes, magicians, palm readers, and crystal ball gazers make use of the Barnum effect when they convince people that their description of them is highly special and unique and could never apply to anyone else.

The Barnum effect has been studied or used in psychology in two ways. One way has been to create feedback for participants in psychological experiments who read it and believe it was created personally for them. When participants complete an intelligence or personality scale, sometimes the experimenter scores it and gives the participant his or her real score. Other times, however, the experimenter gives participants false and generic feedback to create a false sense (e.g., to give the impression they are an exceptionally good person). The reason that the feedback “works” and is seen as a unique descriptor of an individual person is because the information is, in fact, generic and could apply to anyone.

The other way that the Barnum effect has been studied is with computers that give (true) personality feedback to participants. Personality ratings given by computers have been criticized for being too general and accepted too easily. Some researchers have done experiments to see if people view actually true feedback as being any more accurate than bogus feedback. People do see actually true descriptions of themselves as more accurate than bogus feedback, but there is not much of a difference.

The Barnum effect works best for statements that are positive. People are much less likely to believe that a statement applies to them when it is a negative statement, such as “I often think of hurting people