

Perversible Figures: An Ironic Process in Perception

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Introduction

Wegner and colleagues found an ironic hyperaccessibility to thoughts subjects were instructed to suppress under conditions of high cognitive load which they called The Ironic Effect. Wegner proposed that the Ironic Process underlying this effect entails the integration of two parallel processes: an effortful cognitive process which searches for distractors, and an automatic process which monitors the occurrence of the forbidden target thought (Wegner et al., 1987).

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Study

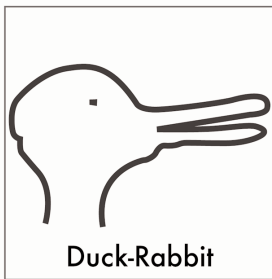
We asked the question: Is there a perceptual analogue to the Ironic Effect?

We presented subjects with one of two reversible figures, either the Duck-Rabbit ($N=48$), or the Cat-Swan ($N=40$). Subjects were given instructions to either try to see the duck (cat), try not to see the duck (cat), try to see the rabbit (swan), or try not to see the rabbit (swan).

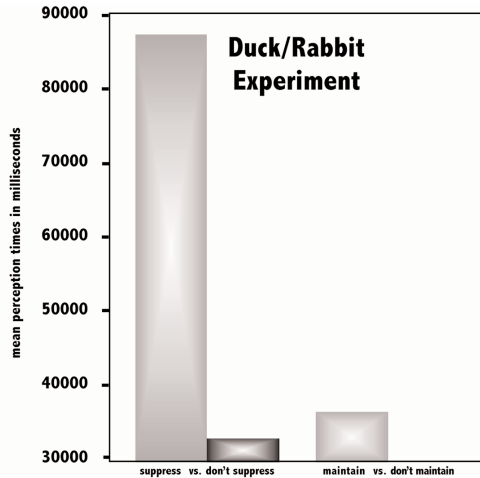
Using two computer keys, subjects recorded which construal they were perceiving during a two minute observation period.

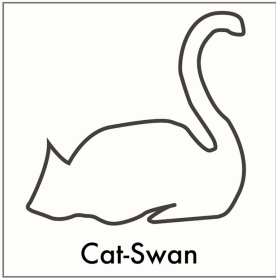
A control group of subjects were presented with the Duck-Rabbit and Cat-Swan figures ($N=16$ and $N=8$, respectively). These subjects were given the identical task as the experimental groups, however they received no instructions to suppress or to maintain a construal. Rather, they were asked simply to record which construal they were perceiving during the two minutes.

Results

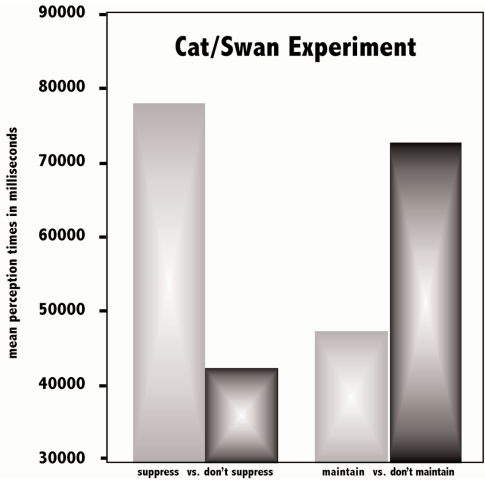


A paired samples T-test revealed significant differences between the viewing times of the Duck and the Rabbit in the Suppress condition, $t(1, 15) = 5.06, p < .001$; as well as in the Hold/Maintain condition, $t(1, 15) = 5.08, p < .001$.

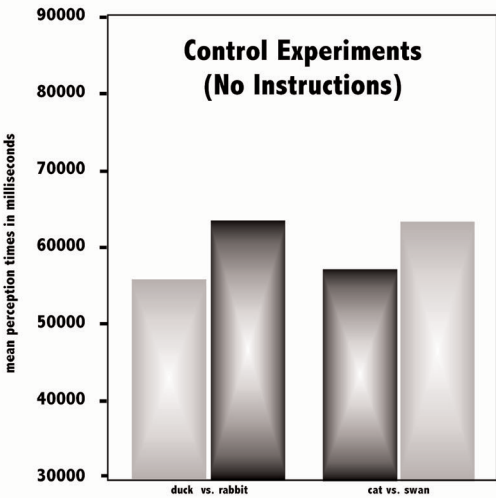




A paired samples T-test revealed significant differences between the viewing times of the Cat and the Swan in the Suppress condition, $t(1, 15) = 2.393, p < .05$; as well as in the Hold/Maintain condition, $t(1, 15) = 2.731, p < .05$.



In comparison to the control groups, in which there was no significant difference between viewing times for the two construals, the experimental subjects perceived the undesired view of the figures for significantly greater periods of time than its alternative.



Conclusions

We conclude that instructions to suppress or maintain one construal of a reversible figure creates a high perceptual load resulting in a perverse effect that appears to be the perceptual analogue of the Ironic Effect. This phenomenon has the potential to increase our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the perception of reversible figures and the Ironic Process itself.

References

Wegner, D. M., Schneider, D. J., Carter, S., & White, T. (1987). Paradoxical effects of thought suppression. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, *53*, 5-13.