I'm not a bot

By Charlie Huntington, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate Assimilation, psychologically speaking, is the act of merging new information with old information, incorporating what's new into what's old. *This page may include affiliate links; that means we earn from qualifying purchases of products. When my father and my sibling left me in my dorm room at college on a humid August morning, I was despondent for about half an hour. I looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings and felt terribly alone. Then I realized I was about to be late for my first college cross country practice.Walking out onto the field to join my new teammates was effectively the beginning of a rollercoaster of what I would now call assimilation. Being part of a sports team that gets together for several hours a day means being introduced to any number of team habits and traditions, lingo and inside jokes. By the time that first week was up, I talked and ran and looked like a runner. I even smelled like a runner, since we all used the same soap in the locker room showers.This is assimilation as a social process: entering a preexisting culture or social space and becoming a part of it, taking on its features and characteristics and traditions. What else can assimilation mean, and what do we know about it as social scientists? Let's find out. Before reading on, if you're a therapist, coach, or wellness entrepreneur, be sure to grab our free Wellness Business Growth eBook to get expert tips and free resources that will help you grow your business exponentially. Are You a Therapist, Coach, or Wellness Entrepreneur? ✓ Save hundreds of hours of time ✓ Earn more $ faster ✓ Boost your credibility ✓ Deliver high-impact content There are several meanings of the word assimilation. On a very basic level, to assimilate something means to take it in fully, often as a concept or piece of knowledge. Psychologists have used this word in two more specific ways: as a way to describe a learning process, and as a way to describe what can happen when people from one culture enter another culture (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991; Piaget, 1952). Assimilation in the second sense I described is a term often used in the context of immigrants entering a new country and facing the question of how much to join the new culture versus how much to retain their original culture and ways. At first, the mostly White sociologists and psychologists writing about this process saw it as a natural and necessary phenomenon: Anybody who came to the United States should want to adopt the values, language, and traditions of Main Street USA (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991). This, the early theorists reasoned, was the best way to avoid the kind of intergroup strife that results when cultures encounter each other. Since the United States was a melting pot, after all, it was thought that this could all happen organically, that minority groups would naturally transfer their loyalties to the ways of dominant groups. This was seen as progress at the time—a perspective that has since been called into question, many times over, because it implies that a minority group must give up its identity to successfully exist alongside a more dominant group (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991). This has led many people, and rightfully so, to characterize assimilation as something akin to the utter disappearance of an ethnic identity and all the characteristics that define it (Alba & Nee, 2003). The opposite of assimilation can be considered to be multiculturalism (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). If, in assimilation, a subgroup's identity and culture is erased as it moves into contact with a dominant culture, in multiculturalism, a subgroup's identity and culture get to coexist with and enjoy the same rights as the dominant group. True multiculturalism is difficult to achieve in a society where certain cultures and backgrounds hold more privilege and access to power; for the most part, people who do not possess the characteristics of the majority or dominant group are going to feel pressure to conform. The short answer to this question is that different cultures are constantly coming into contact with each other—on an individual scale, a societal scale, and everything in between. Every time this kind of contact occurs, there is the possibility of one group assimilating into the other or at least of some degree of assimilation taking place.Here in the United States, we have many examples of wholesale assimilation in our history. For example, Whiteness as a racial category originally only applied to people from Western Europe, or even more specifically from England itself (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991). The many Irish people who immigrated to the United States in the 19th century were not considered to be White until many years had passed and they had come to resemble, in language and accent and customs, the light-skinned occupants of the United States who had been here longer. The same can be said of later settlers from elsewhere in Europe, such as Italian people and ethnically Jewish people.This highlights a primary driver of assimilation, another reason why it is an essential concept to understand: The more one is able to assimilate, the more one can access the rights and privileges of the group one is joining. This was a bargain that many light-skinned immigrants to the United States were willing to make, even as they lost touch with their heritage. But what about the black- and brown-skinned arrivals, willing or enslaved, who have reached our shores either recently or long ago? Their ability to assimilate into mainstream American culture is more limited. It is this kind of sociological analysis of who can claim what identity in the United States for which the concept of assimilation is very helpful. Some psychologists have been very interested in how teenagers assimilate (e.g., Greenman & Xie, 2008). Adolescents in migrant or immigrant families are often the bridge between cultures, having to balance being competent in at least two cultures—the one they moved away from and the one they have moved into. For adolescents, becoming more assimilated seems to hold both advantages and disadvantages. For example, they may experience more academic success, but they may also start to engage in more risky behaviors (Greenman & Xie, 2008). This tells us that there is something potentially limiting, but also protective, about remaining deeply connected to one's original culture.Another population of interest to sociologists and psychologists who study assimilation is the queer community. For example, the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States made a powerful cultural institution—marriage—accessible to many people for the first time. This opened up a complex question for many nonheterosexual people: To what extent is getting married an act of assimilation (Bernstein, 2018)? The fear articulated by many members of the community was that by entering into such a traditional (and traditionally heterosexual) arrangement such as marriage, they would lose some of the beautiful otherness of queer relationships—all the ways that nonheterosexual romantic relationships subvert some of the unhealthy aspects of traditional heterosexual unions. As noted above, the theory around assimilation started from the perspective that it would be a beneficial process for all parties, but it has since come to recognize that assimilation is far more complex, with advantages and disadvantages that vary based on context (Greenman & Xie, 2008). One example of how social scientists now differentiate among pathways or types of assimilation is Portes and Zhou (1993)'s theory of segmented assimilation. This theory is based on the notion that U.S. culture is inherently unequal: Some people have access to layers of society that other people simply won't be able to join.For this reason, people can assimilate at any of several levels. To make Portes and Zhou's theory more concrete, let's consider three potential immigrants to the United States: a White professor of history from Belgium, a migrant farm worker from Mexico, and a Chinese small business owner. The history professor may be able to engage in assimilation as it was first conceived; by virtue of her education, prior opportunities to learn English, and skin color, they can probably join the American middle class in their lifetime. By contrast, the migrant from Mexico may be seen simply as cheap labor, and a lack of education and exposure to English may cause that person to assimilate, whether they want to or not, into a culture of poverty in the United States. As for the Chinese business owner, imagine that they set up shop in Chinatown in a major city. In this case, they may assimilate only in the sense of living in the United States, remaining immersed in their home culture and experiencing some degree of economic mobility by virtue of living among other Chinese immigrants.Portes and Zhou (1993) point out that each of these is a story of assimilation, but into different sectors of American society. Each pathway is one of assimilation, to some degree, and each pathway comes with both benefits and drawbacks. For example, the children of the migrant farmworker from Mexico may have limited access to educational opportunities in the United States, but they may also avoid becoming assimilated into the more sexually permissive mainstream U.S. culture, meaning they are insulated from sexual risks (Ebin et al., 2001). Psychology research has found that some people who fit securely into the dominant culture of a society find the possibility that newcomers will not assimilate into their culture threatening (Paxton & Mughan, 2006). This seems to center on concerns that people will not adopt the default language of the dominant culture, will not seek citizenship, and will be less productive members of society. This pattern has been called realistic group conflict theory, and it may explain why anti-immigrant sentiment increases when a country experiences economic challenges (Alba & Nee, 2003). Economic insecurity aside, assimilation seems to reassure people in the dominant cultural positions that their own values and traditions are not under threat (Alba & Nee, 2003). Seeing as people have been immigrating to the United States for hundreds of years but anti-immigrant sentiment has not really diminished, this desire for assimilation to happen seems to be a pretty innate and enduring psychological phenomenon. Unfortunately, even if people do work to actively assimilate into a new culture, the people who were already there may be slow to see them as truly culturally similar (Schachter, 2016). In other words, research has found that people can and do adopt the customs of the places they move to, but that does not guarantee that they will be treated as having assimilated. Scholars who push back on assimilation as a wholly positive intercultural process point out that while assimilation offers benefits to all parties, so does multiculturalism (Berry, 2001). The culture that an immigrant brings with them to their new home has just as much to offer as the new culture they are entering. While the contact between the groups may feel simpler and safer to the residents of the country if the immigrants are working to assimilate, the residents are also missing out on an opportunity to appreciate another culture and perhaps expand their own customs and traditions too. The process of assimilation itself is very gradual (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991). One does not adopt the social style, culture, and values of another society overnight. For most people who choose to assimilate into another culture, the transition takes a long time and consists of both practical things such as changing what one eats, wears, and does in one's leisure time to more esoteric things like interacting with other people through a new set of values and priorities. Whether and how people should assimilate into a mainstream culture has often been the focus of intense political scrutiny and formal policy (Ellinghaus, 2009). For example, in the United States, regulations around interracial marriage were a matter of great concern to many state legislatures for decades, and it took a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 1967 to overturn the many nationwide prohibitions against people marrying across race and ethnic categories. This is an example of how official policy can discourage assimilation, but examples abound of institutional measures that promote assimilation too, such as when legal documents or health services are only available in English. Thus far, I've focused on assimilation as a cultural phenomenon, but the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget used this term in a different way. Piaget (1952) described parallel processes of assimilation and accommodation. In this definition, assimilation means fitting something new into a preexisting model. For example, if you attend a meeting at work with all new colleagues for the first time, you might readily assume that the person at the head of the table has the most power and is in charge—or you might assume that the oldest person in the room is in charge, or the oldest White person, and so on. If you then learn that the person running the meeting does not fit any of your expectations, you may have to accommodate this new reality, or change your preexisting beliefs. Want to learn more? Check out these articles: If you'd like to keep learning more, here are a few books that you might be interested in. Assimilation is a controversial topic and an essential one to understand if you are interested in how different cultures intersect with each other. If you would like to know more about assimilation, I recommend watching this video: Alba, R. D., & Nee, V. (2003). Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration. Harvard University Press.Bernstein, M. (2018). Same-sex marriage and the assimilationist dilemma: A research agenda on marriage equality and the future of LGBTQ activism, politics, communities, and identities. Journal of Homosexuality, 65(14), 1941–1956.Berry, J. W. (2001). A psychology of immigration. Journal of Social Issues, 57(3), 615–631.Ebin, V. J., Sneed, C. D., Morisky, D. E., Rotheram-Borus, M. J., Magnusson, A. M., & Malotte, C. K. (2001). Acculturation and interrelationships between problem and health-promoting behaviors among Latino adolescents. Journal of Adolescent Health, 28(1), 62–72.Ellinghaus, K. (2009). Biological absorption and genocide: A comparison of Indigenous assimilation policies in the United States and Australia. Genocide Studies and Prevention, 4(1), 59–79.Greenman, E., & Xie, Y. (2008). Is assimilation theory dead? The effect of assimilation on adolescent well-being. Social Science Research, 37(1), 109–137.Hornsey, M. J., & Hogg, M. A. (2000). Assimilation and diversity: An integrative model of subgroup relations. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 4(2), 143–156.Moghaddam, F. M., & Solliday, E. A. (1991). "Balanced multiculturalism" and the challenge of peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies. Psychology and Developing Societies, 3(1), 51–72.Paxton, P., & Mughan, A. (2006). What's to fear from immigrants? Creating an assimilationist threat scale. Political Psychology, 27(4), 549–568.Piaget, J. (1952), The origins of intelligence in children. International Universities Press.Portes, A., & Zhou, M. (1993). The new second generation: Segmented assimilation and its variants. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 530(1), 74–96.Schachter, A. (2016). From "different" to "similar" an experimental approach to understanding assimilation. American Sociological Review, 81(5), 981–1013. Assimilation is the cognitive process of making new information fit in with your existing understanding of the world. Essentially, with assimilation, when you encounter something new, you process and make sense of it by relating it to things you already know. There are many benefits of adapting to the world around you, such as through assimilation, which includes building increased resilience. Keep reading to learn more about how assimilation works and examples of this process. Assimilation refers to a 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 experiences or information to fit our pre-existing beliefs. In assimilation, children make sense of the world by applying what they already know. It involves fitting reality and what they experience into their current cognitive structure. A child's understanding of how the world works, therefore, filters and influences how they interpret reality. In early childhood, children are constantly assimilating new information and experiences into their existing knowledge about the world. However, this process does not end there. As people encounter new things and interpret these experiences throughout life, they make both small and large adjustments to their existing ideas of the world around them. Assimilation plays an important role in how we learn about the world around us, both in childhood and in our adult life. Piaget believed that there are two basic ways that we can adapt to new experiences and information: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation New information is added to existing knowledge Schemas remain the same Fits into current interpretation of reality Accommodation New information changes or replaces existing knowledge New schemas may develop Transforms current interpretation of reality Assimilation is the easiest adaptation method because it does not require a lot of adjustment. Through this process, we add new information to our existing knowledge base, sometimes reinterpreting new experiences so they will fit in with existing information. For example, imagine your neighbors have a child you have always known to be sweet, polite, and kind. One day, you glance out your window and see the child throwing a snowball at your car. It seems out of character and rather rude. How do you interpret this new information? If you use the process of assimilation, you might dismiss the child's behavior, believing that it's something they witnessed a classmate doing and they do not mean to be impolite. You're not revising your opinion of the child during assimilation; you are simply adding new information to your existing knowledge. The child is still kind, but now you know they also have a mischievous side to their personality. If you were to utilize the accommodation method of adaptation described by Piaget, the young child's behavior might cause you to reevaluate your opinion of them. With accommodation, old ideas are changed or even replaced based on new information. Assimilation and accommodation work in tandem as part of the learning process. Some information is incorporated into our existing schemas through the process of assimilation, while other information leads to the development of new schemas or total transformations of existing ideas through the process of accommodation. Piaget also believed that as children learn, they strike a balance between the use of assimilation and accommodation. This process, known as equilibration, allows children to find a balance between applying their existing knowledge and adapting their behavior to new information. According to Piaget, the learning process involves the following: Assimilation: Attempting to interpret new information within the framework of existing knowledge Accommodation: Making small changes to that knowledge to cope with things that don't fit those existing frameworks Equilibration: Eventually adjusting existing schemas or forming new ones to adjust to a new understanding Assimilation and accommodation are complementary learning processes that play a role at each stage of cognitive development. During the sensorimotor stage, for example, some information is assimilated, while some experiences must be accommodated. It is through these processes that infants, children, and adolescents gain new knowledge and progress through the stages of development. Piaget did not believe that children just passively take in information. He argued that they actively try to make sense of the world, constantly forming new ideas and experimenting with those ideas. Examples of assimilation include: A child sees a new breed of dog they've never seen before and immediately points to it and says, "Dog!"A chef learns a new cooking techniqueA computer programmer learns a new programming language Another common example would be how children learn about different types of animals. A child might begin with a schema for a dog, which in the child's mind, is a small, four-legged animal. When the child encounters a horse, they might assimilate this information and immediately call the animal a dog. The process of accommodation then allows the child to adapt the existing schema to incorporate the knowledge that some four-legged animals are horses. As the child encounters new information in the world, it can be assimilated or accommodated into this existing schema. 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. Assimilation can be viewed as a mental shortcut that lets us process and categorize massive amounts of information at one time. It plays a significant role in allowing humans to adapt to and learn about their environment—especially during childhood when we're constantly learning new things. Of course, assimilation can have its drawbacks. There are times when new information doesn't fit neatly into an existing category or schema in our minds. This may lead to errors in judgment. An example would be a child calling a skunk a "kitty." However, when the child is taught that this animal is, in fact, a skunk, the animal will be removed from their existing cat schema and enter a new mental category. Assimilation helps us adapt to the world around us. It enhances our knowledge by using past experiences to interpret new information. Assimilation also works in tandem with accommodation, giving us a more complete and factual picture when new data is received. Understanding assimilation also helps us understand how we learn and process information. It also makes it easier to see how judgment errors can sometimes be made based on existing schemas. How did you come to know what you know? According to some psychologists, we might know what we know because of the processes of assimilation and accommodation. These fairly common words have other meanings - assimilation is often associated with cultural integration and accommodation is associated with finding a place to sleep at night! But for this blog post, we're going to talk about these terms as they relate to developmental psychology. Assimilation and accommodation describe two different processes that describe how we come to "know what we know." They both fall under the umbrella term "adaptation." Adaptation is the process of changing schema with new information. Jean Piaget first introduced these terms as he conducted work on cognitive structures and cognitive development. So let me ask you again: How did you come to know what you know? This is a big question, and maybe something you've never thought about. The answer might seem simple: at one point or another, you learned something and stored it in your brain. When you want to grab information out of your brain, it seems to pop up out of nowhere. If you can't find the information you are looking for, you might turn to outside sources to learn more: Google, YouTube, a friend, etc. But the way that you learn and store new information may look different than a friend's. It may look different from someone who had access to different experiences! When psychologists look at the way that we learn new things, they find a certain amount of importance in the things that we have learned before, and how we connect new information to what we already know. Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist known for his Theory of Cognitive Development. Throughout his career, he observed babies and young children as their brains developed and they acquired new information. Children are not born with the ability to work out problems in their heads, weigh the pros and cons of a situation, or even understand that their mother exists, even when she's not in the room. Piaget observed that children acquire these skills in stages, which he later titled the "Stages of Cognitive Development." There are a few concepts within Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development that suggest how we continue to build and grow knowledge. One of these concepts is that of the "schema." Modern psychologists use the analogy of an index card to describe the schema. Schema are units of knowledge that can be used to organize information and respond appropriately to stimuli. Each schemata in a child or adult's brain may represent a concept, person, word, etc. Within the schemata is information about how to interpret that concept and how to link it to other schemas in the brain. In addition to index cards, psychologists use the term "building blocks" to describe schema. Here is an example. A baby has a schemata for "mother" or "mama." As they build that schemata, they may include information about the mother's face, feel, or voice. They know that they can get milk from their mother. They learn how to say the word "mama," but may not know to use it to only address one particular woman who is their mother. Jean Piaget believed that babies develop schema in the earliest stage of their development: the sensorimotor stage. Have you ever seen a baby address another woman as "mother" or ask them for milk? This is a baby still building the correct schemata for "mother." They have learned information but may have not organized that information correctly yet. As they learn about aunts, uncles, sisters, or cousins, they will start to build schema for each of these people, as well as a schemata for the concept of a stranger. The schemata you have for "stranger" may be influenced by lessons you have learned, experiences you have had, and other information relating to this concept. Now that I have explained the "building blocks" for assimilation and accommodation, let's talk about these two processes and how they build and shape schema. Building blocks can be swapped out, changed, or adjusted to build a stronger structure. The information on index cards can be erased, new information can be added, or the index card itself can be placed in a more appropriate file cabinet. Piaget identified these cognitive processes as adaptation. Our perceptions may be adjusted with new information. As a young child, you have a very egocentric thought process. You believe you are the star, the main character, the center of the universe. As you learn that this is not the case, you have to adjust the way that you have perceived a lot of information. Of course, this is just one example. Adaptation can be as simple as changing your opinion on a fast-food chain when you learn that their ethics don't match yours. Adaptation includes both assimilation and accommodation, processes that change schema with new information. The amount that these schema are changed will depend on which process the mind is using. Let's talk about assimilation first. Assimilation occurs when new information adds to what we already know about a concept. The new information may be added to the schema, like making an extra note on an index card, but does not change much about the rest of the schema. You can identify a "cat." Your family has a calico cat that is orange, black, and white. That schemata is already in place, and it includes information about not pulling the cat's tail, petting the cat gently, and that the cat does not eat "people food." Then, you and your parents read a picture book. In the book is a picture of a cat, but it looks nothing like your cat! Instead of a calico pattern of orange, black, and white, it is an all-grey cat. Maybe it's a hairless cat. Rather than warping your entire idea of what a cat is and what a cat does, you add the new information to your schema. Cats can be one plain color, or they can have three different colors in a specific pattern. As you continue to learn about cats, you can identify a tortoiseshell cat, a tabby cat, or even "big cats" like lions and tigers. This is assimilation of new information, adding or "expanding" previously developed schema. Here's another example of assimilation. You are a computer programmer, with knowledge of HTML and CSS. As you take more courses on programming, you learn new languages: Python, Java, PHP. As you assimilate this information, you expand your schema of "computer programming." You have access to more information as you attempt to solve problems within computer programming. Assimilation may be viewed as an easy or natural process. Accommodation, for example, is a little more complicated. Building schema is not always a perfect process. You can probably recall a time when you had to "rewind" what you had learned about something and relearn it. You developed certain perceptions of the world, but those perceptions did not always explain the reality in front of you. By changing your perception, you were able to see things in a more clear light. This is accommodation. When you learn new information that challenges schema that has already been built, you may have to dismantle the schema you have and develop new schema to better accommodate this new information. Think of erasing a few notes on an index card, and then grabbing another index card so you can better organize the information that you have. One classic example of accommodation involves cats and dogs. You are raised with one calico cat, and you know that it is fluffy and has four legs. When you visit your aunt's house, you encounter a different fluffy, four-legged creature. You pull from your schema and identify the animal as a cat. Not quite - you are told that the fluffy, four-legged creature is a dog. You have to change what you thought you knew about fluffy, four-legged creatures. Cats are no longer identified solely on these characteristics. Information present in the "cat" schema is now given its own schema: fluffy, four-legged animals. As you come across more animals that are fluffy and have four legs, you build a schema for "dog," "horse," "guinea pig," etc. Here's another example of accommodation. As a child, you form a schema for a particular group of people. These people are seen as untrustworthy, greedy, and downright evil. You learned to become scared of these people. Then, much later in life, you are forced to work with people who belong to that group. You interact with them. As you learn more about them, you start to see that the information you had been given was not entirely accurate. You have to rework your schema for this group of people to accommodate the complexities within the group. You may also rework the schema for the people who taught you to not trust this group in the first place. Our cognitive development does not end when we are children or teenagers. We have the potential to build, organize, and rework the information in front of us every day. These processes can be uncomfortable, especially as we realize that we have been seeing things "incorrectly" for a number of years. This discomfort is normal. Accommodation is normal. Assimilation is normal. They are reminders that you are still capable of growth and change. The work on discovering how we take in new information did not stop with Jean Piaget. In more recent years, psychologists have begun to uncover a process in which our entire brain structure changes with new information. That process? It's called neuroplasticity. And if you currently believe that skills are "fixed" or our brains stop changing at a young age, you've got to read about neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity doesn't see the way we store information as index cards or file cabinets, although that is a great metaphor for the organization of that information. Instead, neuroplasticity looks at the brain as the web of synapses that it is. The connections between these synapses are like the notes on index cards. And as we learn new information, practice skills, and endure new experiences, those synapses move and change. This is important to know because growth is possible. Change is possible. Assimilation and accommodation don't end at a young age. It is possible to teach an old dog new tricks, as the old saying goes! Keep reading, keep learning, and keep trying new things. Your brain will respond and what is possible will continue to expand. In the realm of psychology, assimilation refers to the cognitive process by which individuals integrate new information and experiences into their existing frameworks of understanding. This concept is pivotal in the study of cognitive development, as it helps explain how humans perceive and adapt to their ever-changing environment. The history of assimilation traces back to the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who introduced the term as part of his influential theory of cognitive development. Piaget posited that assimilation, along with accommodation, is essential for the cognitive growth of children. Examples of assimilation abound in everyday life, from learning new words and applying them in proper context, to incorporating novel cultural practices into one's lifestyle. Understanding assimilation is crucial for educators, psychologists, and anyone interested in the mechanisms of learning and adaptation. Definition Assimilation, in psychology, is the process of integrating new information and experiences into our existing knowledge. It helps us learn and adapt to our surroundings by fitting new things into what we already know. It's about how we make sense of the world and shape our beliefs and values based on our experiences. History History The concept of assimilation has its origins in the field of psychology, specifically in the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget in the 20th century. Piaget is widely regarded as one of the key figures in the development of cognitive psychology and his theories on assimilation have had a significant impact on our understanding of learning and intelligence. Piaget's interest in cognitive development led him to conduct extensive observational studies of children. Through these studies, he proposed that human beings have a natural inclination to integrate new information and experiences into their existing frameworks. This process, which he called assimilation, is essential for learning and the growth of intelligence. Piaget's theory suggested that when individuals encounter unfamiliar information, they attempt to make sense of it by fitting it into their pre-existing schemas or mental structures. This process of assimilation allows individuals to incorporate new knowledge and experiences into their existing understanding of the world. Piaget's insights revolutionized our understanding of how children learn and paved the way for a more developmental approach to education. His work emphasized the importance of considering the learner's cultural and cognitive background when designing educational experiences. By tailoring instruction to the learner's existing knowledge base, educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment. Significant events and studies have contributed to the evolution of the concept of assimilation. Piaget's own research, which involved observing and interacting with children, provided a foundation for understanding the cognitive processes involved in assimilation. Additionally, subsequent research in the field of cognitive psychology has further refined our understanding of assimilation and its role in learning and problem-solving. Examples To better understand the concept of assimilation, let's consider the example of a person learning to drive a car. Initially, a beginner driver might have a schema for driving that includes only the basics, such as accelerating, braking, and steering. When they encounter a new situation on the road, such as merging onto a busy highway, they may try to assimilate this information into their existing schema by using the same techniques they would use on a regular road. However, as they gain more experience and receive guidance from a driving instructor or more experienced drivers, they learn to differentiate between different driving scenarios and adapt their driving techniques accordingly. They refine their schema to accommodate new information, such as using turn signals, adjusting speed, and checking blind spots when merging onto a highway. This example demonstrates how assimilation allows individuals to apply their existing knowledge and skills to new situations, while also adjusting and refining their understanding as they encounter different driving scenarios. Several related concepts, such as accommodation, adaptation, and cognitive equilibrium, play integral roles in understanding the broader implications of assimilation within the field of psychology. Accommodation refers to the process of modifying existing cognitive structures in response to new information, complementing assimilation's incorporation of experiences into extant frameworks. In other words, while assimilation involves fitting new information into existing mental frameworks, accommodation involves changing those mental frameworks to accommodate the new information. Adaptation, on the other hand, is a broader term that encompasses both assimilation and accommodation as mechanisms by which individuals interact with and adjust to their environments. It refers to the overall process of psychological growth and development as individuals adapt to the demands and challenges of their surroundings. Assimilation and accommodation are two specific processes within adaptation that work together to ensure that individuals effectively engage with and make sense of their experiences. Cognitive equilibrium represents a state of balance between assimilation and accommodation. It is a state in which individuals effectively manage and integrate new information, maintaining psychological stability. In this state, individuals are able to both incorporate new experiences into their existing mental frameworks (assimilation) and modify those frameworks when necessary (accommodation). Cognitive equilibrium is crucial for cognitive development as it allows individuals to adapt and learn from their experiences while maintaining a sense of balance and stability. Together, these concepts underscore the dynamic and responsive nature of human cognition, highlighting the complex interplay between the mind and the culturally diverse world it navigates. Assimilation, accommodation, adaptation, and cognitive equilibrium are all interrelated processes that contribute to individuals' cognitive development and their ability to effectively interact with and understand their environments. References The concept of assimilation within psychological discourse has been extensively studied and analyzed by reputable sources, studies, and publications. These sources provide a solid foundation for understanding assimilation's psychological aspects, its historical context, and its ongoing evolution. One notable source is the research conducted by Berry (2003), who explored the psychological mechanisms involved in assimilation and the experiences of individuals and groups as they navigate cultural integration. Berry's work offers valuable insights into the complexities of assimilation and its implications for identity formation and social dynamics. Another important contribution to the understanding of assimilation is the study by Portes and Zhou (1993), which examines the outcomes of assimilation across different immigrant groups. Their research highlights the diverse experiences and outcomes of assimilation, shedding light on both its potential for growth and its potential for conflict. Furthermore, Waters and Pineau (2016) provide an in-depth analysis of assimilation within the context of multicultural societies. Their work explores how assimilation can influence individuals' sense of belonging and how it intersects with issues of race, ethnicity, and culture. These sources, among others, contribute to a comprehensive understanding of assimilation within psychology. They are academically credible and provide a solid foundation for further reading and research on this topic. Assimilation refers to the process of how people develop an understanding of their world. As a person encounters new information, that information is processed based on existing knowledge. That is assimilation. The idea of assimilation was proposed in Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's (1954) theory of cognitive development based on his observations of his children. He theorized that as the baby grows it continuously encounters new information, which is organized in a framework he called a schema. New information, or experiences, are processed in the framework (assimilation) which may lead to an alteration of that schema or the creation of a new schema (accommodation). For example, a young child has a schema for "dog" that includes: furry, four legs, and one tail. One day they learn something new about dogs: they can play fetch. That additional information is initially processed and made sense of in the child's existing dog schema. This is assimilation. Piaget also proposed a concept called accommodation. Whereas assimilation involves adding new information to an existing schema, accommodation involves changing an existing schema altogether. Here's the difference: Assimilation: Improving existing knowledge of something thanks to new but congruent information. Accommodation: Amending existing knowledge of something thanks to new information that contradicts previous thinking. AssimilationAccommodationImproving existing knowledge of something thanks to new but congruent information.Amending existing knowledge of something thanks to new information that contradicts previous thinking.A child owns a poodle. They see a dachshund and notice it looks like a poodle. They point at the dachshund and say "That's a dog!" The parent says "Yes. It's a dog called a dachshund." The child's 'dog' schema is now improved and refined – they now know two types of dogs.A child owns a poodle. They see a cat and notice it looks like a poodle. They point at the cat and say "That's a dog!" The parent corrects them: "that's a cat". The child now has to change its 'dog' schema to exclude some four-legged pets, and instead create a new 'cat' schema. A newborn reaches for a soft toy. The visual image of the toy forms the basis of a visual schema for the object. Once grasped, the sensations are initially processed in the context of the visual schema. An infant grabs mom's noisy keys and puts them into their mouth to see if they're edible. As they do so, the information regarding the sound, texture, and image of the keys are processed: they realize keys can't be eaten. They bank "cannot eat" into their cognitive schema about keys. While the newborn is gazing at the face of its mother, the physical features of her face are being processed in a "mom" schema. A toddler sees a basketball and realizes it looks like a soccer ball. They put it in their "ball" schema and add a sub-category: soccer ball. A kindergarten teacher shows the class a horse and names it as a mammal. Then she shows a dog and explains that it's also a mammal. The information is assimilated into the children's "mammal" schema. When meeting a new teacher for the first time, each student compares her behavior with the schema they have for the previous teacher. The new teacher's behavior is assimilated into the "teacher" schema. Every day first graders are learning to read short CVC words. The teacher is sure to use photos to help kids understand what the words mean. Now the children are developing schemas that consist of an image, letters, and sound of the word being spoken. Middle school students are taking a Spanish class. At first, every time they hear a new word that think of what it means in English. While in training, middle managers keep comparing the leadership styles they are learning about (servant, transformative, and collaborative), with their old concept of leadership as bossy and cold, to broaden their knowledge of the "leadership" schema. When visiting a foreign country, people will often process their new cultural experiences with the data base that they already have for the country, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the country's culture. During the sensorimotor stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development, infants progress from reflexive repetitive actions to those that are intentional. One of those types of actions are referred to as tertiary circular reactions. These behaviors are a result of the child trying to discover new results as a function of changing their movements. It is a kind of trial-and-error engagement with the environment. As the child experiments, information is being assimilated through their existing schema for that situation. As the experimenting proceeds, the processes of assimilation and accommodation are in constant flux: "…accommodation and assimilation are simultaneously slightly differentiated and antagonistic. They are relatively undifferentiated in the sense that every attempt at assimilation is at the same time an attempt at accommodation…Every schema of assimilation is therefore forthwith a schema of accommodation; primitive assimilation, whether reproductive, generalizing or recognitory, only functions to the extent that it is accommodation growing toward reality" (p. 275). At the time Piaget was formulating his theory of cognitive development, the idea of "cognitions" was unpopular with the more prominent views of behaviorism. Observed behavior was a result of conditioned reflexes and there was no need to include fuzzy concepts about "thinking" that cannot be seen directly. As Piaget (1956; 1965) states: "…wherever we may speak of conditioned reflexes being stabilized as the result of experience, we always perceive that a schema of the whole organizes the parts of the associations" (p. 128). The examples offered by Piaget include when the newborn "…follows moving objects with his eyes, tends to look at the people whose voice he hears, grasps objects he perceives…" (p. 128). The schemata for each of these actions are a result of sequential experiences that create meaning: "Accommodation and assimilation combined, peculiar to each schema, ensure its usefulness… which explains why the relationships of the parts which presuppose the schema are confirmed by experience" (p. 128). According to Piaget, tracking, looking, and grasping are not merely associative reflexes, but rather, they constitute "sensorimotor assimilation and accommodation" (p. 129). As anyone with children will testify, young children, even infants, are just very small iterations of scientists. They love to explore their world by manipulating aspects of the environment and employing a variety of tools to do so. There is no doubt that these behaviors are intentional and serve a very focused purpose.To illustrate, here is an excerpt from Piaget's notes while observing his daughter play in the tub: "Observation 147. In her bath, Jacqueline engages in many experiments with celluloid toys floating on the water. At 1;1 (20) and the days following, for example, not only does she drop her toys from a height to see the water splash or displace them with her hand in order to make them swim, but she pushes them halfway down in order to see them rise to the surface (p. 273). Although from a superficial perspective this just looks like a baby playing with water, if we could peer inside the cerebral cortex, we would see a massive amount of neural signaling taking place. University students often encounter information which contrasts with their existing schemas. It is a time of exploration that can be both joyful and confusing. It also represents an opportunity to examine the role of assimilation and accommodation when engaged in class discussions regarding various important issues. When students participate in a class discussion, they are very likely to be confronted with opposing points of views. Ideally, that information will be processed in terms of one's existing worldview in an objective manner. Unfortunately, it may also be the case that information which challenges a person's understanding will be rejected outright. In Piagetian terms, there will be no assimilatory processing. When a person refuses to consider opposing views, no matter how diplomatically presented, it blocks personal growth. On a larger, more societal scale, it poses a threat to a civil society where ideas are exchanged freely and openly. Assimilation refers to the processing of newly encountered information or experience through one's existing schema. A kind of compare-and-contrast analysis takes place to see how the new data fits with the current knowledge base. When the schema is altered or when a new schema is formed, it is referred to as accommodation. The two processes, assimilation and accommodation, are in a constant of change. We can see examples of assimilation when a class of kindergarten students yells "horse" the first time their teacher shows them a toy zebra; or when an adult travels to a foreign country and compares everything they see to how things are back home. Read Next: The 5 Types of Schema Bormanaki, H. B., & Khoshhal, Y. (2017). The role of equilibration in Piaget's theory of cognitive development and its implication for receptive skills: A theoretical study. Journal of Language and Teaching Research, 8(5), 996-105. Hanfstingl, B., Arzenšek, A., Apschner, J., & Gölly, K. I. (2021). Assimilation and accommodation: A systematic review of the last two decades. European Psychologist, 27. Piaget, J. (1954). The Construction of Reality in the Child. New York: Basic Books. Piaget, J. (1956; 1965). The Origins of Intelligence in Children. International Universities Press Inc. New York. Rahmat, N., Othman, N. A., Muhammad, A. M., Anuarudin, A. A. S., & Arepin, M. (2019). Assimilation and accommodation: Exploring the dynamics of class discussions. European Journal of Educational Studies, 6(1), 222-237. Assimilation is the cognitive process of making new information fit in with your existing understanding of the world. Essentially, with assimilation, when you encounter something new, you process and make sense of it by relating it to things you already know. There are many benefits of adapting to the world around you, such as through assimilation, which includes building increased resilience. Keep reading to learn more about how assimilation works and examples of this process. Assimilation refers to a 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 experiences or information to fit our pre-existing beliefs. In assimilation, children make sense of the world by applying what they already know. It involves fitting reality and what they experience into their current cognitive structure. A child's understanding of how the world works, therefore, filters and influences how they interpret reality. In early childhood, children are constantly assimilating new information and experiences into their existing knowledge about the world. However, this process does not end there. As people encounter new things and interpret these experiences throughout life, they make both small and large adjustments to their existing ideas of the world around them. Assimilation plays an important role in how we learn about the world around us, both in childhood and in our adult life. Piaget believed that there are two basic ways that we can adapt to new experiences and information: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation New information is added to existing knowledge Schemas remain the same Fits into current interpretation of reality Accommodation New information changes or replaces existing knowledge New schemas may develop Transforms current interpretation of reality Assimilation is the easiest adaptation method because it does not require a lot of adjustment. Through this process, we add new information to our existing knowledge base, sometimes reinterpreting new experiences so they will fit in with existing information. For example, imagine your neighbors have a child you have always known to be sweet, polite, and kind. One day, you glance out your window and see the child throwing a snowball at your car. It seems out of character and rather rude. How do you interpret this new information? If you use the process of assimilation, you might dismiss the child's behavior, believing that it's something they witnessed a classmate doing and they do not mean to be impolite. You're not revising your opinion of the child during assimilation; you are simply adding new information to your existing knowledge. The child is still kind, but now you know they also have a mischievous side to their personality. If you were to utilize the accommodation method of adaptation described by Piaget, the young child's behavior might cause you to reevaluate your opinion of them. With accommodation, old ideas are changed or even replaced based on new information. Assimilation and accommodation work in tandem as part of the learning process. Some information is incorporated into our existing schemas through the process of assimilation, while other information leads to the development of new schemas or total transformations of existing ideas through the process of accommodation. Piaget also believed that as children learn, they strike a balance between the use of assimilation and accommodation. This process, known as equilibration, allows children to find a balance between applying their existing knowledge and adapting their behavior to new information. According to Piaget, the learning process involves the following: Assimilation: Attempting to interpret new information within the framework of existing knowledge Accomm