

## Buffer items: when do they buffer and when don't they

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Buffer Items:  
When Do They Buffer and When Don't They

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**When Do They Buffer and When Don't They?**

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**Buffer Items:**

**When Do They Buffer and When Don't They?**

In constructing a questionnaire, we frequently face the problem that preceding questions may influence the responses given to subsequent ones. There are four ways in which we can deal with this problem.

Chart 1

First, we may ignore it. After all, Tom Smith (1992) observed in analyses of 358 variations in the General Social Survey and 113 variations in the Detroit Area Study that context effects may only occur once out of every 40 to 60 questions. Clearly, methodological experiments into the nature of context effects are likely to overestimate their prevalence because they use substantively related items that are selected on theoretical grounds precisely because they likely are to show context effects. If your items are substantively related, however, you may not want to ignore the possible impact of their placement.

As a second option, you may conduct a split-ballot experiment. This may result in some interesting insights into the nature of order effects, and perhaps an interesting publication -- but it may not satisfy your client.

As a third option, you may eliminate any systematic influence of presentation order by randomizing the presentation order used. Whereas this option is technically possible in computerized interviews, it may create difficulties with the flow of the interview and it is rarely used in practice.

Rather, what most of us are likely to do is the fourth option: We try to identify the



items that may result in an order effect and introduce some unrelated buffer-items, hoping that they will eliminate whatever the effect of question order may be. This option presupposes knowledge about the conditions that may lead to order effects as well as knowledge about the operation of buffer items.

Unfortunately, however, our knowledge about the operation of buffer items is surprisingly limited. Whereas we have recently made some theoretical progress in understanding the processes that underlie the emergence of order effects, the role of buffer items has rarely been addressed in theoretical analyses. General survey practice suggests that most researchers assume that the impact of preceding questions on the responses given to subsequent ones decreases with the number of intervening "buffer" items.

In the present paper, we'd like to draw attention to some theoretically meaningful findings that do not follow this prediction. These findings are part of a series of studies in which we attempt to specify the operation of buffer items in the context of different processes known to elicit context effects in attitude measurement (Schwarz, 1991 a,b; Schwarz & Bless, in press). The first study demonstrates that one single item may accomplish what an excessive buffer of 101 items cannot, whereas the second and third study indicate that buffer items may reverse the direction of order effects, rather than eliminate them. Throughout, the findings illustrate that we need to pay close attention to the nature of the context effect in the first place, before we can understand the operation of buffer items.

## **One Hundred and One versus One:**

### **It Is Not How Many, But Which**

Our first example draws on a context effect that has been documented by George Bishop and colleagues (see Bishop, 1987, for a review). Asking people how much they "...follow what's going on in government and public affairs...", they observed that respondents were less likely to report that they follow what's going on in public affairs if that question was preceded by a difficult knowledge question. Specifically, this question asked them to report what their U. S. representative has done for his or her district. Knowing little about the representative's record, respondents apparently concluded that they don't follow what's going on.

In a series of follow-up studies, Bishop observed that this effect was hardly influenced by buffer items. In three experiments, the number of unrelated buffer items used was 33, 40, or even 101, taking between 7 and 17 minutes to administer. Despite this unusual length of the buffer, the size of the context effect remained virtually unaffected, in contrast to what survey researchers would commonly expect.

How are we to account for this? Presumably, respondents based their judgment about how much they follow politics on the implications of the most accessible relevant information. Given that the buffer items were unrelated, pertaining mostly to community issues and cable tv, the most accessible information relevant to that judgment was the salient experience that one knew little, if anything, about one's representative's record. Hence, Bishop (1987, p. 182) concluded that these effects "will last until the respondent has an experience that changes his or her self-perception, either during the interview or afterwards."

Note that the self-perception explanation presupposes an implicit attribution:

Respondents have to assume that their lack of knowledge about their representative is due to their own behavior, namely that they don't follow what's going on. Alternatively, however, they might assume that their representative is not doing a good job in keeping them informed. In that case, their lack of knowledge would not reflect that they don't follow politics, but rather that their representative does a lousy public relations job. If so, a single buffer item that draws attention to this possibility may accomplish what 101 unrelated items could not.

We recently explored this possibility in an ISR survey using a representative sample of  $N = 597$  (Schwarz & Schuman, unpublished data). Chart 2 shows the results.

#### Chart 2

In the baseline condition, 21% of the respondents reported that they follow politics only "now and then" or "hardly at all". When this question was preceded by a question about the record of one's representative, this percentage increased to 39.4%, thus replicating George Bishop's findings. In the third condition, however, we introduced one single buffer item. Following the representative's record question, we first asked respondents to evaluate the quality of their representative's public relations work. Finally, they were to report how much they follow what's going on in government. In that case, the impact of the knowledge question was largely attenuated, and the percentage for "now and then" and "hardly at all" dropped to 29.6%, a percentage that is not significantly higher than the baseline of 21%.

Thus, one single item accomplished what 101 did not. However, that one item was of a specific nature: It brought an alternative explanation for one's own lack of knowledge to mind, and thus undermined the implications for how much one follows politics (see

Schwarz, Bless, Strack, Klump, Rittenauer-Schatka, & Simons, 1991, for a more detailed theoretical discussion and Biller, Bless, & Schwarz, 1992, for a conceptual replication). We would only expect the sheer number of buffer items to reduce the impact of a preceding question if the information primed by that question is of limited relevance. In the present case, however, the experience that one cannot answer a question is likely to be very salient and the impact of that experience is only reduced when we call its implications for the judgment at hand into question.

### **Buffer Items May Reverse the Direction of Context Effects**

Whereas we typically hope that buffer items reduce the size of the context effect, some studies suggest that they may actually reverse the direction of the context effect under some specific conditions. A study in which we assessed attitudes towards civil liberties illustrates this point (Ottati, Riggle, Wyer, Schwarz, & Kuklinski, 1989). In this study, we asked American college students to report their agreement with general and specific statements pertaining to civil liberties. For example, a general statement would read, "Citizens should have the right to speak freely in public." In one condition, this general statement was preceded by a specific statement that pertained to a favorable or unfavorable group, e.g., "The Parents-Teacher Association (or the Ku-Klux-Klan, respectively) should have the right to speak freely in public".

What are we to expect in part-whole question sequences of this type? On first glance, the most plausible prediction is that thinking about a favorable group will render this group more accessible in memory. Hence, this favorable group is likely to come to mind when the general question is asked later on. As a result, respondents should report more favorable

attitudes toward freedom of speech when the specific question pertained to the PTA rather than to the KKK, reflecting a part-whole assimilation effect. This, however, may not always be the case. First, psychological experiments have shown that respondents ignore information that comes to mind if they are aware that it may only come to mind because it was addressed in a preceding task. For example, Lombardi, Higgins, and Bargh (1987) observed that priming effects in a person perception task were only obtained when respondents were not aware of the priming episode (see also Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kübler, & Wänke, in press). Moreover, conversational norms may induce respondents to ignore information that they have already provided in response to a specific question when they are later asked to answer a more general one. This reflects that conversational norms request us to provide information that is "new" to the recipient, rather than to reiterate information that has already been given (see Schwarz, Strack, & Mai, 1991; Strack & Schwarz, in press, for a more detailed discussion). Under these conditions, part-whole contrast effects may emerge (see Schwarz et al., 1991; Strack, Martin & Schwarz, 1989).

In general, we should be likely to observe part-whole assimilation effects when the specific and the general question appear unrelated or respondents are not aware of a possible influence of the preceding question. On the other hand, when both questions seem to be part of the same conversational context, or when respondents are aware of a possible influence, part-whole contrast effects are likely to emerge. Both of the crucial variables, i.e., respondents' awareness of a possible influence and the perceived conversational relatedness of both questions, may be influenced by buffer items (see Schwarz & Bless, in press, for a more detailed theoretical discussion).

In the present study, asking the specific and the general question without a buffer item resulted in a part-whole contrast effect. That is, respondents reported lower support for

freedom of speech in general when the preceding specific question pertained to the PTA than when it pertained to the KKK, as shown in Chart 3. This may either reflect that they were aware of a possible influence or that the question sequence elicited the conversational norm of non-redundancy. In either case, respondents answered the general question as if it pertained to groups other than the one they just reported on.

### Chart 3

However, when we separated the specific and the general question by eight buffer items, that pattern reversed. In this case, respondents reported higher support for freedom of speech in general when the preceding question pertained to the PTA than when it pertained to the KKK. This reflects a part-whole assimilation effect. Apparently, the buffer items were sufficient to reduce respondents' awareness of the possible influence of the preceding question, or their perception of the questions' conversational relatedness. As a result, they now used the specific group that came to mind in making the general judgment, resulting in a part-whole assimilation effect.

These findings raise the possibility that the impact of buffer items may show a more complex pattern than is usually assumed, in particular if the questions follow a part-whole sequence: Without buffer items, respondents may be aware that the preceding question may influence the thoughts that come to mind, or may interpret both questions as part of the same conversational unit. If so, they may exclude the primed information, resulting in a part-whole contrast effect. On the other hand, if a small number of buffer items is introduced, the primed information may still come to mind, but respondents may no longer be aware of the possible influence of the preceding question. Moreover, the two questions

may no longer be perceived as belonging to the same conversational unit. In this case, respondents may use the information that comes to mind in constructing a representation of the target, resulting in part-whole assimilation effects. Finally, as the number of buffer items increases further, the accessibility of the primed information may decrease, and order effects may be completely eliminated (see Schwarz & Bless, in press, for a more detailed discussion of the theoretical assumptions).

We recently explored this possibility with a sample of German students at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, using a self-administered questionnaire (Schwarz & Hippler, unpublished data). Specifically, we asked students to report their attitudes toward freedom of speech. In one condition, this general question was asked first, whereas in another it was immediately preceded by a specific question that asked whether a right wing extremist party, namely the "Republikaner", should be allowed to speak on campus. As shown in Chart 4, a contrast effect emerged when both questions were presented adjacent to one another, replicating our previous findings (Ottati et al., 1989). However, this contrast effect did not reach significance, in part because the baseline was already close to the upper limit of the scale, introducing a ceiling problem.

#### Chart 4

In a third condition, the specific and the general question were separated by six unrelated filler items, and the general question was presented on the next page of the self-administered questionnaire. In that case, support for freedom of speech in general declined, reflecting a part-whole assimilation effect. Thus far, the data replicate the findings of the Ottati et al (1989) study, conducted in the U. S. In a final condition, we asked the general

question as the last question in the questionnaire, separated from the specific question by 31 buffer items, which were spaced out over 5 pages. In this case, support for freedom of speech returned to baseline. Overall, a planned contrast that tests for the assumed curvilinear relationship is highly significant.

### Conclusions

In combination, these findings that the operation of buffer items is more complex than one would assume on the basis of general survey practice. First, the impact of buffer items is not only a function of their number, but also of their specific content. At the extreme, one item may accomplish what 101 do not. More bothersome, buffer items may not only eliminate order effects. Rather, they may also reverse their direction under some conditions, as the last two studies illustrated.

We have to admit, however, that we do not yet understand the operation of some of the crucial variables to a degree that would allow strong predictions in any specific case. For example, how many items do we need to decrease the accessibility of the information that was used to answer a preceding question? Whereas many studies in the psychological literature suggest that priming effects are short-lived, some have obtained priming effects after delays of several hours (e.g., Schwarz & Strack, 1981; see Wyer & Srull, 1989, for a review). Most obviously, information differs in its memorability. Accordingly, salient experiences, such as being unable to answer an apparently simple knowledge question, may exert an influence over a longer time period than a simple thought about one of many political groups.

Moreover, why do adjacent specific and general items trigger a perception of conversational relatedness in some cases, but not in all? Most likely, surface similarities



such as similar question wordings and similar response formats are likely to influence this, but again we do not fully understand the relevant determinants. At present, we can construe experimental conditions that do the trick by using clear-cut manipulations, but for many items we can not yet predict how they will perform. Nevertheless, the present findings illustrate that there is much that we need to learn about the operation of buffer items, and that some of our pet assumptions are unlikely to hold under many conditions. Most importantly, we need to understand the processes that underlie the emergence of a context effect in the first place, before we can decide what kind of a buffer will do the trick.

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## Four Ways of Dealing with Context Effects

- (1) Ignore the problem
- (2) Conduct experiment
- (3) Randomize item order
- (4) Introduce buffer items

*General assumption:*

*Order effects decrease with an increasing number of  
buffer items.*

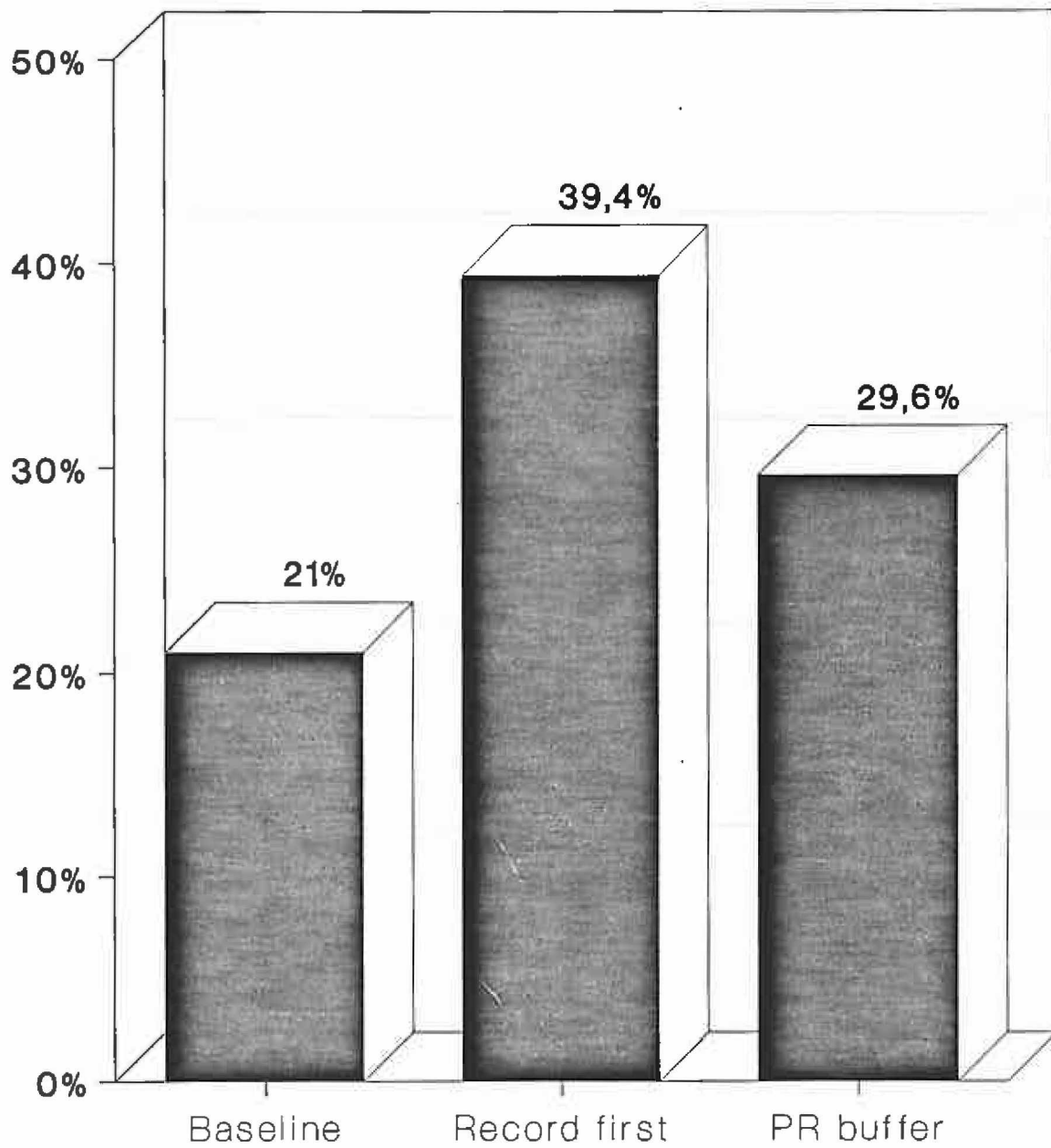
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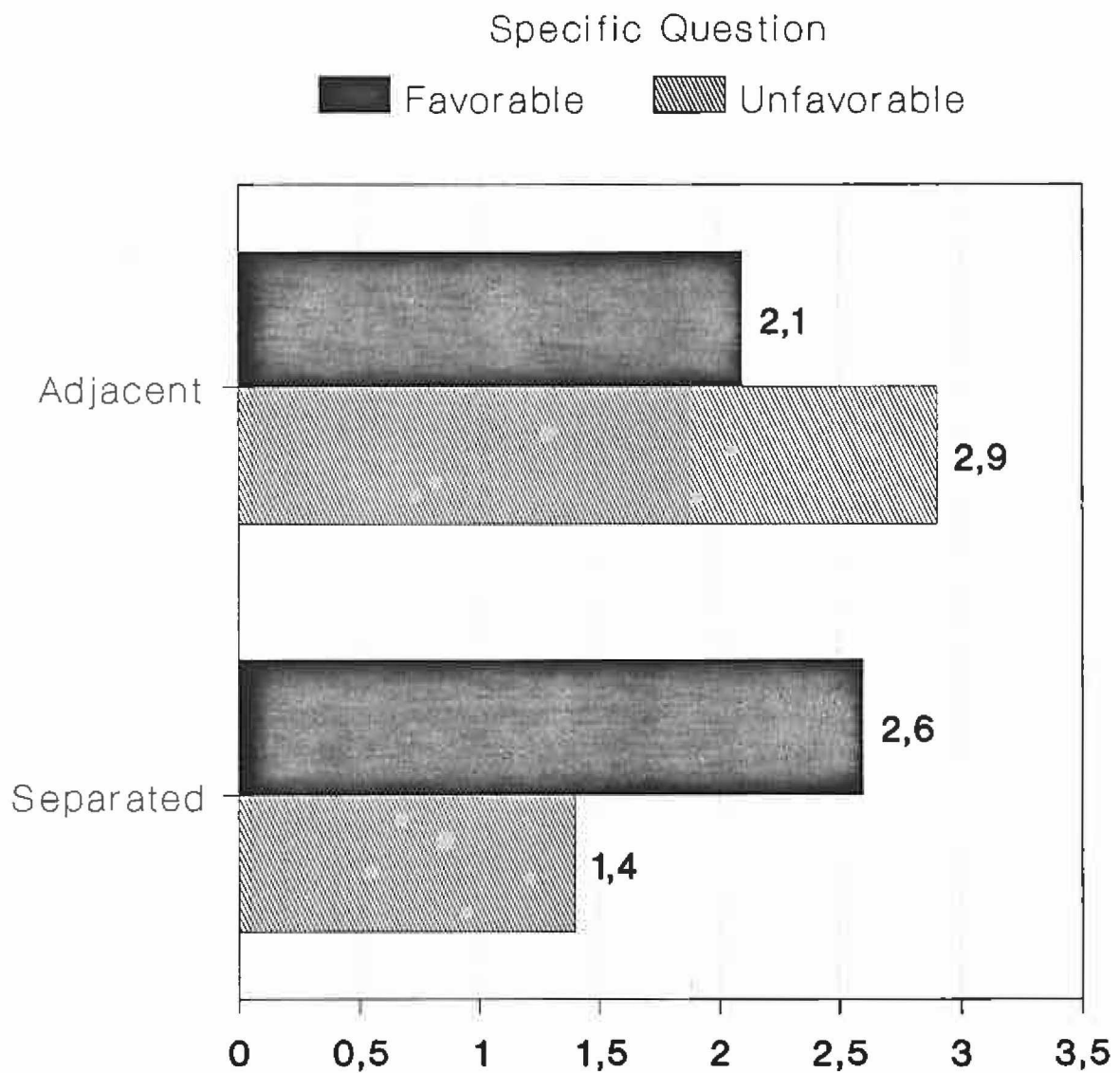
*Order effects decrease with an increasing number of  
buffer items.*

## Follow What's Going On "Now and then" or "Hardly ever"



*Schwarz & Schuman, unpublished data*

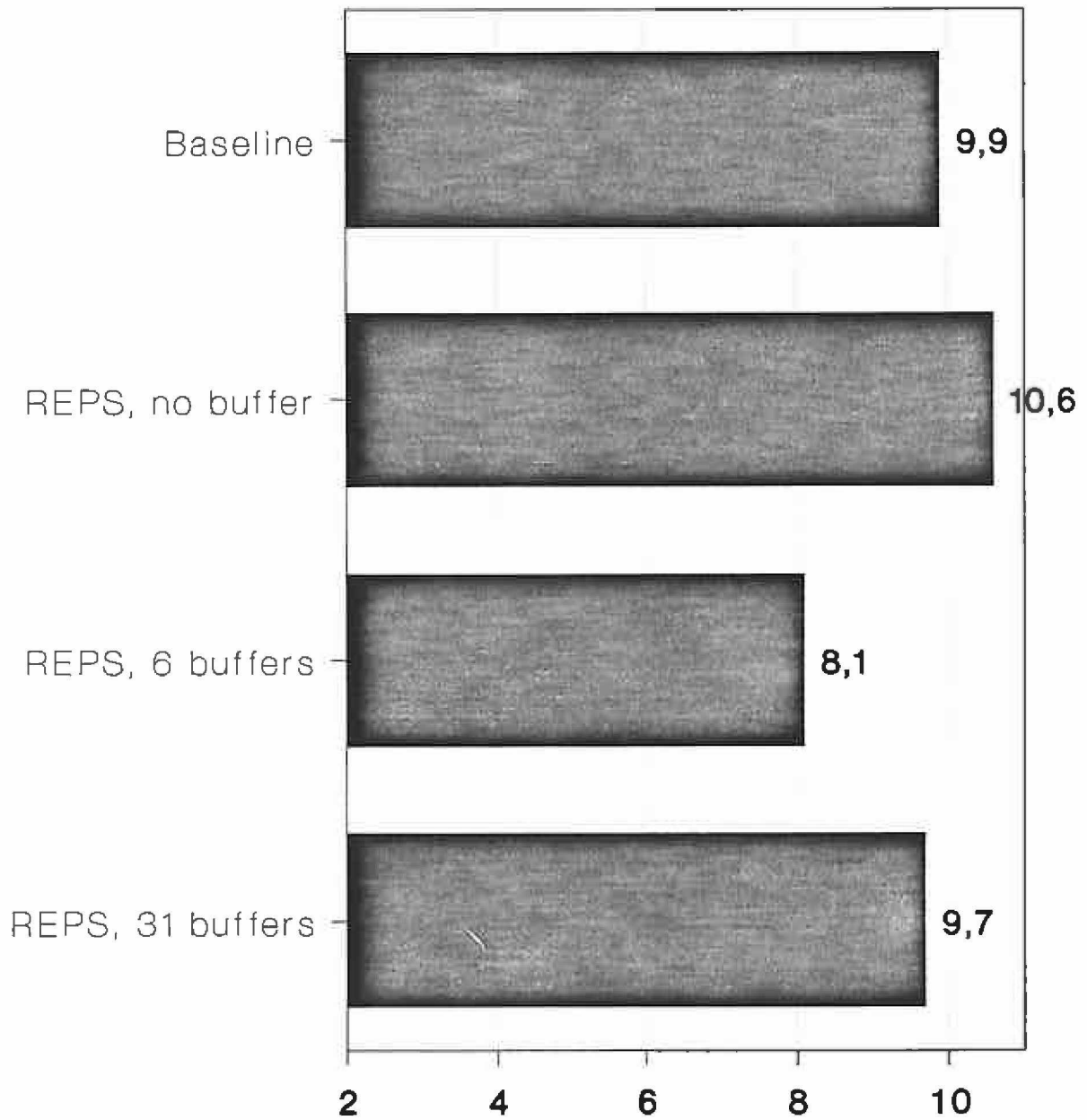
# Assimilation and Contrast: The Impact of Spacing



*Ottati, Riggle, Wyer, Schwarz & Kuklinski, J of Personality and Social Psychology, 1989, 57, 404-415*

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## 0, 6, and 31 Buffer Items



*Schwarz, unpublished data*



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