Not all research shows evidence of a contrast effect in self-evaluations, however. Under some conditions, people show an assimilation effect: They evaluate themselves more positively when they compare themselves with others who are exemplary on some dimension (Mussweiler, 2003). Sometimes this occurs when people believe the comparison attribute can be modified. For example, if you think you can improve your soccer skills, you will probably be inspired when you compare yourself with a world champion (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Major, Testa, & Blysma, 1991; Stapel & Koomen, 2000; S. E. Taylor & Lobel, 1989).

Psychological closeness also influences when assimilation effects occur. To illustrate, in one investigation, my colleagues and I led female participants to believe they would be having a get-acquainted conversation with another woman (J. D. Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992). Prior to the conversation, they were shown a picture of what the other woman (allegedly) looked like. Some participants saw a very attractive woman, and others saw a woman who was relatively unattractive. To vary psychological closeness, some participants were led to believe that they shared the same birthday with the woman in the photograph; participants in a control condition were not given this information. Finally, participants rated their own attractiveness.

My colleagues reasoned that the shared birthday manipulation would lead participants to feel psychologically connected to the woman in the photograph (Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989; Finch & Cialdini, 1989; D. T. Miller, Downs, & Prentice, 1998) and that these feelings of relatedness would lead participants to assimilate to the woman’s attractiveness. The data shown in Figure 5.3 confirm these predictions. Although the usual contrast effect was found in the control condition (participants viewing the attractive woman rated themselves as less attractive than did participants viewing the unattractive woman), assimilation effects occurred in the shared-birthday condition (participants rated themselves as more attractive when viewing the attractive woman than when viewing the unattractive woman). These findings establish that assimilation effects occur when people compare themselves with a person who is part of their extended self (see also Brewer & Weber 1994; Broemer & Diehl, 2004; Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002; McFarland & Buehler, 1995; Pelham & Wachsmuth, 1995).