

Do Social Psychologists Cause Priming Research, or Does Priming Research Cause Social Psychologists?

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Abstract

There is a strong relationship between Social Psychology and priming research. A near universal assumption is that social psychologists are the cause of priming research. Not one study has ever subjected the assumption to test. We report two studies that fill this gap and show that, in fact, the reverse causal situation is operating. Priming research causes social psychologists.

Study 1 - Priming research causes social psych behavior

We took advantage of a naturally occurring phenomenon that involves random assignment - the editorial review process for scientific manuscripts. When editors receive submitted manuscripts, they select potential reviewers randomly. Some editors insist that they intentionally select reviewers that have expertise relevant to the manuscript topic. However, besides not being aware of the causes of their behavior (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), it is obvious that reviewers are selected and assigned randomly from the (a) quality of reviews, (b) interrater reliability among reviewers, and (c) article acceptance patterns. [Note: We do not develop here the evidence for random assignment of "accept" and "reject" to submitted manuscripts, though support is compelling (see Bones & Devine, in prep).]

Study 1 Method

Article creation and submission

From 1998 to 2008 we fabricated dozens of articles reporting priming research with outrageous claims and results and submitted them with actual researchers' names to leading Social Psychology outlets. The absurdity of the findings were intended to prevent the articles from appearing in print. Unexpectedly, 70% of the submissions were accepted, the remaining 30% received a "revise-and-resubmit" (see Table 1). [Note: No actual researcher complained that their name had been used falsely. Most appear delighted to have landed the publication.]

Identification of reviewers

The review process posed a challenge to identifying which individuals received the prime and which did not. We solved this by content analyzing the article reviews and calculating an index of two variables: [1] mentions of Roy Baumeister, and [2] self-references (by name, citation, or pronoun). Every human has a unique Baumeister/Self-reference (BS) index, providing a linguistic fingerprint (see Figure 1).

Measurement of reviewers

After identifying the reviewers via BS coefficients, we tracked their subsequent productivity (number of articles published per year) and compared that to the productivity rates of psychologists that were not primed.

Study 1 Results

Figure 2 presents a comparison of research productivity for researchers that were primed with priming research compared to those that were not. There was a significant effect of condition. Researchers primed by priming research published more social psychology than researchers that were not primed ($p < .001$). Priming research causes social psychological publishing, but possibly also promotion and accolade.

Figure 1: Baumeister/Self-reference (BS) coefficients of some well-known social psychologists

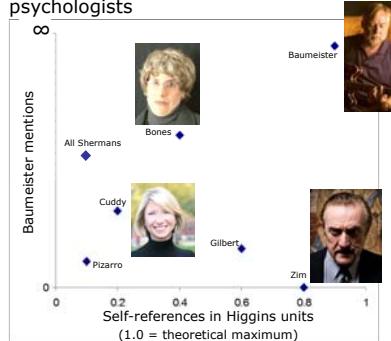


Table 1: Examples of Made-up Articles

Chartrand, T. L., Dalton, A. N., Fitzsimons, G. J. (2007). Nonconscious relationship reactance: When significant others prime opposing goals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 43, 719-726.

Dijksterhuis, A., Preston, J., Wegner, D.M., & Aarts, H. (2008). Effects of subliminal priming of self and God on self-attribution of authorship for events. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44, 2-9.

Weinberger, J., & Westen, D. (2008). RATS, we should have used Clinton: Subliminal stimulation in political campaigns. *Political Psych*, 29, 631-651.

Hassin, R. R., Ferguson, M. J., Shidlovsky, D., & Gross, T. (2007). Waved by invisible flags: The effects of subliminal exposure to flags on political thought and behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104, 19757-19761.

Figure 2: Research Productivity of Social Psychologists primed vs. not-primed with Priming Research

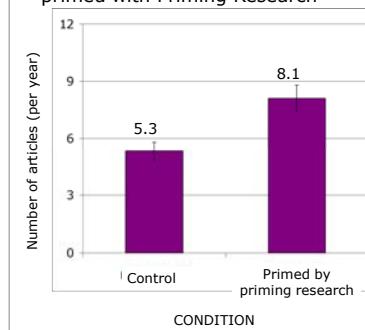


Table 2: Participants in Study 2

Travis Carter, Cornell
Jeni Kubota, UC-Boulder
Matthew Kugler, Princeton
Paul O'Keefe, Duke
Paul Eastwick, Northwestern
Justin Friesen, Waterloo
Julie Phelan, Rutgers
Jaime Napier, NYU
Ravi Iyer, USC
Anna Han, Ohio State
Santiba Campbell, UD
Chris Miller, UMN

(Warnings: Do not approach participants or mention their installed EAR within hearing distance. Do not attempt to feed participants. Do not agree to provide a head massage. If asked, "Is there something on my face?" you must respond "Did your advisor just say something?" to reinforce manipulation and induce cognitive load.)

Figure 3: Single-cell recording device in rat, and the Unobtrusive Head-Mounted Recorder (EAR) on graduate student (rat pictured on left)



Study 2 - Priming research creates social psychologists

The only limitation of Study 1 is that the participants were already social psychologists. Priming research might only cause small changes within an individual, but not a transformation from non-psychologist into a psychologist. This is the same problem that debunked evolutionary theory. Evolution causes micro-changes within species, but not macro-changes into new species (see Genesis, 3761 BC).

We randomly selected a dozen social psychology graduate students to receive a heavy dose of priming research (see Table 2). Multiple dependent variables index social psychologist behavior such as: [a] number of studies run and papers written, [b] number of times defending "undergraduate students" as the population of interest, [c] number of Malcolm Gladwell books given to family members, and [d] securing a PhD.

These data are not easy to collect outside of the laboratory. Luckily, graduate students do not leave the laboratory. Also, we drew inspiration from technical innovations in single-cell recording of naturally behaving rats to construct a device for administering the manipulation and collecting data. Figure 3 provides illustration of the Unobtrusive Head-Mounted Recorder (EAR) outfitted on each participant. For purity of design, it is important that the students not be aware that they are in the study or are wearing the device. As such, the participants were sedated when the EAR was installed, and participants' colleagues were instructed to pretend that they did not notice it. The EAR administers descriptions of priming research at 12 random intervals during the day. The descriptions are presented in the voice of the primary advisor to increase plausibility. The EAR wirelessly communicates the data to the first author's Facebook application. Data collection is still underway.