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Priming as a way of understanding children's mental representations of the social world



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ABSTRACT

Priming is a well established tool for experimental examination of how mental representations drive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that has been widely used in adult research. Priming is also a well established technique in cognitive development research. Social development research, however, has rarely used priming as a research method despite evidence that this technique is promising for helping researchers untangle causal connections between children's mental representations and children's social development outcomes. This paper discusses how priming methods may yield important insights into the role that children's mental representations of the social world play in children's social functioning. We begin by discussing the theoretical conceptualization underlying priming and priming methods. We next review evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of priming techniques in child development research. We conclude by suggesting ways in which priming can inform future research in social development using research examining attachment, social-information-processing, gender development, and mood and mental health as examples.

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Introduction

A core concept in social development has long been the idea that children's experiences with their environment are organized into mental representations or schemas and that these mental representations guide children's processing of responses to social stimuli (e.g., [Bowlby, 1969/1982](#); [Dweck & London, 2004](#)). Social development research that explores how children process social information

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has largely relied on non-experimental designs as the field progresses from describing the associations among children's experiences with the social environment, their social behavior, and their mental representations to explaining the causal cognitive mechanisms that mediate the link between exposure to social stimuli and children's responses to this social information. An extensive body of observational and correlational research has accumulated in this progression from description to explanation and has established a wealth of rich empirical descriptive and predictive information about the many factors associated with children's processing of social information (for reviews see Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009; Saarni, Campos, Camras, & Witherington, 2006; Thompson, 2006). Causal explanations of how children's mental representations drive their processing of and responses to social stimuli, however, are lacking due to a dearth of experimental social development research. In order to fill this gap in our understanding of the causal role of mental representations in children's social development, experimental manipulation of children's mental representations is necessary.

One possible means for experimental manipulation of children's mental representations is the use of priming methods in an experimental design. By randomly assigning children to be exposed to schema-relevant stimuli or to a control group (which is either not primed or exposed to neutral stimuli or stimuli unrelated to the concept of interest), researchers can experimentally activate a mental representation of interest and possibly expand our understanding of children's social development to include explanations of the causal role that children's cognitive representations play in their responses to social stimuli.

Our goal is to demonstrate how priming offers the possibility for future research in social development to provide important and unique insights into the role of children's mental representations of the social world in their responses to social cues. We begin by providing the theoretical conceptualization underlying priming and describing priming methods. Next, we review evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of priming techniques for examining how children's mental representations drive their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We end with suggestions about how priming methods can inform future research in social development using attachment, social-information-processing, gender development, and mood and mental health as examples.

Priming: Concepts and methods

According to schema theory, psychological reactions to environmental events are driven by mental representations, or schemas, which are organized knowledge structures of past experiences (Bartlett, 1932; Bruner, 1960; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Piaget, 1973; Rumelhart, 1980). Environmental events are filtered through mental representations, which, in turn, guide thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Environmental cues can activate relevant mental representations which then serve to guide attention, interpretation, encoding, storage, retrieval, emotions, and behavior. By exposing participants to schema-relevant cues, researchers prime or activate these mental representations that serve as the driving force behind how people respond to environmental cues (Bargh, 2003, 2006; Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Hamilton, 2005).

Priming methods can be divided into two categories (supraliminal priming and subliminal priming) based on the level at which priming stimuli are perceived and processed. *Supraliminal priming* techniques present priming stimuli at or above the threshold of conscious perception; participants are consciously aware of the priming stimuli. Supraliminal priming can be accomplished by asking participants to focus on schema-relevant information by recollecting, imagining, reading, viewing, or writing about an event. For example, attachment security has been primed by asking participants to write about a close relationship in which they felt secure to examine the effects of attachment security on lying (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010).

Supraliminal priming can also be accomplished more inconspicuously by priming participants discreetly via subtle exposure to the priming stimuli (e.g., by placing schema relevant stimuli in the environment rather than asking participants to focus on the stimuli). For example, having the experimenter ask participants to briefly hold a cup of hot or iced coffee while recording their names and the

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