



# Mental ownership: Does mental rehearsal transform novel stimuli into mental possessions? <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Mentally rehearsing unfamiliar first names for the purpose of categorizing them into a group produces both preference for and, more surprisingly, identification with the group of names (i.e., association of the names with self; Greenwald, Pickrell, & Farnham, 2002). The present research started as an effort to determine how these ‘implicit partisanship’ effects of stimulus exposures differed from the well-known mere exposure effect and whether mental rehearsal might play a role in both phenomena. Four experiments found that parallel effects on liking and association with self-occurred (a) more strongly for stimuli that were mentally rehearsed than for ones that were passively exposed, (b) equally for stimuli rehearsed individually versus categorized in groups, (c) consistently for both self-report and implicit measures, and (d) across substantial variations of stimulus types and of mental rehearsal procedures. The findings are interpreted as identifying a shared theoretical ingredient of implicit partisanship and mere exposure effects, linking these two effects more generally to phenomena of implicit self-esteem, including minimal group and mere ownership effects.

## 1. Introduction

Minimal group experiments have regularly shown that leading people to believe that they have similar reasoning styles, art preferences, or other similarities with a group of strangers causes them to identify with and favor the people in that group (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Even more surprising, however, is that people spontaneously identify with groups without any superficial similarity (Billig & Tajfel, 1973) or even association with the group (Greenwald, Pickrell, & Farnham, 2002b). In one of the most minimal procedures demonstrating this, memorizing four first names together as a group increased both implicit identification with and preferences for the memorized group of names relative to a group with unrehearsed names (Greenwald et al., 2002b). This ‘implicit partisanship’ effect occurred in the absence of any instruction for subjects to consider themselves a member of the (hypothetical) group represented by the studied names. Further experiments with stimuli quite different from the first names of the initial experiments (e.g., fictitious car brands) found this same pattern of dual effects on both implicit and self-report measures of liking and identification (Pinter & Greenwald, 2004, 2011).

Because the stimuli in implicit partisanship studies were relatively unfamiliar to participants, these studies shared a procedural ingredient

with the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968), the finding that repeated passive exposure to unfamiliar stimuli increases liking. At the same time, the implicit partisanship procedure differs from most prior mere exposure findings in three ways: First, it involves instructed mental rehearsal of the unfamiliar stimuli rather than passive exposure; second, it uses a single sustained 45-s exposure to the stimuli rather than repeated briefer stimulus presentations; and third, stimuli were presented as a group rather than individually. The initiating, exploratory goal of this research was to evaluate and separate these three possible causes of the implicit partisanship finding.

Each of the four experiments in this report extended the generality of the original findings, while evaluating the three initially plausible causes. To anticipate the conclusion that emerged: The present findings identify a shared theoretical ingredient of implicit partisanship and mere exposure effects, linking these two effects with multiple previously identified phenomena that have been considered indicators of implicit self-esteem (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), including minimal group and mere ownership effects. These in turn support a theory that connects attitude, identity, and self-esteem (Greenwald et al., 2002a).

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### 1.1. Similarities between mere exposure and implicit partisanship procedures

Although mere exposure is widely considered to involve passive (unrehearsed), repeated exposure to stimuli (see Bornstein, 1989), mere exposure procedures have often incorporated some degree of mental rehearsal. Participants in mere exposure experiments are sometimes asked to memorize the repeatedly exposed stimuli (e.g., Newell & Bright, 2001; Stang, 1975, Studies 2–3) or to attend selectively to some stimuli while ignoring others (Fenske, Raymond, & Kunar, 2004; Raymond, Fenske, & Tavassoli, 2003; Yagi, Ikoma, & Kikuchi, 2009). Even without an explicit rehearsal task, procedures such as those instructing subjects that they are in a study of “verbal learning” (e.g., Stang, 1975, Study 1, p. 7) or “visual memory” (e.g., Zajonc, 1968, Experiment 3, p. 18) may encourage subjects to mentally rehearse the repeatedly presented stimuli, rather than just observing them passively. Because both mere exposure and implicit partisanship procedures may entail mental rehearsal, there is a possible explanatory overlap that has not previously been explored.

### 1.2. Challenges in connecting to theories of mere exposure effects

Despite the procedural similarities to mere exposure just described, the implicit partisanship findings appear inconsistent with a theoretical proposition that has been prominent in discussions of mere exposure effects in the past 25 years. Whereas implicit partisanship studies suggest that active mental rehearsal of stimuli increases liking of those stimuli, one of the best established theories of the mere exposure effect suggests that repeated exposure effects may sometimes be weakened when procedures create good recall or recognition memory of the repeatedly presented stimuli (Bornstein, 1989; see also Bornstein & D’Agostino, 1992; Kunst-Wilson & Zajonc, 1980; Moreland & Zajonc, 1979). This *perceptual fluency/misattribution* theory holds that subsequent encounters with repeatedly presented stimuli are processed with improved ease of processing (fluency), which facilitates a liking judgment (Bornstein & D’Agostino, 1992, 1994). It has also been hypothesized that this fluency effect can be discounted when experimental procedures draw subjects’ attention to the prior presentations in a way that may lead subjects to credit those prior presentations as the basis for any experienced ease of processing (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; cf. Reber, Winkielman, & Schwarz, 1998; Schwarz et al., 1991; Greifeneder & Unkelbach, 2013).

In addition to the empirical support for the related fluency/discounting and fluency/misattribution accounts of repeated exposure effects, there are findings that demonstrate the reverse. For example, Lee (1994) showed that mere exposure effects are not always eliminated when subjects are given an alternative explanation for perceptual fluency (Lee, 1994), and Bornstein (1989) reported that complex (less fluently processed) repeatedly exposed visual stimuli show stronger repeated exposure effects than simple stimuli (Bornstein, 1989). Multiple additional studies, including those in the implicit partisanship tradition, show that instructions to remember or attend to stimuli, which must call attention to the repeatedly presented stimuli and therefore provide a possible basis to discount processing fluency, nevertheless increase liking (Greenwald et al., 2002b; Pinter & Greenwald, 2004; Stafford & Grimes, 2012; Stang, 1975; Yagi et al., 2009).

While the fluency discounting and misattribution theories suggest that mental rehearsal has the potential to undermine repeated exposure effects, other theories used in explaining repeated exposure effects suggest that mental rehearsal might increase those effects. In addition to increasing processing fluency, rehearsed exposures should increase judged familiarity, which is presumably a more consciously perceivable effect. Berlyne (1970) and Stang (1975) both proposed that more familiar stimuli should be less threatening and anxiety-inducing than unfamiliar stimuli, which could be the source of increased liking (see

also Lee, 2001; Wang & Chang, 2004). Similarly, Winkielman and Cacioppo (2001) theorized that increased fluency due to repeated presentations would enhance positive mood directly, thereby producing increased liking.

In sum, available theories from the mere exposure tradition are equivocal on expectations for effects of mental rehearsal, the most salient procedural ingredient of the implicit partisanship effect. The other two possible procedural causes of the implicit partisanship finding—grouped presentations of stimuli and sustained (rather than repeated brief) presentations—do not readily align with any of the existing mere exposure theories. An exploratory evaluation of the three suspected procedural causes is therefore likely to yield an empirical answer that cannot be anticipated from existing theory. Also of interest was to observe whether the two parallel measures in the implicit partisanship procedure (liking and identification) would remain linked.

### 1.3. Present research

To achieve clearer understanding of the relationships among mental rehearsal, mere exposure, and implicit partisanship, the present studies sought to determine which of the empirical components of the implicit partisanship procedure was (or were) responsible for the observed effects on liking and identification. The role of those components was tested by varying the nature of the rehearsal task and the presence or absence of stimulus groupings. To extend generality, the present experiments also varied types of stimulus materials and dependent measures, using both implicit and explicit measures of liking and identification. As was hinted in the opening paragraph (and will be elaborated in the General Discussion), the findings provided a basis for finding a common theoretical theme in implicit partisanship and mere exposure, plausibly also extending to the collection of implicit self-esteem effects described by Greenwald and Banaji (1995), including minimal group and mere ownership effects.

## 2. Experiment 1: rehearsal task – memory search in a set of memorized letters

Experiment 1 examined whether a set of mentally rehearsed stimuli would be evaluated more positively, on both implicit liking and identification measures (as used in implicit partisanship procedures), than comparable stimuli that were attended without rehearsal (passive exposure). To ensure rehearsal, participants completed a Go/No-go task that required them to rehearse letter sets. Because they rehearsed the same letter set continuously, this procedure corresponded more closely to past implicit partisanship procedures than to mere exposure procedures.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 85 undergraduate students from the University of Washington Psychology Department participant pool (mean age = 18.78, *SD* = 1.01; 68% female; 47% White, 30% Asian). Data were collected until the end of the academic term because the study served as an opportunity for students to receive partial course credit for their participation. One participant was excluded from analyses for excessive speed while completing the IAT measure (10 percent or more of their latencies were faster than 300 ms). In this and subsequent studies, we have reported all exclusions, measures, and manipulations.

#### 2.1.2. Procedure

Each participant completed a Go/No-go rehearsal task, followed by either implicit liking or identification measures.

**2.1.2.1. Go/No-go rehearsal task.** Participants read these instructions for the adaptation of the Go/No-go task:

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