



## Reports

## Seeing others through rose-colored glasses: An affiliation goal and positivity bias in implicit trait impressions<sup>☆</sup>



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We tested the effect of an affiliation goal on spontaneous trait inference (STI).
- We found a positivity bias in STIs in response to an affiliation goal.
- Those with the goal formed more positive (vs. negative) STIs compared to controls.
- This positivity bias persisted when the goal was unfulfilled versus fulfilled.
- We conclude that STIs form flexibly in response to perceivers' social goals.

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 10 December 2012

Revised 13 May 2013

Available online 23 May 2013

## Keywords:

Impression formation

Spontaneous trait inference

Affiliation motivation

Attribution

Social cognition

Social perception

## ABSTRACT

People infer traits from other people's behaviors without intention, awareness, or effort, and this spontaneous trait inference (STI) effect has been shown to be robust. The purpose of the present research was to demonstrate the flexibility of STIs despite the ubiquity. Specifically, we examined the effect of an affiliation goal on STI formation and found a positivity bias. In Experiment 1, perceivers with an affiliation goal formed more positive (versus negative) spontaneous trait inferences compared to those without this goal and those who had been primed with semantically positive, affiliation-unrelated words. Experiment 2 provided evidence that this effect was driven by a motivational state by showing that the positivity bias occurs only when a perceiver's goal to affiliate remains unfulfilled. The goal's interaction with trait valence showed focused, goal-relevant bias. These studies are the first to show that STIs form flexibly in response to perceivers' primed social goals supporting the functionality account of STIs in implicit impression formation.

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## Introduction

Impressions of others can form implicitly, without intention, and without explicit memory for past encounters with those others (see Uleman, Blader, & Todorov, 2005 for a review). Consider the following situation: you go to the supermarket and encounter various people. An employee walks a customer to the aisle where the item she is looking for is located. You pass a man who spills coffee on his shirt. A woman at the check-out line runs to get a forgotten item just as the cashier begins to ring her up, while the person in line behind her waits without

saying a word. What are your impressions of these various individuals? You will most likely think that they are "helpful," "clumsy," "inconsiderate," and "patient," respectively. These spontaneous trait inferences (STIs; Winter, Uleman, & Cunniff, 1985) occur routinely and robustly, from minimal behavioral information (see Skowronski, Carlston, & Hartnett, 2008; Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008 for reviews).

The purpose of the present research is to demonstrate that, their documented ubiquity notwithstanding, STIs are flexibly formed in response to perceiver's social goals. In the above example, imagine that before walking into the supermarket, you heard someone on the radio promote a book on building meaningful friendships. How might this influence your subsequent impressions? We predicted that an affiliation goal, even one that is nonconscious (i.e., in the sense that one is unaware of having this goal), would lead to greater positive (helpful, patient) versus negative (clumsy, inconsiderate) STIs. This research builds on prior work on the situational flexibility of STIs (e.g., Crawford, McCarthy, Kjaerstad, & Skowronski, 2013; Rim,

<sup>☆</sup> We thank Jim Bettman, Gavan Fitzsimons, Grainne Fitzsimons, and Jim Shah for the helpful comments, and Alix Katz and Steven Dallas for their help with this research.

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Uleman, & Trope, 2009) and also critically extends it by showing that STIs can be modulated depending on a perceiver's currently activated social goals.

#### *Spontaneous trait inferences*

Spontaneous trait inferences are inferences that people form upon reading about (e.g., Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Todorov & Uleman, 2002) or observing (Fiedler & Schenck, 2001; Fiedler, Schenck, Watling, & Menges, 2005) other people's trait-implicating behaviors. STIs form in the absence of any explicit task instructions to form impressions and without perceivers' explicit awareness of having formed any inferences. STI effects are robust, occurring rapidly, and under concurrent cognitive load (Todorov & Uleman, 2003; Winter et al., 1985; but see Wells, Skowronski, Crawford, Scherer, & Carlston, 2011 for evidence that cognitive load sometimes affects STIs).

The apparent ubiquity and robustness of STIs makes it unclear whether they are sensitive to temporarily activated social motivations of the perceiver. Uleman (1999) speculated that "spontaneous impressions are guided more by chronically accessible constructs, while intentional impressions are guided more by temporarily activated goal-relevant constructs and procedures" (p. 146). Consistent with this suggestion, STIs have been shown to be sensitive to chronically activated constructs (e.g., Newman, 1991; Zárate, Uleman, & Voils, 2001; Zelli, Cervone, & Huesmann, 1996; Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 1995) such as personal need for structure (Moskowitz, 1993). And although past research has shown that STIs are affected by task instructions that alter information processing (Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Sherer, 2007; Uleman & Moskowitz, 1994), these manipulations do not speak to the issue of situationally activated social goals.

#### *Evidence for situational flexibility*

Previous research supports the flexibility and functionality account of STI formation. For example, STIs can be modulated depending on their predictive utility for the perceiver. From the same behavioral information, participants formed STIs to a greater extent about actors who were from the distant (vs. near) past, or located in a remote (vs. proximal) place (Rim et al., 2009). Rim et al. (2009) postulated that STIs are more functional in thinking about distant actors because abstract traits are more stable and invariant across situations while the specifics of the immediate situation (e.g., exact behaviors) may not always hold for those individuals. More recently, Crawford et al. (2013) found that STIs are generated in a way that matches a perceiver's somatic state. For example, positive STIs decreased when participants were oriented toward avoidance, and negative STIs decreased when participants were oriented toward approach. The present research provides converging evidence for the functional utility of STIs and, importantly, extends past work by demonstrating biased STI formation within a motivational context. To our knowledge, these studies are the first to demonstrate the influence of situationally activated *social goals* on STI formation.

We were particularly interested in affiliation goals because people are fundamentally social and the need to belong is a critical and pervasive human motivation (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). Specifically, we propose that when the goal to affiliate with others is activated, the perceiver will form more positive, relative to negative, STIs from others' behaviors. This prediction is supported by research indicating that perceivers evaluate a potential dating partner more positively compared to someone they do not expect to date (Goodwin, Fiske, Rosen, & Rosenthal, 2002; see also Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976; Clark & Wegener, 2008). And insofar as an affiliation goal can be thought of as activating a general approach orientation, Crawford et al.'s (2013) findings would similarly predict such a valence effect. However, our prediction is that implicit

impressions may be functional in context-specific ways. We argue that this implicit bias (i.e., the goal's effect of selectively binding an unrepresentative sample of trait concepts to the actor representation) serves the perceiver's goal of affiliating with the target because positive impressions should facilitate smooth interaction and liking.

### **Experiment 1**

Experiment 1 tested the effect of an affiliation goal<sup>2</sup> on positive and negative spontaneous trait inference formation. Participants were in an affiliation goal, no goal, or positive-semantic prime condition. The positive-semantic prime condition was included to rule out the possibility that the affiliation goal prime simply primed positive feelings, and not the goal itself, and the possibility that it activated the positivity of the goal and not its motivational properties. Participants completed the false recognition task, which is used to examine spontaneous trait inference (Todorov & Uleman, 2002). The essence of this method is that participants who infer a trait from a sentence are more likely to erroneously remember that trait as having been explicitly mentioned in the sentence. We hypothesized that an affiliation goal prime would lead to greater formation of positive than negative STIs, relative to the no goal prime and the positive-semantic prime conditions.

#### *Method*

##### *Participants*

One hundred and twelve undergraduate students (47 males,  $M_{age} = 20.68$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.05$ ) at Duke University participated in the experiment for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six between-subjects conditions.

##### *Procedure*

Upon arrival, participants were told that they would complete two separate experiments. Participants first completed a word search task, which was actually a supraliminal priming task, and were randomly assigned to one of three priming conditions: affiliation goal, positive-semantic, or no goal. In all conditions, participants then completed a linguistic processing task, which was actually the false recognition task to detect STI formation.

*The priming task.* Participants completed a word-search puzzle packet containing one  $9 \times 9$  matrix and five  $6 \times 6$  matrices of letters. All three of the priming conditions contained the same set of three neutral words in each of the matrices (eagles, calendar, plant) and the remaining six words were either relevant to affiliation (e.g., companion), were positive and unrelated to affiliation (e.g., butterfly), or were additional neutral words (e.g., table).

*The false recognition task.* The false recognition paradigm for detecting STIs consists of two phases. In the study phase, participants were presented, in random order, with 36 trait-implicating sentences<sup>3</sup> (Uleman, 1988) paired with photographs of actors (half female, half male) exhibiting neutral expressions. Eighteen sentences implied positive traits and 18 sentences implied negative traits about the actor. All 36 sentences had an overall pretest consensus of 50% or greater regarding the trait best exemplified by each (Uleman, 1988). These traits were used as probes in the second part of the task. On

<sup>2</sup> We primed an affiliation goal nonconsciously to prevent demand characteristics arising from participants' awareness of the goal. Because we were interested in implicit impressions, we avoided using such methods as anticipated interaction, which could produce an explicit impression formation goal. The implicit affiliation goal did not, therefore, reference any particular target.

<sup>3</sup> We chose affiliation-unrelated behavioral sentences to guard against the alternative hypothesis that any effect of an affiliation goal was a semantic priming effect rather than a goal effect.

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