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The effect of priming with a love concept on blood donation promise



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ABSTRACT

This field study on blood donor behavior tests the effectiveness of semantic priming on donor intention and commitment. Using face-to-face interactions, participants were primed with the concept of love and solicited to promise blood to the French National Blood Bank. Results showed a significant effect on willingness to donate blood and on donor commitment. The relatively simple and easily implemented technique used in this study could be of interest in improving performance of recruitment and retention campaigns.

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1. Introduction

The French National Blood Bank (Etablissement français du sang, EFS) is confronted with a chronic deficit of whole blood and blood products, which threatens the functioning of the entire health system. The World Health Organization estimates that if only 1% of the world's population donates blood, this would be sufficient to cover basic needs of safe blood on a global scale. Blood loss during delivery, is one of the leading causes of maternal deaths worldwide and the lack of blood available for the treatment of anemia, which threatens the lives of thousands of children suffering from malaria or malnutrition, is a primary cause of infant mortality in developing countries. In developed countries, such as France, modern health care systems require increasing quantities of blood that go far beyond mere vital necessity, since they are now linked to scientific standing whether medical or surgical, but also the aging of the population. Media campaigns regularly call on the generosity of potential blood donors, but perhaps because of the specificity of the act of donating blood [1], the number of donors is in

constant diminution. Indeed, the worldwide shortage of active blood donors [2] has driven researchers to investigate new ways of increasing blood donations. The challenge for the French National Blood Bank to secure the health system, is to attract new donors and to strengthen their approach for retaining active donors. In France, there is a clear difference between attitudes and actions in blood donor behavior, for while 98% of French are in favor of giving, only 4.5% of individuals are active donors [3]. This raises two questions, in particular. Firstly, how is intention transformed into commitment in the 4% of the population who are active donors? And secondly, what stops those individuals who are willing to give blood, from transforming their attitudes into action?

2. Semantic priming and behavior

Psychologists have known for some time that many cognitive processes are beyond conscious awareness or voluntary control [4]. In behavioral studies, semantic priming has frequently been observed in lexical decision tasks [5,6]. The effect of priming is defined as the influence of an event (commonly called a prime) on the treatment of a subsequent event (commonly called a target). This

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influence is reflected in facilitation when there is a link between prime and target. Research has shown that priming the activation of a concept or a mental representation can lead to differential treatment of subsequent information and/or behavior modification. Thus, the activation can be independent of the consciousness of priming information, suggesting that the subliminal activation of concepts can effectively influence the judgment and behavior of individuals. Indeed, individuals who are subliminally primed with adjectives related to the concept of guilt, are more helpful than individuals who are primed with adjectives related to sadness [7]. Our perception of the surrounding environment can affect our behavior automatically, involuntary, in a nonconscious way that is not controllable [8–11]. This effect of context on our actions has been demonstrated for a wide range of behaviors, both simple and complex. For example, the presentation of the concepts, such as *traditional* or *retired*, that are linked to stereotypes of the elderly, effectively reduces the speed with which participants leave a room [12,13]. These authors also showed that the perception of racial stereotypes encourages antagonistic behavior. Activating the concept “teacher” in the minds of students increases their performance on a general culture quiz [14], and activating the construct of “helpfulness” encourages helping behavior [15].

3. Blood donation and altruism

While several studies report that donors take pride in the act of giving, altruism and humanitarian motivation are often the reasons that are cited by donors to explain their commitment. According to Piliavin & Callero [16], a donor gains psychological and emotional satisfaction as well as self-esteem. Furthermore these authors suggest that it is reasonable to use altruism and self-interest in blood donation campaigns because of their effectiveness as recruitment mechanisms.

While some authors suggest that the motivation of active blood donors may be partly an egotistical act [17–21].

3.1. Love and altruism

The concept of love is important to human culture and the activation of this concept has been shown to foster pro-social behavior in a wide range of contexts. Subtle priming with the word “loving” Gueguen, Jacob and Charles-Sire [22], increases donations in a fund-raising context. In the street, asking people to evoke a memory involving love engenders helping behavior [23].

Lamy and his colleagues [24] consider altruism as a possible form of the concept of love, suggesting that the semantic induction of love (either implicitly or explicitly) should facilitate altruistic behavior. In addition, the induction of love may be helpful in overcoming resistance due to personal anxiety. This observation is particularly important in the context of blood donation since giving blood can be stressful for many potential donors.

Our objective was to test a semantic priming technique in the context of blood donation to determine whether the concept of love could be used to encourage people to trans-

form their intention into commitment and thereby effect an increase in donations. Building on the work of Guéguen and his colleagues who showed that the semantic induction of love increases donations in a fund-raising context [25], and engenders pro-social behavior generally [23–25], we designed a field experiment to test the effect of coupling love semantics with the priming technique on individuals' commitment to a target behavior: giving blood. Given that the semantic induction of love encourages compliance in a variety of situations, we hypothesized that associating the concept of love with a pro-social construct in an equation (“Loving = Helping”), presented as an implicit prime, would increase compliance with a request to give blood.

4. Material and methods

4.1. Participants

Students were solicited on a university campus in western France. A total of 180 students (101 men, 79 women) were asked to participate in a future blood drive and to promise their blood by completing a pledge form. Graduate students (6 women and 2 men) were recruited on a voluntary basis to act as confederates in the study. Participants were approached on four main campus sites. Most of the participants were young, healthy-looking and apparently first-time donors.

The experiment was conducted on a multi-site university campus where the population base represents more than 200,000 inhabitants. The participants were solicited when entering different buildings located on campus or walking across the campus.

Confederates were conservatively dressed in dark trousers and a long-sleeved T-shirt, over the top of which they wore a white, short-sleeved T-shirt bearing either no inscription (control) or the inscription “Loving = Helping”



Fig. 1. Illustration of the T-shirt worn by confederates in the experimental condition Loving = Helping.

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