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Implicit attitudes toward children may be unrelated to child abuse risk☆

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore whether adults possess implicit attitudes toward children and whether those attitudes are especially negative among respondents who are high in child physical abuse (CPA) risk.
Methods: The present study used an implicit evaluative priming procedure. In this procedure, participants were instructed to make decisions about the evaluative implications of target words. These words were preceded by photographs of child faces or adult faces displaying positive, neutral, or negative expressions. Reaction times for the evaluative decisions were used as an index of the extent to which photos invoked negative or positive evaluative reactions.
Results: Results from 2 studies, the first conducted on a student sample ($N = 90$) and the second on a parent sample ($N = 95$), demonstrated that evaluative congruence between the facial expressions displayed in photographs and the target words facilitated responses. Furthermore, the results suggested that regardless of CPA risk, child faces, relative to adult faces, facilitated responses to negative target words, suggesting an out-group bias. This implicit out-group bias was not moderated by respondents' CPA risk status.
Conclusions: Faces of children, relative to faces of adults, appear to activate negative information structures that facilitate evaluative decisions of negative stimuli, suggesting an out-group bias. Given that out-group biases typically lead to less favorable treatment of out-group members, additional research is needed to examine the pervasiveness of negative evaluative biases towards children and the potential implications of such biases on children's lives. Further, research examining whether high CPA risk parents and low CPA risk parents differ in how they manage initial negative evaluative reactions is needed.

The Social Information Processing (SIP) model of physically abusive parenting (Crouch & Milner, 2005; Milner, 1993, 2000, 2003) describes cognitive processes that direct parenting behavior. In this model, repeated experiences with parenting and with child stimuli contribute to the development of parenting knowledge structures called schemata. Schemata include parent–child interaction scripts as well as knowledge about child attributes or characteristics (e.g., Risser, Lovejoy, & Magliano, 2005). Importantly, some schemata are highly accessible, and hence, are more easily activated than others (Bargh & Williams, 2006). These easily activated schemata are especially likely to guide subsequent social information processing, influencing everything from the stimuli to which a parent attends to the behaviors selected in parent–child interactions.

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Schemata can contain both semantic knowledge and evaluative knowledge. Semantic knowledge includes beliefs about developmental milestones (e.g., that by 3 years of age children should be toilet trained) and general expectations about child behavior and characteristics (e.g., children are noisy; see Holden & Miller, 1999; Stolz, 1967). Evaluative knowledge includes attitudes about children, a particular child, or a child behavior (e.g., a 3-year-old who is not toilet trained is bad; quiet children are good). Importantly, each knowledge type may be linked to a specific mechanism underlying abusive parenting behavior; these may guide subsequent CPA risk reduction interventions. For example, deficits in semantic knowledge may indicate a need for parent training leading to the acquisition of appropriate developmental expectations. In comparison, the presence of parent negative evaluative biases may point to the usefulness of mindfulness training, which might reduce the influence of negative biases on parent thoughts and behaviors.

Research has just begun to explore the cognitive structures and social information processing tendencies that might characterize parents who are high in child physical abuse (CPA) risk. For example, recent results suggest that parents high in CPA risk possess highly accessible knowledge structures that link children with negative traits. One set of studies (Farc, Crouch, Milner, & Skowronski, 2008) found that high CPA risk parents were especially likely to rate children displaying ambiguous facial expressions as hostile and difficult. However, one ambiguity in the Farc et al. (2008) results reflects the classic distinction that attitude theorists have made between beliefs about an attitude object and evaluative reactions to the attitude object (e.g., Breckler & Wiggins, 1989). From the standpoint of this distinction, it is not clear whether Farc et al.'s results were due to beliefs about children (the semantic component of attitudes) or to evaluative reactions to children. One possibility is that high CPA risk parents are especially likely to have developed schemata containing a default belief that children are hostile and difficult. If this were the case, then this belief could be invoked to assign a negative interpretation to ambiguous child behavior (e.g., a neutral facial expression). A second possibility is that high CPA risk parents are especially likely to negatively evaluate children whose faces convey neutral expressions. Note that this response does not necessarily involve a judgment about, or interpretation of, the child's behavior. Instead, the response simply reflects an evaluative reaction to a stimulus (e.g., a negative reaction to the neutral-expression child face).

The Farc et al. (2008) results could have been caused by CPA risk group differences in either of these components of child-relevant schemata. The primary goal of the research described in the present article is to gain information about which of these components may have been responsible for the Farc et al. (2008) results. The research does so by probing for evidence of automatic negative evaluative responses to neutral-expression child faces.

Such automatic activation of evaluative components of knowledge structures is often cited as a property of attitudes. For example, Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, and Kardes (1986) suggested that when a strong association exists between an attitude object and an evaluation, that association can be automatically activated by simply exposing the individual to the attitude object. Subsequent research has shown that this activation may occur even when the association is relatively weak (Bargh, Chaiken, Raymond, & Hymes, 1996).

The *evaluative priming* technique relies on this effect (see Fazio & Olson, 2003). The technique attempts to assess, in a subtle and non-reactive manner, the association between an attitude object and an evaluation. The technique is predicated on the idea that responses to a question about the valence of a target stimulus can be made especially quickly when there is a match in valence between a priming stimulus and the target (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004). For example, in one set of studies (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995), on each of a series of trials, a priming photo (either a White face or a Black face) was followed by either a positive adjective (e.g., pleasant) or a negative adjective (e.g., awful). On each trial, participants made a decision about adjective valence. Fazio et al. (1995) found in-group biases. White students' responses to positive adjectives were facilitated when preceded by White faces, and responses to negative adjectives were facilitated when preceded by Black faces. In contrast, Black students' responses to positive adjectives showed facilitation when preceded by Black faces, and responses to negative adjectives showed facilitation when preceded by White faces.

Importantly, the evaluative priming method is thought to capture evaluative effects (reflecting a match in attitude valence; e.g., good, bad), but not semantic effects (reflecting knowledge of, or beliefs about, an attitude object). Accordingly, the authors reasoned that this technique could help to determine whether Farc et al.'s (2008) data reflected negative evaluative responses to children whose facial expressions were neutral, or whether the data reflected semantic beliefs that prompted negative interpretations of the neutral facial expressions exhibited by the children.

To better understand this reasoning, consider a thought experiment. Imagine that a photograph of a child displaying a neutral expression is followed by a negative word. If this photo prompts a negative evaluative response, then responses to the question of whether the word is positive or negative should be speeded (a priming effect). The emergence of such a priming effect in people high in CPA risk, but not in people low in CPA risk, would suggest that in the Farc et al. (2008) study parents high in CPA risk rated the neutral-faced child negatively because that neutral child face prompted a negative evaluative response. Now consider an alternative result: for all parents, regardless of CPA risk, no priming effect emerges when a neutral-faced child photo is followed by a negative word. The absence of a priming effect on these trials in all parents, regardless of their risk status, would not support an evaluative explanation of Farc et al.'s (2008) results. Instead, such a result would suggest that high CPA risk parents were especially likely to rate the neutral-faced child as hostile and difficult because the lack of expression on the face was interpreted as the child acting in a hostile manner.

The present article reports results from two studies designed to explore these ideas. The evaluative priming task used in these studies: (1) presented photos of children whose facial expressions were neutral, (2) followed those faces with negative words, and (3) observed whether the faces speeded responses to the question of whether the words were negative or positive. Our primary interests were: (1) whether response facilitation (revealed as shorter response latencies) emerged