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Brief Report

Burn! How implicit and explicit attitudes predict early adolescents' "hot sauce" aggression toward classroom peers

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined to what extent early adolescents' implicit and explicit evaluations of a classmate predict (a) their own aggressive behavior toward that classmate and (b) their classmate's aggressive behavior toward them. Implicit and explicit peer evaluations were assessed among 148 early adolescents (78 boys and 70 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 11.1$ years) with an approach–avoidance task and a likeability rating. Adolescents' aggression was measured by the number of grams of hot sauce administered to the peer in a "taste test." The analyses with the actor–partner interdependence model showed that girls' implicit attitude predicted aggression toward their partner and that boys' implicit attitude predicted their partner's aggression toward them. Explicit attitudes did not predict "hot sauce" aggression. The current study demonstrates that implicit evaluation of a peer can in fact be even more impactful than explicit evaluation in social interactions among peers.

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Introduction

Evaluations of others determine our social behavior toward them (e.g., [Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2008](#); [Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002](#); [McConnell & Leibold, 2001](#)). In addition to deliberate explicit evaluations, automatic implicit evaluations may also affect this interpersonal behavior. This has been demonstrated with attitudes toward groups and social behavior toward members of these

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groups (Dotsch & Wigboldus, 2008; Dovidio et al., 2002; McConnell & Leibold, 2001), but except for the study by Krause, Back, Egloff, and Schmukle (2014) there are no examinations of how the explicit and implicit evaluations of a *specific person* is predictive of the social behavior *toward that person*. It is urgent that we understand how evaluations of a specific person shape interactions with this person, especially when people are already acquainted and see each other on a daily basis. Taking these previously overlooked implicit evaluations into account may help us to better understand and predict social interactions under these circumstances. Therefore, the current study examined how early adolescents' explicit and implicit evaluations of a classmate are associated with social behavior toward that classmate. More specifically, it was tested whether implicit evaluations predict aggressive behavior between classmates when also taking explicit evaluations into account.

Explicit and implicit evaluations

In recent social psychological research, two types of social processes are distinguished (e.g., Bargh, 1994; Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000). Although not always termed consistently, the processes described in these dual process theories can be labeled *explicit* and *implicit*. Explicit processes are deliberate, controlled, and with awareness. Implicit processes are non-deliberate, automatic, and often without awareness. Whereas the measurement of explicit evaluation usually is quite straightforward by asking how much a person likes something or someone, implicit evaluation can be measured with reaction time paradigms that capture automatic evaluations that are not consciously reflected on during measurement (De Houwer, 2006). Such paradigms have been used successfully in studies with children and adolescents to examine the implicit associations with race (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2006), gender (Skowronski & Lawrence, 2001), bullying (van Goethem, Scholte, & Wiers, 2010), victimization (Rosen, Milich, & Harris, 2007), popularity (Lansu, Cillessen, & Karremans, 2012), and classroom peers in general (Lansu, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2013). In the current study, an approach–avoidance task (Rinck & Becker, 2007) was used to examine adolescents' implicit evaluative response to a randomly selected same-sex classmate. This joystick task assumed a link between the evaluation of a person and the speed of one's tendency to bring that person closer (an approach movement indicating a positive evaluation) or move it away (an avoidance movement indicating a negative evaluation). Not only has the theory behind this idea been thoroughly described (Elliot, 1999), but also the fundamental working of the approach–avoidance paradigm has been demonstrated in adults (Chen & Bargh, 1999; Eder & Rothermund, 2008) and youths (Van Cauwenberge, Sonuga-Barke, Hoppenbrouwers, Van Leeuwen, & Wiersema, 2017). Moreover, it has been shown to be practically relevant in studying emotion, addiction, and phobia (Heuer, Rinck, & Becker, 2007; Marsh, Ambady, & Kleck, 2005; Rinck & Becker, 2007) as well as youths' reactions to fantasy animals (Huijding et al., 2009), spiders (Klein, Becker, & Rinck, 2011), peers in general (Lansu et al., 2013), and popular and unpopular peers specifically (Lansu et al., 2012).

Implicit evaluation and behavior

It can be expected that many of youths' responses to peers are subject to implicit or automatic processes. According to Bargh's (1994) "four horsemen of automaticity," implicit or automatic processes are especially likely to guide behavior when a person has low awareness of a process or decision, low controllability, and low intentionality and when it is efficient to process information quickly. Empirical evidence indeed supports this link between implicit attitudes and social behavior in adults. Negative implicit evaluation of a minority group is related to more negative non-deliberate social behavior such as nonverbal communication (Dovidio et al., 2002), unfriendly behavior in a conversation (McConnell & Leibold, 2001), and larger interpersonal distance (Dotsch & Wigboldus, 2008) toward minority group members. There are multiple studies demonstrating a link between implicit evaluation of a group and behavior toward a member of that group, but very few studies have examined whether implicit attitudes toward a specific other person also predict behavior toward that person. Because dual process theories are not limited to attitudes toward groups of people predicting behavior, implicit evaluation of specific others may also play a unique role in shaping the pleasantness of the social interactions with these specific others. The findings of Krause et al. (2014) support this suggestion.

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