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# Does contextualized attitude change depend on individual differences in responses to belief-incongruent information?<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that changes in the evaluation of an attitude object can be limited to the context in which counterattitudinal information was learned. To account for these findings, it has been proposed that exposure to expectancy-violating information enhances attention to context, which leads to an integration of the context into the representation of expectancy-violating counterattitudinal information. Although a considerable body of evidence supports these assumptions, it is still unclear whether contextualized attitude change is a general phenomenon that is robust across individuals or instead depends on psychological characteristics of the perceiver. To address this question, the current research tested whether contextualized attitude change is moderated by three individual difference variables that are known to influence responses to belief-incongruent information: preference for consistency, need for structure, and implicit theories of personality. Based on the hypothesis that contextualized attitude change is due to enhanced attention to context during encoding of expectancy-violating information, we hypothesized that individual differences along the three dimensions should moderate contextualized attitude change via differences in attention to context in response to expectancy-violating information. Contrary to this hypothesis, none of the three variables moderated contextualized attitude change (Experiments 1 and 2) and attention to context during exposure to expectancy-violating information (Experiment 3). Implications for the generality of contextualized attitude change, research on the three individual difference variables, and cognitive consistency more broadly are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

People often behave inconsistently. One might observe a new colleague being nice and friendly at work, but later find the same colleague being nasty and rude at a grocery store. How do observers account for such inconsistencies in their evaluations of others? Previous research suggests that changes in the evaluation of another person in response to counterattitudinal information about that person can be limited to the context in which the counterattitudinal information was learned (for reviews, see Gawronski & Cesario, 2013; Gawronski et al., 2018). That is, evaluations may reflect newly learned counterattitudinal information only in the context in which this information was learned and the valence of initial attitudinal information in any other context. To explain such patterns of contextualized attitude change, it has been proposed that expectancy-violating information enhances attention to context, which leads to an integration of the context into the representation of expectancy-violating

counterattitudinal information (Gawronski, Rydell, Vervliet, & De Houwer, 2010). Although these assumptions are supported by a considerable body of evidence (for a review, see Gawronski et al., 2018), it is still unclear whether contextualized attitude change is a general phenomenon that is robust across individuals or instead depends on psychological characteristics of the perceiver.

Drawing on the hypothesis that contextualized attitude change is due to enhanced attention to context during the encoding of expectancy-violating information (Gawronski et al., 2010), the current research tested whether contextualized attitude change is moderated by three individual difference variables that are known to influence responses to belief-incongruent information: preference for consistency (PFC; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995), need for structure (NFS; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993), and implicit theories of personality (ITP; Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997). Across three experiments, we tested whether individual differences along the three dimensions moderate contextualized changes in evaluations of another person (Experiments 1

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and 2) and attention to context during exposure to expectancy-violating information (Experiment 3).

### 1.1. Contextualized attitude change

To reconcile mixed findings regarding the malleability of attitudes, [Gawronski et al. \(2018\)](#) suggested that whether or not attitudes appear resistant to counterattitudinal information can depend on the context in which evaluations are measured. Specifically, they suggested that evaluations of an attitude object might reflect newly learned counterattitudinal information only when measured in the context in which the counterattitudinal information was learned. Yet, evaluations may continue to reflect initially learned attitudinal information when measured in the context in which the initial attitudinal information was learned or a novel context in which the attitude object has not been encountered before (for a review of similar findings in research on animal learning, see [Bouton, 2004](#)). For example, if Megan observes her new colleague Don being nice and friendly at work, and later observes Don being nasty and rude at a grocery store, her evaluation of Don may reflect the new, negative information only within the context of the grocery store. Conversely, the initial, positive information may continue to influence her evaluation of Don within the work context as well as any novel context in which she has not encountered him before (e.g., a resort).

[Rydell and Gawronski \(2009\)](#) provided the first evidence that social attitudes show such patterns of contextualized attitude change (for a meta-analysis, see [Gawronski, Hu, Rydell, Vervliet, & De Houwer, 2015](#)). In a series of studies, participants first formed an impression of a target individual based on statements describing either positive or negative behaviors. The statements were paired with a picture of the target, both of which were presented against a colored background (e.g., blue). Subsequently, participants learned new information about the target that was evaluatively incongruent with the initial information. The new statements were paired with the same picture against a different colored background (e.g., yellow). Finally, participants completed an affective priming task ([Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005](#)) to measure spontaneous evaluations of the target. Critically, the target's picture was presented against three different colored backgrounds to assess whether participants' evaluations differed across contexts: the background of the initial attitudinal information (e.g., blue), the background of the counterattitudinal information (e.g., yellow), and a novel background that was not part of the impression formation task (e.g., green). [Rydell and Gawronski \(2009\)](#) found that evaluations reflected the counterattitudinal information only when the target was presented against the background in which the counterattitudinal information was learned. In contrast, evaluations reflected the initial attitudinal information when the target was presented against the background in which the initial attitudinal information was learned. Moreover, when the target was presented against a novel background that was not part of the impression formation task, evaluations again reflected the initial attitudinal information.

### 1.2. Representational theory

To account for context-dependent changes in evaluations, [Gawronski et al. \(2010\)](#) proposed a representational theory that explains why the effect of counterattitudinal information is sometimes limited to the context in which this information was learned (for a review, see [Gawronski et al., 2018](#)). A central assumption of this theory is that attention to context during the learning of evaluative information determines whether the context is integrated into the mental representation of that information. [Gawronski et al. \(2010\)](#) further suggested that attention to context is typically low when encoding initial attitudinal information about an object (see [Gilbert & Malone, 1995](#)), leading initial attitudinal information to be stored in a context-free representation. Moreover, because attention to context is typically

enhanced by exposure to expectancy-violating information (see [Roese & Sherman, 2007](#)), expectancy-violating counterattitudinal information is assumed to be stored in a contextualized representation. Thus, after learning attitude-incongruent information about an object, the mental representation of that object takes on a “dual” nature by including (1) a context-free representation of the initial attitudinal information and (2) contextualized representation of the counterattitudinal information. As a result, evaluative responses to the object should differ depending on the presence versus absence of the context in which the counterattitudinal information was learned. In line with the principle of pattern matching in memory activation ([Smith, 1996](#)), the contextualized representation of counterattitudinal information should be activated when the object is encountered in the context in which the counterattitudinal information was learned. Conversely, the context-free representation of initial attitudinal information should be activated when the object is encountered in a context that is different from the context in which the counterattitudinal information was learned.

In addition to providing an explanation of contextualized attitude change, [Gawronski et al.'s \(2010\)](#) representational theory also includes specific predictions about the conditions under which contextualized attitude change should *not* occur. Specifically, the theory suggests that contextualized attitude change should be eliminated when attention to context is low during both the encoding of initial attitudinal information and the encoding of counterattitudinal information. In this case, the two kinds of information should be integrated in a single context-free representation, leading to evaluative responses that reflect a mixture of attitudinal and counterattitudinal information regardless of the context. Consistent with the proposed role of attention to context, [Gawronski, Ye, Rydell, and De Houwer \(2014\)](#) demonstrated that attention to incidental context cues (i.e., background color of a computer screen) is relatively high during the encoding of attitude-incongruent information, but relatively low during the encoding of attitude-congruent information (see also [Brannon & Gawronski, in press](#); [Brannon, Sacchi, & Gawronski, 2017](#); [Ye, Tong, Chiu, & Gawronski, 2017](#)). Moreover, [Gawronski et al. \(2010\)](#) found that contextualized attitude change was fully eliminated when attention to context during the encoding of attitude-incongruent information had been experimentally reduced. In this case, evaluations reflected an equally weighted mixture of attitudinal and counterattitudinal information regardless of the context.

Although these and various other findings support the assumptions of the representational theory (for a review, see [Gawronski et al., 2018](#)), it is still unclear whether contextualized attitude change is a general phenomenon that is robust across individuals or instead depends on psychological characteristics of the perceiver. Drawing on the hypothesis that contextualized attitude change is due to enhanced attention to context during the encoding of expectancy-violating information, the current research tested whether contextualized attitude change is moderated by three individual difference variables that are known to influence responses to belief-incongruent information.

### 1.3. Individual differences in responses to inconsistency

According to the representational theory, a critical factor underlying contextualized attitude change is mental conflict in response to belief-incongruent information, which is known to elicit a broad range of cognitive, affective, and motivational reactions ([Festinger, 1957](#); [Gawronski & Brannon, in press](#); [Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012](#)). These reactions are assumed to be central for contextualized attitude change, in that they involve enhanced attention to context during the encoding of expectancy-violating counterattitudinal information. Classic theories proposed that inconsistency between cognitive elements is inherently aversive (e.g., [Festinger, 1957](#)), which motivates people to reconcile the inconsistency. However, later work suggested that people differ in their tolerance for inconsistency and, thus, the extent to which they show cognitive, affective, and

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