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The environment influences whether high-fat foods are associated with palatable or with unhealthy

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Abstract

This study investigated whether relatively automatic evaluations of food differ between situations and between obese people and lean controls. These evaluations were assessed in the affective priming paradigm (APP)—a response latency based measure for associations. In Experiment 1, we either focused participants (33 obese and 26 lean controls) on the palatability (restaurant condition) or on the healthiness (health condition) of food, prior to the APP. Independent of weight-status, relatively automatic evaluations of food were based on palatability in the restaurant condition, and on health in the health condition. So, the current focus of attention can shape the way foods are evaluated relatively automatically. In Experiment 2, craving was induced in participants (27 obese and 29 lean controls). Unexpectedly, the craving induction did not achieve its goal of focusing on the palatability of food in general, but just for low-fat foods, possibly because of the health-emphasizing environment—a hospital. Interestingly, obese people showed a stronger palatability priming effect with increasing levels of initial craving. For normal weight controls the effect was in the same direction, but missed significance. In our environment, palatability of food may be too salient, and health may not be salient enough, influencing automatic food-evaluations.

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Keywords: Eating attitudes; Obesity; Affective priming paradigm; Automatic evaluation

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Introduction

The intake of high-fat foods seems an important factor contributing to the global obesity epidemic (e.g., Lissner & Heitmann, 1995). This heightened intake of high-fat foods in obese people may be caused by an increased preference for this type of food (Rissanen et al., 2002). An approach to assess these food preferences is to employ so-called indirect measures. Recently, there has been an enormous increase in the application of indirect measures, such as the affective priming paradigm (APP) (Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986) and the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), in clinical psychology (e.g., de Jong, Pasman, Kindt, & van den Hout, 2001; Roefs & Jansen, 2002; Teachman, Gregg, & Woody, 2001).

In the two experiments reported in this article, one of these indirect measures was used: the APP. In this paradigm, two word-stimuli are presented in quick succession, a prime followed by a target. The participant does not need to respond to the prime, which is simply displayed and replaced by the target. The participant only needs to decide as quickly as possible whether the target word is positive or negative. The dependent variables are the response latency in response to the target and the percentage of errors. The focus of the paradigm is on the extent to which the presentation of the prime influences the response to the target. Typically (e.g., Bargh, Chaiken, Gower, & Pratto, 1992; Fazio et al., 1986; Hermans, De Houwer, & Eelen, 1994, 2001), affectively congruent prime-target pairs (e.g., “love”–“happy”) lead to shorter response latencies to the target word than do affectively incongruent prime-target pairs (e.g., “love”–“awful”). The critical idea is that the pattern of response latencies as a function of affect match between prime and target indicates how people evaluate the prime on a fairly automatic level. Applied to the palatability of food, if people respond faster on congruent trials (‘palatable—positive’ and ‘unpalatable—negative’) than on incongruent trials (‘palatable—negative’ and ‘unpalatable—positive’), it can be inferred that they like palatable foods more than unpalatable foods.

These indirect measures are designed to tap automatic associations or attitudes. One of the main reasons for indirect measures’ popularity is the assumption that these automatic processes are inflexible—stable across situations—and cannot be influenced by someone’s goals or intentions. This assumption has contributed to the idea that attitudes or evaluations assessed by these indirect measures may represent someone’s true attitude or evaluation (Blair, 2002). Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, and Williams (1995) even called the affective priming paradigm a “bona fide pipeline” for attitude or evaluation measurement. This certainly would be an interesting way of assessing food preferences.

However, Banaji (2001) pointed out that both indirect and direct measures (e.g., self-reports) can be valid indicators of attitudes or associations, “each of a different form of the same attitude object and within the same mind (p. 136).” Also Fazio and Olson (2003) now share this point of view, and according to their MODE model (Fazio & Towles-Schwen, 1999), which type of measure (indirect vs. direct) is predictive of behavior depends on someone’s motivation and opportunity to engage in more controlled processing. So, though there may not be such thing as a “real attitude”, the study of automatic evaluations is still interesting in that it can be very informative to assess what someone’s relatively spontaneous associations are, because they guide behavior when there is no opportunity or motivation for more controlled processing. This also holds true for research into food preferences of obese people. When these food preferences are

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