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Differential processing of self-referenced versus other-referenced body information among American and Chinese young adults with body image concerns

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Abstract

Two experiments assessed the impact of self-referenced and other-referenced primes on processing of body-related information in samples of young adults from the United States and China. In Experiment 1, 46 American university students (41 females, 5 males) comprising groups higher and lower in body weight concerns engaged in a computer-based experiment wherein subliminal self-relevant (*I*) and other-related (*He*) primes were followed by positive and negative body words to be correctly classified as such. Relative to control group participants, those high in weight concerns had slower response latencies when classifying words presented with an *I* prime, especially positive *I*-primed words, compared to *He*-primed body words. This pattern was not observed for control words. In a second experiment comprised of 48 Chinese university students (45 females, 3 males), respondents high in weight concerns were again slower responding to *I*-primed body words relative to *He*-primed body words and control group participants. Consistent with cognitive perspectives identifying self-schemata as a central basis for body image disturbances, findings indicated both Chinese and American young adults with concerns about body weight experience interference in processing body information linked to the self.
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During the past 15 years, cognitive–behavioral accounts of body image disturbances have garnered considerable interest (e.g., Vitousek & Hollon, 1990; Williamson, 1996; Williamson, Muller, Reas, & Thaw, 1999). From this perspective, body image concerns stem from negative self-schemata (Vitousek & Hollon, 1990), knowledge structures about body size and shape that direct attention, perception, and information processing about the body. These models assume that: 1) individual differences on cognitive tasks reveal underlying psychopathology; 2) cognitive biases are specific to self-referenced (not other-referenced) eating and body shape; 3) cognitive biases are a function of disordered body schema, not disordered eating, and can therefore be seen in non-clinical samples; and 4) cognitive biases are specific to weight and body concerns, not more general biases in information processing (Williamson et al., 1999).

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Considerable evidence supports these propositions. Samples with disturbances in body image may have biases in attention towards (e.g., Fairburn, Cooper, Cooper, McKenna, & Anastasiades, 1991; Fuller, Williamson, & Anderson, 1995; Schotte, McNally, & Turner, 1990), memory for (e.g., Baker, Williamson, & Stylve, 1995; Sebastian, Williamson, & Blouin, 1996; Watkins, Martin, Moller, & Day, 1995), and interpretations of (e.g., Jackman, Williamson, Netemeyer, & Anderson, 1995; Watkins et al., 1995; Williamson, Perrin, Blouin, & Barbin, 2000) body-related stimuli but not control stimuli. Nonetheless, Lee and Shafran (2004) concluded there is no clear consensus as to whether attention biases are due to the activation of self-relevant body schema or are simply a function of anxiety-eliciting body-related stimuli that impair cognitive functioning. These authors also raise methodological concerns in relation to research on attention biases, noting a nearly exclusive focus on responses to negative targets, the occasional reliance on crude reaction time measures, and frequent failures to provide information about control stimuli. Moreover, assessment methods typically used in past work (e.g., Stroop test, dot-probe task) fail to rule out the potentially confounding influence of responding under strategic control.

Subliminal priming, an implicit measurement technique that involves presenting an initial prime (e.g., word, phrase, picture) for a brief interval that cannot be consciously perceived (Fazio & Olson, 2003), may elucidate effects of non-consciously perceived stimuli and conclusively rule out other explanations for findings obtained with supraliminal or priming (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Furthermore, the strategy may clarify the extent to cognitive biases related to body image are a function of self-referenced information processing (Hetts, Sakuma, & Pelham, 1999) versus anxiety-eliciting external stimuli.

A premise central to subliminal priming paradigms is that exposure to an attitude object (i.e., a prime) temporarily facilitates judgments of stimuli sharing valences with the attitude object and interferes with judgments of stimuli having dissimilar valences (e.g., Fazio, 2001; Fazio, Sanbonmastu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986). For example, the negative prime word, *cockroach* should facilitate a faster response in correctly judging an affectively congruent target word, *disgusting*, as negative but interfere with a response to correctly judge an affectively incongruent target, *wise*, as positive (Fazio, 2001). In either case, the process is potentiated by automatic activation of evaluations associated with the prime. Any consequent effect on response latencies to positive versus negative targets provides information about evaluations of the prime (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Although any word can serve as a prime, Hetts et al. (1999) argued that identity-relevant pronouns such as *I* are routinely related to evaluative stimuli, and accumulate affective associations that mirror one's representations of self. Differential responding to stimuli following self-related versus control primes would suggest that self-evaluations rather than anxiety-eliciting external stimuli account for biased information processing. Hetts et al. (1999) also argue the relative accessibility of positive and negative associations to identity-relevant primes reveals how favorably people evaluate aspects of identity. For example, these researchers and others (e.g., Spalding & Hardin, 1999) have used identity-relevant primes (*I* and *We*) to assess latencies in judging positive and negative words; presumably, faster judgments of positive words after self-primes reflect implicit self-esteem.

Based on these arguments, if information processing biases among persons with body image disturbances reflect effects of processing *self-referenced* body stimuli rather than external stimuli per se, then body information following self-related primes such as *I* should be processed differently than body information following primes not relevant to self such as *He*. Furthermore, if such information processing biases are related to *negative* self-schemata, then self-related primes such as *I* or *Me* should result in response competition and longer latencies in judging positive body words and response facilitation and shorter latencies in judging negative body words. Finally, if contents of self-schemata are specific to body image (Williamson, 1996), then persons higher and lower in body image concerns should not differ in responses to control stimuli not related to the body.

These premises were tested in two experiments. In Experiment 1, the impact of subliminal priming on processing of body information was examined in American young adults comprised of subgroups reporting higher and lower levels of body image concerns. It was hypothesized that participants with increased weight/size concerns would be slower classifying body words following a self-relevant (*I*) prime than body words that followed an control pronoun (*He*). Reaction times within this group were expected to be slower in judging positive body words compared to negative body words. This pattern was not expected for positive and negative control words or among participants reporting low levels of weight concern. Experiment 2 extended hypotheses to a sample from the People's Republic of China.

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