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Malleability of attitudes or malleability of the IAT?

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ABSTRACT

In the current set of experiments, we establish, and explore the consequences of, the imprecision that characterizes the attribute response labels typically employed in the Implicit Association Test (IAT). In Experiment 1, we demonstrate the malleability of the IAT, as conventionally implemented. IAT scores are shown to be influenced by perspective mindsets induced by an unrelated preceding task. Then, we explore how the malleability of the IAT can lead to the inference that attitude change has occurred even when there is very good reason to believe it has not (Experiment 2), and conversely, how it can obscure the detection of attitude change when such change is indeed likely to have occurred (Experiment 3). We provide conceptual explanations for these discrepancies and suggest methodological improvements to enhance the specificity of IAT measures.

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Introduction

Most behavioral scientists who employ questionnaire measures have experienced the occasional, troubling realization that participants interpreted a specific question differently than they had intended. Whether the cause was poor wording, the implications of a preceding set of questions, or some unexpected natural event that cast a different light on the matter at hand, it became apparent that the participants' responses were less than correspondent to the query we had been posing. Indeed, years of research have been devoted to the study of survey responding as an exercise in communication between the questioner and the respondent; "questions shape answers" (Schwarz, 1999, p. 93). It has been shown repeatedly that when survey questions are ambiguous, participants guess or use contextual information to disambiguate and respond as best they can (Bickart, 1992; Billiet, Waterplas, & Loosveldt, 1992; Krosnick, 1992; Krosnick & Alwin, 1987). Although they may stem from a desire to be cooperative, the outcome of such efforts to disambiguate have the potential to produce less than meaningful data and can lead the researcher to draw inappropriate inferences. Hence, experienced survey researchers consistently strive to construct questions that are free of ambiguities.

Perhaps because of the basic assumptions underlying implicit measures (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), the extent to which these attitude measurement tools are influenced by efforts on the part of the participants to disambiguate the nature of the task before them has not yet been as carefully examined. Researchers have devoted considerable effort to determining exactly what measures like the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) are assessing, as well as the mechanisms that underlie the measurement procedures (e.g., De Houwer, 2009; Fazio & Olson, 2003; Govan & Williams, 2004; Karpinski & Hilton, 2001). However, more research is needed so as to inform the scientific community about the appropriateness of inferences that might be drawn from IAT findings. Most importantly, the implications of any disambiguating efforts by the participants for inferences regarding the measurement procedure vs. underlying representation require careful analysis. When change is observed on the IAT, does that change reflect the malleability of attitudes or the malleability of the measure? We argue that the imprecise response labels typically employed in the IAT allow for plasticity that can lead to erroneous inferences regarding the malleability of attitudes.

Specifically, the present research demonstrates that the IAT as conventionally implemented is open to multiple interpretations, and therefore, can provide contextually malleable measurement outcomes (Experiment 1). We then explore important consequences of the IAT's malleability for the inferences that can be drawn regarding the presence or absence of attitude change following a social influence attempt. Whereas past research often has interpreted change in IAT scores as evidence of the malleability of attitudes, we argue that the malleability of the IAT can sometimes lead to the mistaken inference that attitude change has occurred even when there is very good reason to believe it has not (Experiments 2). However, we also show that the traditional

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implementation of the IAT can sometimes obscure the detection of attitude change when such change is indeed likely to have occurred (Experiment 3). We provide a conceptual explanation for these discrepancies and suggest methodological improvements to focus IAT measures more precisely.

The sensitivity of the IAT to extrapersonal associations

Since its inception, the IAT has become the preferred implicit measure for many psychological variables. Because implicit measures are presumed to be relatively immune from many of the concerns that plague self-report measures, the IAT has been especially useful in domains in which social desirability is a concern. This has led to its extensive use in areas such as stereotyping and prejudice (e.g., Blair, 2002; Greenwald et al., 1998; Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005), health behaviors (e.g., Sherman, Presson, Chassin, Rose, & Koch, 2002), and self-esteem (e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). Despite this wide usage, evidence indicates that the IAT as typically implemented may not be as robust to momentary, irrelevant contextual considerations as once believed (e.g., Karpinski & Hilton, 2001; Olson & Fazio, 2004).

IAT performance depends on one's ability to cope with a response mapping problem. During the critical blocks, any given response key has two meanings: one key is to be pressed, for example, whenever an exemplar of Category X or something "good" is presented, and the other key whenever an exemplar of Category Y or something "bad" is presented. To perform well, one needs to remember the dual meaning of any given key. The easier it is to associate X with good and/or Y with bad, the faster one can respond. The assumption is that the ease of remembering and working with a given response mapping is a function of individuals' attitudes toward X and Y. But, why would attitudes be the only form of information to affect the efficiency with which the dual meaning of a response key can be accommodated?

Olson and Fazio (2004) argued that IAT participants may be influenced by *any* information that can facilitate their management of the response mapping, including information that is inconsistent with their attitudes. They maintained that category labels such as the commonly employed "good/bad" or "pleasant/unpleasant" are open to multiple interpretations and, hence, allow for the activation of any information that might be useful for managing the demands of the categorization task. Most importantly, the perspective intended by such category labels is unspecified: "good"/"bad" or "pleasant"/"unpleasant" to whom? Should the stimuli be categorized from the perspective of the self, the culture, or the researcher, to consider just a few possibilities?

An important consequence of this category label ambiguity is that the attitude estimates provided by traditional versions of the IAT can be influenced by extrapersonal associations (Han, Olson, & Fazio, 2006a; Olson & Fazio, 2004) – attitude-irrelevant knowledge that does not form the basis of the individual's attitude toward to the object. Such extrapersonal knowledge sometimes arises from the recognition that others have attitudes that differ from one's own, whether those others be a specific individual, a class of people, or even more general cultural norms. For example, the knowledge that my neighbor was a huge supporter of presidential candidate McCain did not impact my support for Obama. Nevertheless, such knowledge can facilitate a respondent's efforts to accommodate the dual meaning of the response keys during the IAT. Thinking about Aunt Mary or my neighbor's preferences, the researcher's presumed intent, or the cultural perspective may promote faster responding for a given response mapping.

A much more thorough and lengthy consideration of extrapersonal associations can be found in Olson, Fazio, and Han (2009). Responding to various questions about how "extrapersonal" might be conceptualized (Gawronski, Peters, & LeBel, 2008; Nosek & Hansen, 2008a), Olson, Crawford, and Devlin (2009) address issues concerning the conceptual and empirical distinction between personal and extrapersonal associations, including definitional matters, the development of extrapersonal knowledge, and the ensuing advantage that typically characterizes personal associations in terms of their likelihood of activation. In the present context, we wish to emphasize only three related points. The first is definitional, and concerns both attitudes and extrapersonal associations. Consistent with such classic definitions as those of Allport (1935) and Thurstone (1928), we view attitudes as inherently personal reactions to an attitude object. More specifically, we consider attitudes to be summary evaluations that have the potential to be automatically activated upon encountering an attitude object and that then guide construal of the object in the immediate situation and ultimately approach/avoidance decisions (see Fazio, 2007). Simply put, extrapersonal associations are items of information that, although associated with the attitude object, have not contributed to one's summary evaluation of that object. This may be because the information was deemed inconsequential or irrelevant to one's personal tastes, or because it was rejected as untrue (Petty, Briñol, & DeMarree, 2007). Or, it may simply be because the information played no role as the attitude developed. An individual with a severe allergy to peanuts in all likelihood developed a negative attitude as a consequence of the first causally identifiable allergic reaction, and this aversion will have been reinforced by the individual's regular surveillance of food items and menus for the presence of peanuts. A sibling's liking for peanut butter played no role in the development of this negative attitude, nor did other knowledge related to peanuts, such as the cuteness of the Mr. Peanut character (a peanut sporting a top hat and cane) that serves as the mascot for Planters Peanuts. Information of this sort is certainly available in memory, but it did not contribute to the person's negative attitude toward peanuts.

The second point to be highlighted follows directly from this conceptualization. Extrapersonal associations should not be regarded as corresponding directly to cultural associations (Nosek & Hansen, 2008a). There is no necessary equivalence between the two. Indeed, cultural knowledge, i.e., how the attitude object is generally portrayed within the culture, may serve as the very basis for a given individual's attitude. It is when personal attitudes deviate from the more cultural, normative view that such cultural knowledge can be considered extrapersonal for a person. Most lovers of anchovies recognize that their positivity places them in the minority, but this does not stop them from anticipating delight at the prospect of requesting that their caesar salads be served with anchovies. For such individuals, knowledge of the more culturally predominant negativity assumes the status of an extrapersonal association.

Finally, we wish to emphasize that our focus on the concept of extrapersonal associations is not intended to deny in any way the essential social psychological principle that social influence is pervasive in nature. Individuals develop attitudes not only from their personal experiences when interacting with the attitude object, but also through the social transmission of information about the attitude object, the norms that characterize their reference groups, and even their mere awareness of others' attitudes. Social forces have long been known to produce not only public compliance, but also private acceptance, at least under certain specifiable conditions (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Informational social influence is undoubtedly a powerful force, as is direct persuasion. Yet, it also seems evident that at least sometimes the attitudes of at least some people are not affected by their knowledge of others' views or the communicated attributes of the attitude object. Social influence phenomena are not universal. It is when they fail to impact a given individual's attitudes that such information meets our

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