

NATIONAL AFFAIRS



Findings: A Daily Roundup of Academic Studies
Serious, Sublime, Surreal, and Otherwise
Compiled by Kevin Lewis

Tuesday, July 12, 2011

Prime Time

A Single Exposure to the American Flag Shifts Support Toward Republicanism up to 8 Months Later

Travis Carter, Melissa Ferguson & Ran Hassin

Psychological Science, forthcoming

Abstract:

There is scant evidence that incidental cues in the environment significantly alter people's political judgments and behavior in a durable way. We report that a brief exposure to the American flag led to a shift toward Republican beliefs, attitudes, and voting behavior among both Republican and Democratic participants, despite their overwhelming belief that exposure to the flag would not influence their behavior. In Experiment 1, which was conducted online during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, a single exposure to an American flag resulted in a significant increase in participants' Republican voting intentions, voting behavior, political beliefs, and implicit and explicit attitudes, with some effects lasting 8 months after the exposure to the prime. In Experiment 2, we replicated the findings more than a year into the current Democratic presidential term. These results constitute the first evidence that nonconscious priming effects from exposure to a national flag can bias the citizenry toward one political party and can have considerable durability.

Working for the System: Motivated Defense of Meritocratic Beliefs

Alison Ledgerwood et al.

Social Cognition, June 2011, Pages 322-340

Abstract:

Conceptualizing the widespread belief in meritocracy as a case of system justification, we examined how the desire to justify the societal status quo motivates cognitive and behavioral defense of the notion that hard work leads to success. Experiment 1 demonstrated that participants judged objectively equivalent evidence as better in quality when it led to a conclusion that supported (vs. challenged) a link between hard work and success in American society, and that this pro-meritocracy bias in judgment increased following system threat. Experiment 2 tested a paradoxical implication for behavior: Participants defended the system by working harder when they were told that success on the task was due to luck (vs. effort), but only when the task was perceived to be system-relevant. In Experiment 3, this pattern replicated even for participants who did not explicitly endorse a personal belief in meritocracy. Taken together, these results suggest that meritocratic beliefs serve to justify the social system and elucidate the cognitive and behavioral mechanisms used to defend such beliefs.

Disgusting smells cause decreased liking of gay men

Yoel Inbar, David Pizarro & Paul Bloom
Emotion, forthcoming

Abstract:

An induction of disgust can lead to more negative attitudes toward an entire social group: Participants who were exposed to a noxious ambient odor reported less warmth toward gay men. This effect of disgust was equally strong for political liberals and conservatives, and was specific to attitudes toward gay men - there was only a weak effect of disgust on people's warmth toward lesbians, and no consistent effect on attitudes toward African Americans, the elderly, or a range of political issues.

Mimicry reduces racial prejudice

Michael Inzlicht, Jennifer Gutsell & Lisa Legault
Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, forthcoming

Abstract:

Humans are empathic animals. We automatically match other people's motor responses, allowing us to get "under the skin" of other people. Although this perception-action-coupling - a form of motor resonance-occurs spontaneously, this happens less readily with the outgroup (vs. the ingroup) and for those high (vs. low) in prejudice. Thus, prejudice diminishes our tendency to resonate with the outgroup. Here we suggest that the reverse is also possible - that resonating with the actions of an outgroup member can reduce prejudice. We predict, in other words, that explicitly mimicking the outgroup can reduce prejudice. Participants watched a 140-second video depicting actors repeatedly reaching for and drinking from a glass of water. They passively watched a video with Black actors; watched the video and mimicked the Black actors; or watched and mimicked a video with actors from their ingroup. Participants then completed the Affect Misattribution Procedure (Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005), a measure of implicit anti-Black prejudice, and an explicit symbolic racism measure. Results indicate that the outgroup-mimicry group had similar implicit preference for Blacks and Whites, unlike the other two groups, which preferred Whites over Blacks. The outgroup-mimicry group also reported less explicit racism towards Blacks than the ingroup-mimicry group, but no less than the ingroup-observation group. Mimicking specific outgroup members, therefore, reduces implicit, and possibly explicit, bias against the outgroup more generally.

Adopting the System-Justifying Attitudes of Others: Effects of Trivial Interpersonal Connections in the Context of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Rick Cheung, Steven Noel & Curtis Hardin
Social Cognition, June 2011, Pages 255-269

Abstract:

Although system justification research has focused most on the needs to explain and control the social world, system justification may also be regulated by the need to maintain social connections with others. Three experiments demonstrate that trivial interpersonal ties to system-justifying others can facilitate the endorsement of system-justifying attitudes, sometimes even in the face of social exclusion. In Experiment 1, participants exhibited stronger implicit pro-system, anti-labor attitudes after playing a game of catch with economically advantaged, high-status (vs. equal-status) partners. Experiments 2 and 3 demonstrated that social exclusion (vs. inclusion) by system-justifying partners increased endorsement of implicit anti-system attitudes - unless participants believed that they shared a birthday or food preference with their partners. In sum, results suggest that system-justifying attitudes are based in part on motivations to regulate interpersonal relationships, including relationships that are temporary, superficial, and even exclusionary.

Lack of power enhances visual perceptual discrimination

Mario Weick, Ana Guinote & David Wilkinson

Abstract:

Powerless individuals face much challenge and uncertainty. As a consequence, they are highly vigilant and closely scrutinize their social environments. The aim of the present research was to determine whether these qualities enhance performance in more basic cognitive tasks involving simple visual feature discrimination. To test this hypothesis, participants performed a series of perceptual matching and search tasks involving colour, texture, and size discrimination. As predicted, those primed with powerlessness generated shorter reaction times and made fewer eye movements than either powerful or control participants. The results indicate that the heightened vigilance shown by powerless individuals is associated with an advantage in performing simple types of psychophysical discrimination. These findings highlight, for the first time, an underlying competency in perceptual cognition that sets powerless individuals above their powerful counterparts, an advantage that may reflect functional adaptation to the environmental challenge and uncertainty that they face.

Deflecting Stereotype Threat Through Downward Comparison: When Comparison with Immigrants Boosts the Performance of Stigmatized Native Students

Paul N'Dri Konan et al.

Social Justice Research, June 2011, Pages 191-205

Abstract:

Two experiments examined the effect of comparison with immigrants on the intellectual performance of stigmatized native students (i.e., women and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds). It was predicted that such a comparison may boost the test performance of both groups of students rather than comparison with their counterparts who are not stigmatized. In line with this hypothesis, we found that female European students (Study 1) performed better on a math test when they were led to compare with a female immigrant rather than with another female European student. Study 2 replicated this finding in regard to the performance of native students with low socioeconomic status on a general intelligence test. Results are discussed in terms of stereotype susceptibility predicaments and their implications for native-immigrant performance gaps.

The substitutability of physical and social warmth in daily life

John Bargh & Idit Shalev

Emotion, forthcoming

Abstract:

Classic and contemporary research on person perception has demonstrated the paramount importance of interpersonal warmth. Recent research on embodied cognition has shown that feelings of social warmth or coldness can be induced by experiences of physical warmth or coldness, and vice versa. Here we show that people tend to self-regulate their feelings of social warmth through applications of physical warmth, apparently without explicit awareness of doing so. In Study 1, higher scores on a measure of chronic loneliness (social coldness) were associated with an increased tendency to take warm baths or showers. In Study 2, a physical coldness manipulation significantly increased feelings of loneliness. In Study 3, needs for social affiliation and for emotion regulation, triggered by recall of a past rejection experience, were subsequently eliminated by an interpolated physical warmth experience. Study 4 provided evidence that people are not explicitly aware of the relationship between physical and social warmth (coldness), as they do not consider a target person who often bathes to be any lonelier than one who does not, with all else being equal. Together, these findings suggest that physical and social warmth are to some extent substitutable in daily life and that this substitution reflects an unconscious self-regulatory mechanism.

Increasing perceived variability reduces prejudice and discrimination

Abstract:

We examined whether increasing individuals' perceived variability of an out-group reduces prejudice and discrimination toward its members. In a series of 4 laboratory and field experiments, we attracted participants' attention to either the homogeneity or the heterogeneity of members of an out-group, and then measured their attitudes or behaviors. Perceived variability was manipulated by making subgroups salient, by portraying the out-group members as having diverse opinions, by making salient that out-group members have different characteristics, or by asking participants to think about differences among out-group members. Prejudice and discrimination were measured in terms of self-reported attitudes, distribution of rewards, helping an out-group confederate, and evaluation of an out-group candidate in a simulated hiring decision. In all experiments, perceived variability decreased prejudice and discrimination. This effect may be due to the fact that perceived variability decreases the role of group membership in the production of attitudes and behaviors toward other individuals.

Washing away your (good or bad) luck: Physical cleansing affects risk-taking behavior

Alison Jing Xu, Rami Zwick & Norbert Schwarz

Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, forthcoming

Abstract:

Many superstitious practices entail the belief that good or bad luck can be "washed away." Consistent with this belief, participants who recalled (Experiment 1) or experienced (Experiment 2) an episode of bad luck were more willing to take risk after having as opposed to not having washed their hands, whereas participants who recalled or experienced an episode of good luck were less willing to take risk after having as opposed to not having washed their hands. Thus, the psychological effects of physical cleansings extend beyond the domain of moral judgment and are independent of people's motivation: incidental washing not only removes undesirable traces of the past (such as bad luck) but also desirable ones (such as good luck), which people would rather preserve.

How Performance Information Affects Human-Capital Investment Decisions: The Impact of Test-Score Labels on Educational Outcomes

John Papay, Richard Murnane & John Willett

NBER Working Paper, June 2011

Abstract:

Students receive abundant information about their educational performance, but how this information affects future educational-investment decisions is not well understood. Increasingly common sources of information are state-mandated standardized tests. On these tests, students receive a score and a label that summarizes their performance. Using a regression-discontinuity design, we find persistent effects of earning a more positive label on the college-going decisions of urban, low-income students. Consistent with a Bayesian-updating model, these effects are concentrated among students with weaker priors, specifically those who report before taking the test that they do not plan to attend a four-year college.

It hurts when I do this (or you do that): Posture and pain tolerance

Vanessa Bohns & Scott Wiltermuth

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, forthcoming

Abstract:

Recent research (Carney, Cuddy & Yap, 2010) has shown that adopting a powerful pose changes people's hormonal levels and increases their propensity to take risks in the same ways that possessing actual power does. In the current research, we explore whether adopting physical postures associated with power, or simply interacting with others who adopt these postures, can similarly influence sensitivity to pain. We conducted two experiments. In Experiment 1, participants who adopted dominant poses displayed higher pain thresholds than those who adopted submissive or neutral poses. These findings were not explained by semantic priming. In Experiment 2, we manipulated power poses via an interpersonal interaction and found that power posing engendered a complementary (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003) embodied power experience in interaction partners. Participants who interacted with a submissive confederate displayed higher pain thresholds and greater handgrip strength than participants who interacted with a dominant confederate.

When to Sign on the Dotted Line? Signing First Makes Ethics Salient and Decreases Dishonest Self-Reports

Lisa Shu et al.

Harvard Working Paper, May 2011

Abstract:

Many business and governmental interactions are based upon trust with the assumption that all actors generally comply with social and moral norms. Proof of compliance is typically provided through signature - e.g., at the end of tax returns or insurance policy forms. Yet even when people care about morality and want to be seen as ethical by others, they sometimes transgress when beneficial to their own self-interest, at great cost to economies across the globe. This paper focuses on testing an easy-to-implement method to discourage dishonesty: signing at the beginning rather than at the end of a self-report, as is the current common practice. Using both field and lab experiments, we find that signing before rather than after having faced the opportunity to cheat raises the saliency of ethics and morality, and leads to significant reductions in dishonesty.

Effects of male anxiety chemosignals on the evaluation of happy facial expressions

Rebekka Zerneck et al.

Journal of Psychophysiology, Summer 2011, Pages 116-123

Abstract:

The communication of chemosensory alarm signals is well explored in mammals. In humans the effects of anxiety substances might seem to be less important due to their high-developed visual system, and their sophisticated ability to communicate via speech and body language. Nevertheless, an increasing number of studies suggest an effect of chemosignals of anxiety on human physiology and behavior. In the present study two kinds of human sweat were collected from 21 males during a bicycle workout and a visit of a high rope course, and were then applied to 15 different healthy male participants during an emotion evaluation task. Participants were instructed to rate emotional male faces of different morphing levels (neutral-happy) by using a visual analog scale under exposure of three different samples (exercise sweat, anxiety sweat, and control material). Our study revealed that men rated happy faces as less happy under the influence of anxiety sweat compared to the exercise and the control conditions; significant differences were demonstrated only for ambiguous emotional faces. In conclusion, chemosignals of anxiety comprised in human sweat are communicated between males; they diminish the evaluation of ambiguous happy male facial expressions in men and thereby influence the perception of emotional faces.

When does mimicry affect evaluative judgment?

Francesco Foroni & Gün Semin

Emotion, June 2011, Pages 687-690

Abstract:

We investigated the effect of subliminally presented happy or angry faces on evaluative judgments when the facial muscles of participants were free to mimic or blocked. We hypothesized and showed that subliminally presented happy expressions lead to more positive judgments of cartoons compared to angry expressions only when facial muscles were not blocked. These results reveal the influence of socially driven embodied processes on affective judgments and have also potential implications for phenomena such as emotional contagion.

When Does the Past Repeat Itself? The Interplay of Behavior Prediction and Personal Norms

Pierre Chandon et al.

Journal of Consumer Research, forthcoming

Abstract:

Does asking people about their future behavior increase or decrease the likelihood that they will repeat their past behavior? In two laboratory and two field experiments, we find that behavior prediction strengthens behavior repetition, making people more likely to do what they normally do, when personal norms regarding engaging in a behavior are weak or not easily accessible. However, when personal norms are strong or made accessible at the time of the prediction request, behavior prediction weakens behavior repetition and increases the likelihood that people do what they think they should do - even if it's not what they normally would do. These findings provide new tools for influencing behavior repetition, reconcile some seemingly contradictory past findings, and contribute to the debate regarding the relative importance of habits and intentions in guiding behavior.

Spreading Rationalization: Increased Support for Large-Scale and Small-Scale Social Systems Following System Threat

Cheryl Wakslak, John Jost & Patrick Bauer

Social Cognition, June 2011, Pages 288-302

Abstract:

System justification theory suggests that individuals defend and rationalize aspects of prevailing social systems, especially in response to system threat. In two experiments we extend this framework by demonstrating that people rationalize small-scale social systems (e.g., local popularity hierarchies and the nuclear family) as well as large-scale social systems (e.g., American society). Furthermore, we find that system threat leads people to bolster not only the legitimacy of the social system that is directly threatened but also the legitimacy of systems at other levels of analysis. These results provide evidence of spreading rationalization, suggesting that people respond defensively to other social systems when one system that they belong to is criticized or attacked.

But what about the Empress of Racnoss? The allocation of attention to spiders and Doctor Who in a visual search task is predicted by fear and expertise

Helena Purkis, Kathryn Lester & Andy Field

Emotion, forthcoming

Abstract:

If there is a spider in the room, then the spider phobic in your group is most likely to point it out to you. This phenomenon is believed to arise because our attentional systems are hardwired to attend to threat in our environment, and, to a spider phobic, spiders are threatening. However, an alternative explanation is simply that attention is quickly drawn to the stimulus of most personal relevance in the environment. Our research examined whether positive stimuli with no biological or evolutionary relevance could be allocated preferential attention. We compared attention to pictures of spiders with pictures from the TV program Doctor Who, for people who varied in both their love of Doctor Who and their fear of spiders. We found

a double dissociation: interference from spider and Doctor-Who-related images in a visual search task was predicted by spider fear and Doctor Who expertise, respectively. As such, allocation of attention reflected the personal relevance of the images rather than their threat content. The attentional system believed to have a causal role in anxiety disorders is therefore likely to be a general system that responds not to threat but to stimulus relevance; hence, nonevolutionary images, such as those from Doctor Who, captured attention as quickly as fear-relevant spider images. Where this leaves the Empress of Racnoss, we are unsure.

By [KEVIN LEWIS](#) | 09:00:00 AM

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