The Effect of Positive and Negative Priming on Self-Description

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Sample APA format paper: paper text in Times New Roman and explanatory comments in Arial Black

Updated edition of this handout by: Rebecca Behrens ’11
Abstract

The current study investigated the impact of positive and negative primes on individuals' self-descriptions. Participants read either a friend acceptance (positive) scenario or friend rejection (negative) scenario, rated and explained how they would react to the situation, then responded to the question "Who Am I?" in up to twenty words. I hypothesized that individuals in the positive prime condition would use more positive words to describe themselves, whereas individuals in the negative condition would use more negative words. The results supported the former hypothesis, but there was no difference in the number of negative words used between the two conditions. A stronger negative prime may be needed to induce people to describe themselves negatively.
The Effect of Positive and Negative Priming on Self-Description

Reading about or recalling a particularly emotional event can arouse a salient emotional response (Vallacher, Nowak, Froehlich, & Rockloff, 2002). Might this response be strong enough to affect how one sees oneself? In the current study, I investigated whether positive and negative situational primes could influence people’s self-descriptions.

Effects of Priming on Individuals

Numerous mood induction studies have shown that people’s perceptions of themselves and situations differ based on their current mood (Vallacher et al., 2002). For example, Fedorikhin and Cole (2004) investigated the effect of mood induction on consumer preferences.

Method

Participants

Thirty-five Hamilton College undergraduates, (18 men, 17 women), ranging in age from 17 to 23 years ($M = 19.1, SD = 1.12$) participated in the current study for extra credit in their Psychology courses.
Positive and negative priming scenarios. In the positive scenario, participants imagined that it was their birthday, and when they arranged to meet their friends for dinner, their friends surprised them with a cake and presents. In the negative scenario…

Procedure
Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants provided informed consent. Participants were then randomly assigned to either the positive or negative prime condition…

Results
Types of Thoughts Listed on the Twenty Statements Test
First, I categorized the types of thoughts participants included in their self-descriptions. As illustrated in Table 1…..

Priming Effects
As shown in Figure 1, participants listed more positive statements following the positive prime ($M = 34.91$, $SD = 19.66$) than following the negative prime ($M = 21.84$, $SD = 18.95$), $t (33) = -1.98, p = .032$. Thus, in terms of positive statements, the results supported the hypothesis.

Discussion
In the current study, I sought to investigate the influence of positive and negative priming on participants’ self-descriptions in terms of how they described their physical appearance, roles, traits/abilities, emotional state, preferences and future jobs. I hypothesized that the positive priming condition would cause individuals to use more positive descriptors, whereas the negative condition would cause them to use more negative self-descriptors.

Other paragraphs in the discussion address:
- Interpretations of the results
- How the results fit into existing research
- Alternative explanations for the results
- Limitations of the study (not too many!)
- Future research ideas (link to limitations, if the ideas are connected)
- Theoretical and practical implications of the results
- Final summary paragraph (take-home point)
References


Table 1

Mean Proportion of Self-Descriptors of Each Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mean Percentage of Responses</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Appearance</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traits/Abilities</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional State</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Jobs</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Percentage of positive and negative statements in the Twenty Statements Test as a function of priming condition. Error bars represent one standard error above and below the mean.