



Individual differences in the effects of baby images on attitudes toward getting married



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ABSTRACT

Previous research on determinants of marital and reproductive timing focused on factors prominent in evolutionary theories. We focused on complementary factors prominent in research on attitudes, social cognition, and personality. Attitude construal and situated inference theories hold that priming can increase the accessibility of specific concepts, and that valence of the primed concepts can affect subsequent judgments. In two studies, one with college students and the other with a larger, more diverse sample, women, but not men, wanted to get married sooner if they had than had not recently seen images of smiling babies. Primed women also listed a greater number of and more positive children-related thoughts about marriage. These results suggest that subtle contextual cues can alter accessibility of relevant concepts, affect attitudes even on important issues, and work differently for different individuals. The results also suggest closer links between evolutionary, social cognitive, and personality theories.

1. Introduction

A closer integration between modern evolutionary theories and modern attitude theories can offer compatible and complementary insights into individual differences in important life decisions like how soon to get married and when to have children. These decisions have both societal and personal consequences, such as when so many young men who had grown up in the Great Depression got their draft notices to serve in WWII and rushed to get married, in part to maximize their chances of producing offspring while they could (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988).

Studies spawned by life history theory have brought new understanding to ways in which the interaction of childhood and current environments can influence adult *motives* and decisions about marriage and reproductive timing. Studies suggested by the construal theory of attitudes have similarly enhanced our understanding of cognitive processes that contribute to the use of relevant *concepts* in consequential decisions. The present studies were designed to narrow the gap between these two lines of research and advance the goal of “integrating research on life history theories with psychological models of social cognition” (Griskevicius, Tybur, Delton, & Robertson, 2011, p. 241).

1.1. Evolutionary perspectives

Previous research on the determinants of marital and reproductive

timing focused on life history factors like early childhood adversity, a threatening current environment, and perceived lack of marriage prospects. In one study, unmarried, childless men and women read a fictitious news article stating that random shootings and deaths had increased dramatically (Griskevicius et al., 2011, Study 3). In a subsequent “unrelated” survey, participants primed with random violence said they wanted to get married and have their first child sooner than did participants in a control condition. These priming effects occurred only for those who had grown up relatively poor, and were reversed for those who had grown up relatively wealthy. Priming self-protective motives made attitudes toward marriage more positive for some, but more negative for others.

In another study based on evolutionary theory, college women read a fictitious news article stating that there were either many more women than men, or many more men than women, on local college campuses, after which they were asked how important it was for them to have a family versus a career, spend time with future children versus have a satisfying job, and get married versus get promoted (Durante, Griskevicius, Simpson, Cantú, & Tybur, 2012, Study 4). Women who read the “surplus of women” article were more likely to agree that “It will be difficult to find someone to marry,” and they downplayed the importance of marriage and family relative to career. The effect was more pronounced for women who considered themselves low in “mate value.” Priming mate acquisition concerns made attitudes toward marriage less positive for some, but not for others.

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These two studies focused on evolutionarily significant factors that affect attitudes toward getting married, such as the momentary priming of specific *motives* by cues in the immediate environment. Implicit in the design of these studies, however, was an assumption that attitudes, even attitudes toward such important topics as marital and reproductive timing, can be altered by cues in the immediate environment, and that those cues might increase the accessibility of motive-relevant and decision-relevant *concepts*. These assumptions run parallel with theory and research on attitudes and social cognition.

1.2. Attitude perspectives

In the present research, which we view as complementary to earlier work that primed evolutionarily significant motives, we focused on subtle contextual cues and individual differences in basic demographic categories like sex and age. Specifically, we predicted that viewing images of smiling babies would prompt women, but not necessarily men, to a) activate a greater number of, and more positive, thoughts about having children when they considered the pros and cons of getting married, and b) desire earlier marriage. Our predictions were derived from construal theories of attitudes, priming contextual cues, and possible sex differences in responding to images of smiling babies.

1.2.1. Construal theories of attitudes

According to traditional attitude theories, people evaluate objects and activities, like getting married, by recalling a pre-existing attitude rather than by constructing a new attitude from scratch (Allport, 1935). The pre-existing attitude is said to “guide,” “direct,” “drive,” or “cause” the subsequent evaluation, ensuring high levels of consistency from one time or context to the next, barring the addition of important new information. As reviewed by Schwarz (2006, 2007), traditional theories predict attitude consistency; they explain attitude inconsistency by claiming that the evaluators were not being honest (e.g., Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980) or that the attitude topic was not important (Converse, 1982).

Construal theories of attitudes, in contrast, hold that people evaluate objects and activities flexibly and adaptively, by taking into account associations that are made accessible by the immediate context (Schwarz, 2007; Wilson & Hodges, 1992). According to attitude representation theory (Lord & Lepper, 1999), for instance, even subtle, incidental cues in the immediate environment can alter the subset of cognitive associations that comes to mind when people evaluate an attitude object. If more positive or more negative associations are accessed on one occasion than another, the individual might evaluate the object or activity differently, even without any new information (Schwarz & Bohner, 2001; Tourangeau, 1992; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Construal theories, unlike traditional theories, explain both consistency and inconsistency with the same mechanism (Lord, 2015; Schwarz, 2006).

Traditional and construal theories of attitudes suggest different outcomes when people are exposed to brief images immediately prior to assessing their behavioral intentions toward an activity as personal and important as getting married. Traditional theories suggest it would be difficult to alter such important attitudes with seemingly incidental images, for example images of smiling babies, whereas construal theories suggest the opposite. This prediction of construal theories relies more on studies that involved priming attitude-relevant *concepts* than on priming evolutionarily significant *motives* (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010), but primed motives and concepts might go hand-in-hand (Lord, Hill, & Holland, 2015), because evolutionarily significant motives can increase the salience of related concepts (Nairne, Thompson, & Pandeirada, 2007).

1.2.2. Priming by contextual cues

Many studies have shown that people are sensitive even to subtle contextual cues that can change which attributes of an attitude object

get activated and how the attitude object gets evaluated (Schwarz, 2007; Schwarz & Strack, 2016). The situated inference model of priming (Loersch & Payne, 2011) explains the mechanisms of this sequence in detail. First, primes can increase the accessibility of specific mental content (Tulving & Pearlstone, 1966). For example, viewing images of smiling babies might increase the likelihood that women will think about having children when assessing their attitudes toward getting married.

Second, when the true source of the accessed mental content is not evident, people can misattribute the source of those thoughts to the attitude object rather than to the prime. Women, for example, might mistakenly believe that thoughts about having children came naturally and spontaneously from evaluating the activity “getting married” rather than from having recently seen images of smiling babies, and not realize that those thoughts would have been less likely had they not seen the baby images. In fact, priming has no effect when the prime is obvious or blatant (Martin, Seta, & Crelia, 1990).

Third, misattributed mental content can be used to make a judgment about the target, but only if the primed information is perceived as valid and relevant to the question at hand (Loersch & Payne, 2011). In our example, women who think about having children will use that thought to inform their attitudes toward “getting married” only if they perceive having children as relevant to that attitude, in either a positive or a negative sense. Men and women of different ages, might differ in how positive they think the implications of having children are for their attitudes toward getting married.

1.2.3. Possible sex and age differences

Implications of the activated concept “children” for the evaluative decision about getting married might differ depending on both sex and age. Theorists from Darwin (1872) to Bowlby (1979) have suggested that smiling infant faces elicit nurturing motives and behaviors in women. Even babies born blind will smile at their mothers, which suggests that infant smiles might have an important evolutionary function—to trigger maternal nurturing behavior (Fraiberg, 1974). Most of the relevant data come from observations of mothers, not fathers, and from younger rather than middle-aged cohorts, so it remains possible that these effects are limited to younger women—a possibility addressed by the present studies.

It seemed possible, based on theories of biological preparedness, construal theories of attitudes, and the situated inference model, that women might be more likely to have their cognitive associations changed by viewing baby images, and/or more likely to view the activated concepts as having positive implications for “getting married.”

1.3. The present studies

We tested predictions of a Priming × Participant Sex interaction in two studies—one on male and female college students, and the other on male and female MTurk workers in a wider age range.

2. Study 1

2.1. Participants

A pretest survey at the start of the semester included questions on marital status and sexual orientation. The main study approximately one month later was made available only to undergraduate men and women who had reported being unmarried, childless, and heterosexual. A total of 122 students (80 women and 42 men) participated in the main study for course credit. Mean participant ages in this undergraduate sample were 19.65 (SD = 1.32) for women and 19.24 (SD = 1.56) for men. Ages ranged from 18 to 27 (*Mdn* = 19).

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