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Contextual effects on prejudiced attitudes:

When the presence of others leads to more egalitarian responses

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Abstract

In the present paper we tested the hypothesis that the physical presence of other ingroup members may ameliorate Whites' spontaneous affective responses toward Blacks. Results of Study 1 demonstrated that IAT-assessed attitudes toward Blacks were indeed less negative when participants were tested in small groups rather than individually. Study 2 shed light on the underlying processes by demonstrating that respondents at the presence of others displayed increased accessibility to egalitarian-related concepts after Black primes, as compared to respondents tested individually. Overall, results point to the wide malleability of spontaneous affective responses and to the possibility that contextual factors, like the presence of other individuals, might automatically activate egalitarians goals. Results are discussed in relation to current models of automatic intergroup bias and preconscious control over it.

Key words: Prejudice – Malleability of spontaneous responses – Egalitarian goals

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Contextual effects on prejudiced attitudes:

When the presence of others leads to more egalitarian responses.

Over the last decades in Western societies there has been an impressive change in the social norms that sanction discriminatory behaviors toward stigmatized outgroups (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Racism is now openly condemned by the majority of the population - especially among specific subgroups like college and university students - and egalitarian principles are increasingly becoming socially shared values. For instance, Crandall and his colleagues (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002) have shown that it is considered appropriate to condemn and sanction racists to an extent similar to that of child molesters or terrorists. The negative perception of racists is even stronger than the negative perception of negligent parents or men who leave their families. Social norms clearly state that race discrimination is not acceptable.

Despite these cultural and social changes, discrimination is still a plague in Western societies. In addition, prejudiced attitudes and negative stereotypes continue to linger at an automatic level (e.g., Devine, 1989; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). For instance, Blacks still trigger automatic negative responses among White perceivers. Therefore, spontaneous responses still signal the presence of a large gap between the valence and the mental contents associated to Blacks on one side, and those associated with Whites on the other.

Recent research demonstrates, however, that automatic negative responses are not as ubiquitous and immutable as they were considered until 10 years ago (Barden, Maddux, Petty, & Brewer, 2004; Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001; Maddux, Barden, Brewer, & Petty, 2005; Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997, 2001; see Blair, 2002 for a review). Indeed the perceiver's characteristics (Wittenbrink et al., 1997), how the targets are mentally construed (Wittenbrink et al., 2001), and the specific characteristics of the setting in which attitudes are assessed (Lowery et al., 2001) all affect the valence of automatic responses toward Blacks. This means that spontaneous responses are also malleable and may undergo positive changes. The challenge is thus to identify

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the specific factors that might help to achieve such goal. In the current paper we will focus on the effects of the physical presence of other ingroup members where the group holds egalitarian norms and explicitly supports positive intergroup relations. It is hypothesized that the physical presence of ingroup members may ameliorate spontaneous responses toward members of stigmatized outgroups - like Blacks – which are protected by social norms shared within the ingroup.

Contextual influences on intergroup judgments. Current models of stereotyping assume that the context in which intergroup judgments are provided influences the valence of such judgments (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Depending on the specific context, different motivations, self-images, and normative rules may become salient. Accordingly, in public settings individuals may feel a stronger pressure toward being fair and, as a consequence, they may be more likely to inhibit prejudiced responses (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998; Plant & Devine, 1998). This reasoning implies that the effects of public contexts are mainly driven by a conscious and strategic desire to appear as non-prejudiced individuals.

However, as noted by Lambert and his colleagues (Lambert, Payne, Jacoby, Shaffer, Chasteen, & Khan, 2003), there is still no systematic investigation about the moderating role of private versus public settings on the expression of prejudice, especially in relation to the less controlled forms of prejudice expression. Even though one of the core goals of social psychology is to study processes that occur in public contexts, our knowledge about how spontaneous intergroup attitudes are influenced by the presence of others is still limited. In a thorough series of studies, it has been recently demonstrated that individuals modify their spontaneous responses in order to go along with the perceived expectations of other physically present persons (Lowery et al., 2001; Sinclair et al., 2005). For instance, when the experimenter wore a t-shirt with an anti-racist slogan, participants' automatic responses were less prejudiced (Sinclair et al., 2005). The underlying theory is that individuals spontaneously tune their attitudes according to the attitudes expressed by physically present and desirable others. In short, this research demonstrates that we are sensitive to persons around us on both controlled and spontaneous responses. In most cases, however, there are

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no salient cues in the environment – like an anti-racist t-shirt – that imply about a need to be egalitarian. In such cases, it is reasonable to ask whether the perceiver behaves in a social vacuum, and whether the perceiver's attitudes are influenced by the presence of others.

We predict that in the presence of other individuals there will be a decrease in prejudiced attitudes due to the operation of egalitarian social norms. These norms are conceived as socially shared sets of prescriptions that indicate that interracial judgments should be characterized by fairness and equality and not by discrimination. Given their socially shared nature, egalitarian norms are particularly relevant in regulating behaviours when the perceiver is in social contexts rather than alone. Therefore, these socially shared sets of prescriptions are expected to be recurrently implicated in regulatory processes that occur in social settings. Beside conscious regulatory attempts, after repeated experiences, individuals may learn to associate specific situations (i.e., public settings) with normatively appropriate responses so that to automatize particular response patterns (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Chartrand & Bargh, 1996; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Therefore, even spontaneous intergroup attitudes should become less negative in public contexts as compared to private settings. In Study 1, we will specifically test this hypothesis.

In addition, when individuals consistently try to attain the same goal in a given situation, they may also come to automatically activate this goal any time that situation is encountered (Shah, 2005). As such, the individual will develop what Aarts and Dijksterhuis (2003) call *situational norms* which are conceived as socially shared beliefs representing the links between specific situations and appropriate normative behaviours. This implies that the goal of being fair toward outgroup members does not need to be intentionally established, but it may also spontaneously arise from contextual cues by means of associative processes (see Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Because (egalitarian) social norms can be considered to be sets of shared knowledge that are maximally relevant to regulate public behaviors, public situations will gradually gain the power to automatically activate those norms, which in turn will automatically modulate spontaneous responses. In other words, the presence of other individuals may automatically trigger relevant

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norms that are functional in order to regulate social conducts, like the need to be egalitarian toward Blacks (see also Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). This activated goal will then give rise to regulatory processes aimed at attaining the goal which, in this case, means to eliminate, or at least decrease, prejudice-consistent responses. In Study 2 we tested whether the actual presence of other individuals automatically activates the goal of being egalitarian when faced with Blacks. We hypothesized that the actual presence of others increases the accessibility of egalitarian-related concepts after the presentation of a Black prime.

Study 1

The preliminary goal that was pursued in Study 1 was to verify whether the physical presence of peers improves spontaneous affective responses toward Blacks¹. To this end a race-IAT was employed (Greenwald et al., 1998), and participants performed it either alone or in the same room with two peers.

Method

Participants

One-hundred eighty-four students attending secondary schools in Padova participated in the study on a voluntary basis (46 males and 138 females; ages ranged between 16 and 18 years) with the consent of the representatives of the schools. All participants except one were Whites.

Procedure

Participants were tested in a quiet room made available by the schools. Two experimental conditions were created. Some participants were tested alone, whereas other participants performed the very same tasks as the "alone" participants but at the presence of two peers. Therefore, in one experimental condition small groups of three students were created by randomly sampling three students attending the same class. This condition will be labelled "physical presence". Importantly, participants worked alone on their own computer just like participants in the individual condition. Participants were placed in a way to maximize physical proximity while at the same time

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preventing that they could see other. Indeed, participants were seated close to each other but they faced their backs.

At their arrival in the laboratory, participants were asked to perform a standard race-IAT. The experimenter first explained the structure and the main characteristics of the task and then all instructions were provided on the computer screen to avoid any discussion during the experiment. In addition, it was explained that participants could not turn around during the experiment and that everyone had to focus on one's own computer. Ten positive words (e.g., love, peace, paradise, and happiness), ten negative words (e.g., disgust, earthquake, vomit, and betrayal), ten pictures portraying young White males and 10 pictures portraying young Black males were used. In the two critical phases of the test each stimulus item appeared once (i.e., 40 trials in each phase). The relative order of the phases within the test was counterbalanced across participants.

Next, we assessed the perceived normative appropriateness of prejudiced responses.

Participants were asked to imagine two hypothetical situations of discrimination and to judge how much the perpetrator might be justified for his/her action (i.e., "It is understandable if a company decides to hire a White rather than a Black worker even though they have similar curricula"; "It is understandable that a girl on a train prefers to sit beside a White rather than a Black male").

Responses were provided on 5-point Likert scales ranging from "I totally disagree" to "I totally agree". Finally, participants were asked additional questions which were not relevant to the aims of the current work. Participants were then returned to their classes. Debriefing was made collectively at the very end of the data collection within the school.

Results

IAT

Data were treated according to Greenwald et al.'s suggestions (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003), so that a single *d* score was computed for each participant. Positive values correspond to stronger associations between Blacks and negative words. Data from 8 participants were excluded because they did not properly follow the instruction and made an excessive number of errors (more

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than 20% of the trials). Data from a group in which a Black participant was present were also excluded from the analyses. One-hundred seventy-three participants remained available for the analyses.

The IAT-score was submitted to a 2 (condition: alone vs. physical presence) X 2 (participants' gender) X 2 (IAT version) analysis of variance with all factors between participants. A main effect of the version of the IAT was found, F(1,165) = 10.84, p=.001, $\eta^2 = .062$, indicating that the IAT-score was larger when participants performed the prejudice-consistent phase first. Most importantly, a significant main effect of the condition emerged, F(1,165) = 4.21, p=.042, $\eta^2 = .025$. As expected, participants who performed the task alone showed significantly more negative responses toward Blacks (d=.46, SD=.064) as compared to participants in the physical presence condition (d=.29, SD=.056). Being in the presence of others significantly reduced the negativity of spontaneous responses toward Blacks. No other main or interaction effect was significant. In both conditions, participants showed a significant preference for Whites over Blacks, t(60) = 6.79, p<.001 and t(111) = 6.04, p<.001 in the alone and physical presence condition, respectively.

Norm perception and spontaneous affective responses

We first tested whether participants in the two experimental conditions had a different perception about the justifiability of discriminatory behaviours. Responses to the two items were moderately correlated, r(171) = .332, p<.001, and they were combined in order to create a single index of norm perception. A 2 (condition: individual vs. group) X 2 (participants' gender) analyses of variance, with both factors between participants, was carried out. The gender effect was statistically non-significant, p = .065, as well as all other effects (all ps>.38), demonstrating that participants in the two conditions had a similar perception of the norm. In general, the mean value was quite low (M = 1.91, SD = .81) indicating that participants perceived discrimination as normatively inappropriate.

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Next, we separately correlated the index of norm perception and responses on the IAT within the two conditions. Results showed that within the individual condition the perception of social norms was not related to responses on the IAT, r(61) = .087, p=.506. In contrast, a significant correlation emerged in the physical presence condition, r(119) = .295, p=.002, demonstrating that, in a social context, the more participants perceived discrimination as inappropriate, the less they had spontaneous negative responses toward Blacks³.

Discussion

Results clearly show that spontaneous affective responses toward Blacks were less negative in the social setting in comparison to the individual setting. The physical presence of other persons significantly reduced the automatic preference for Whites over Blacks. More specifically, in the presence of others, spontaneous affective responses were more in line with perceived social norms. Indeed, norm perception was not related to responses on the IAT in the individual condition, whereas a significant relation was observed in the physical presence condition. This finding suggests that in the presence of others spontaneous responses were more in line with perceived normative values.

An explanation of our findings is that the presence of others is effective in activating egalitarian social norms. The goal of being egalitarian consists of both an individual and a more social component (Moskowitz et al., 2000; Plant & Devine, 1998). Individuals differ to the extent to which they chronically endorse egalitarian values (Moskowitz et al., 1999; 2000). In addition to the degree of this chronic endorsement which is related to stable individual differences, we also expect that social contexts may differentially trigger the goal of being egalitarian. Research on goal activation has shown that different environments and contexts do indeed automatically activate different social norms (see Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003). For instance, Aarts and Dijksterhuis (2003) have convincingly demonstrated that participants primed with the picture of a library automatically

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activated the concept of "silence" as revealed by an enhanced accessibility of words like "quiet" or "silent".

Following this line of reasoning, if egalitarian norms are actually becoming socially shared norms within Western societies, we hypothesize that being in the presence of others might spontaneously trigger the activation of egalitarian goals. The automatic activation of egalitarian goals is therefore considered as the candidate process underlying the amelioration of spontaneous affective responses in the social context. Study 1, however, did not provide a direct test of the activation of egalitarian goals. We specifically predict that respondents who are in the physical presence of ingroup peers will be more likely to activate an egalitarian goal in response to Blacks as compared to people tested individually. The following study will address this issue.

Study 2

In accordance to the proposed hypothesis, the egalitarian concept should be more accessible after seeing a Black person when respondents are in a physical presence setting rather than alone. In this study, participants were asked to perform a Lexical Decision Task (LDT) in which both Black and White faces were used as primes and egalitarian and control words were used as targets. As before, some participants were tested individually, whereas other participants were tested in a small group (i.e., 3 to 4 participants in the same room). As stated, in the physical presence condition we predicted an increase in the accessibility of egalitarian words after Black faces.

Method

Participants

Two-hundred sixty-eight first year psychology students at the University of Padova participated in the study to accomplish partial course requirements (51 males and 217 females). Two participants were not Italian and their data were discarded as well as the data of two Italian respondents who were in a group with a foreign participant.

Materials

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Photographs (5.2 cm × 7.8 cm) portraying head-and-shoulder images of 24 White and 24 Black male adults were used as primes. There were 24 target words: Six words related to egalitarianism (e.g., equality, tolerance, justice), six positive words irrelevant to egalitarianism (e.g., humility, kindness, responsibility) and twelve non sense words. Words were derived from Moskowitz et al. (2000), whereas non words were pronounceable anagrams of the 12 meaningful words.

Procedure

As in the previous study, two experimental conditions were created. In the *alone* condition participants were tested alone whereas in the *physical presence* condition participants were tested in a small group in the presence of two or three other students.

Once participants arrived in the laboratory, they were welcomed and placed in front of a computer. As in the previous study, participants in the physical presence condition were placed in a way to maximize physical proximity and to avoid eye gaze. In both experimental conditions, the instructions for the task were provided on the computer screen and participants had some practice trials, in order to familiarize with the task, before starting with the experimental trials.

Each trial began with a 200 ms presentation of the prime picture that was followed, after a 100 ms of blank screen, by the target word. Participants were instructed to look carefully at the pictures since they would be later asked to perform a memory task, but no response was required at this stage. Indeed the primary task involved the target words. Participants were asked to perform a lexical decision task in which they had to judge as fast and accurately as possible whether the target word was a meaningful or non sense word by pressing one of the two labelled keys on the computer keyboard. Overall, participants went through a series of 144 trials, so that each prime face was presented three times. On half of the trials, the target was a meaningful word, whereas on the other half of the trials it was a non sense word. The pairings between a specific prime and a given target were randomly determined for each participant by the software. The presentation order of the trials was also randomized (ITI = 2 seconds).

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Finally, participants were thanked and the debriefing was given collectively at the end of the data collection.

Results

Seven participants were excluded from the analyses either because of an excessive number of errors in the LDT (more than 20% of the trials) or because they did not properly follow the instructions. This left the data from two-hundred fifty-seven respondents available for the analyses.

Overall, the error rate in the responses to meaningful words was very low (2.68 % of the trials) and these trials were removed. Response latencies to correct trials were log-transformed. Next, for each participant the mean response latencies to egalitarian and control words after Black and White faces were computed. These four indices were then submitted to a 2 (Words: Egalitarian vs. control) X 2 (Prime: Black vs. White) X 2 (Condition: alone vs. physical presence) X 2 (participant's gender) mixed-model analysis of variance, with the first two factors withinparticipants and the last two factors between participants. A significant main effect of the type of word emerged, F(1,253) = 12.09, p=.001, $\eta^2 = .046$. Responses to egalitarian words were faster than responses to control words. No other main effect or two-way interaction was significant. As expected, however, a significant three-way interaction emerged, F(1,253) = 8.97, p=.003, $\eta^2 =$.034.4 In order to better understand the meaning of this interaction, two separate analyses of variance were carried out within the two experimental conditions. As for the alone condition, there was only a significant main effect of the type of word, F(1,65) = 3.97, p = .05, $\eta^2 = .058$, indicating faster responses to egalitarian words. The interaction effect was not significant (p=.146), and, if anything, it suggested that egalitarian words were more easily processed after a White prime. In the group condition, in addition to the aforementioned main effect of the type of word, F(1,190) =18.90, p < .001, $\eta^2 = .090$, there was also a significant interaction effect, F(1,190) = 11.38, p = .001, $\eta^2 = .057$. As can be seen in Figure 1, responses to egalitarian and control words were very similar after White primes. The planned comparison between the two means was not significant (p=.52). In

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contrast, following a Black face participants were faster in processing egalitarian words rather than control words (planned comparison, p<.001). Therefore, in the physical presence condition there was a selective increase in the accessibility of egalitarian words only after Black primes.

Additional 2 (Words: Egalitarian vs. control) X 2 (Condition: Alone vs. physical presence) analyses of variance were performed separately on trials in which a White or Black face appeared as a prime. When a White face was primed, there was no interaction between the two factors (p= .128) suggesting that the condition did not modify the accessibility of egalitarian words. In contrast, a significant interaction emerged after a Black face was primed, F(1,255) = 6.09, p=.014, $\eta^2 = .023$, demonstrating again an increased accessibility of egalitarian words once in the presence of others.

General discussion

Results from Study 1 clearly demonstrate that in a social context spontaneous affective responses toward Blacks tend to be less negative. The actual presence of other individuals significantly modified spontaneous responses demonstrating that changes in the surrounding social environment were effective in producing a positive shift in automatic intergroup attitudes (Blair, 2002; Lowery et al., 2001). Importantly, results from Study 2 do specifically indicate one plausible mechanism that may account for the observed changes. Indeed, participants in the social context activated different mental constructs as compared to participants who were tested alone. In the presence of other persons, egalitarian-related concepts were more easily accessed after the presentation of Black faces demonstrating that the group context triggered the goal of not being prejudiced and behaving fairly toward Blacks.

The presence of others as a cue for preconscious control. The proposed regulatory mechanism is assumed to operate outside of conscious awareness and would thus appear to be an instance of preconscious control (Moskowitz, 2001; see also Moskowitz, Li, & Kirk, 2004). In an interesting line of research, Moskowitz and colleagues have put forward the idea that individuals

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may differ in their ability to automatically suppress negative responses toward Blacks (Moskowitz et al., 1999; 2000). For instance, they demonstrated that individuals with a chronic egalitarian goal did not automatically activate stereotypes after being primed with the category "Blacks" whereas non-chronics did (Moskowitz et al., 1999, Study 3). Despite the fact that these two groups of respondents – chronics and non-chronics - had a similar knowledge about cultural stereotypes, they activated different mental contents (see also Lepore & Brown, 1997). Indeed, chronic egalitarians were assumed to hold internalized egalitarian goals and, as a consequence, they developed efficient strategies that prevent stereotype activation even without conscious effort. On one hand, chronic-egalitarians did not show any evidence of stereotype activation, but on the other they were also significantly faster in processing egalitarian-related words following pictures of African Americans (Moskowitz et al., 2000 study 2). According to Moskowitz's model, it is this automatic activation of egalitarian goals that inhibits the activation of prejudiced responses.

This point is crucial for the aims of the present paper because it implies that spontaneous prejudiced responses are not inevitable but that they can be avoided –or at least reduced- any time the individual is led to activate egalitarian goals. Moskowitz and colleagues (1999; 2000) focused on dispositional and stable differences among individuals, but the same reasoning may also apply for situationally-activated goals (see Moskowitz, 2002). In order to efficiently achieve preconscious forms of control, an adaptive cognitive system should be able to first automate the activation of specific goals in a given social context and then to provide those sets of responses that allow the achievement of the activated goal (Bargh, 1990). The results from the current studies demonstrate that situational cues, like the presence of other persons, may automatically trigger both egalitarian normative imperatives (Study 2), and spontaneous responses in line with this goal (Study 1).

Therefore, the goal of being fair toward Blacks does not need to be intentionally established, but it may also spontaneously arise from contextual cues by means of associative processes (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Kunda & Spencer, 2003). The physical presence of other individuals may by itself activate those social norms that are shared within the group and establish specific behavioural

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goals. These activated goals will then automatically guide regulatory processes aimed at attaining the goals which, in our case, may lead to a significant decrease in prejudice-consistent responses.

Do group contexts always ameliorate spontaneous responses toward Blacks? The described processes are likely to hold true only in social contexts in which egalitarian norms are indeed shared within the group. In cases in which such norms are not widespread, the individual is not expected to build up any associative link between the public context and egalitarian responses. Only wellestablished situational norms can automatically influence social behaviours (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003). In addition, where social norms prescribe discrimination rather than condemning it, as in the case of neo-Nazi groups, group contexts may lead to increased prejudice in comparison to individual settings (Crandall et al., 2002). In other words, in social settings there might be a generalized spontaneous assimilation toward whatever norm is perceived as socially shared within the group (see also Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). This conceptualization is largely different from the framework provided by the social facilitation literature (e.g., Zajonc, 1965). Indeed, social facilitation effects are expected to be quite independent from the social membership of the audience and from normative concerns. In contrast, we expect that the presence of others individuals might have opposite effects depending of the specific characteristics of such individuals, so that prejudice responses could either decrease or increase as a function of the norms that are shared among the various individuals in that specific setting.

Importantly, the changes in the social milieu that have occurred in the last decades in relation to prejudice expression have modified what is perceived as the default social norm.

Currently, egalitarianism is becoming a core value of normatively prescribed social conduct and this represents the first building block for the implementation of preconscious forms of control over prejudiced responses. This reasoning strongly supports the importance of any intervention, cultural or legislative, aimed at sustaining the diffusion of egalitarian social norms. It is sometimes argued that social norms sanctioning discrimination and favouring political correctness have a limited influence because they only impact controlled responses and may even lead to rebound effects

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(Macrae et al., 1994; Plant & Devine, 2001). In contrast, we contend here that the diffusion of egalitarian social norms may represent the first step toward the development of automatized regulatory processes that, at least in group contexts, may reduce prejudiced responses without any need for conscious control. As stated by Allport (1954), legal norms create a public conscience and behavioural models that may decrease blatant forms of discrimination, and next «when expression changes, thoughts too, in the long run, are likely to fall into line» (p. 437).

Conclusion

The present work took up recent appeals to devote more attention to interpersonal factors and social context effects when studying intergroup attitudes (Devine, 1989; Lambert et al., 2003; McGuire, 2003). Along this line, we found evidence that the mere presence of other people may modify spontaneous affective responses as well as the activation of egalitarian goals. This demonstrates the relevance of social settings in the modulation of individual cognitive processes. In particular we have shown that at the actual presence of others individuals tend to reduce their spontaneous negative responses toward Blacks.

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Footnotes

¹ It should be recalled that in the context where data were collected Black individuals are mainly immigrants from Central Africa.

² The analysis of the means indicated that indicated that male respondents were slightly more prone to justify discriminatory behaviours in comparison to female respondents, M = 2.09, SD = .93 and M = 1.86, SD = .73, respectively

³ We also compared the two correlation coefficients but they were not significantly different from each other, Z = 1.35, p = .08, one-tailed. It has to be noted, however, that results were far clearer when computing the correlation between norm perception and an IAT score computed in accordance with Greenwald et al. (1998). The observed correlation in the individual condition was equal to zero, r(61) = .035, p = .79, whereas it was significant in the physical presence condition, r(61) = .331, p < .001, and the two coefficients were also significantly different from each other. Z = 1.94, p = .05, two-tailed.

⁴ A similar analysis was performed introducing the mean latency in responding to non-words as a covariate. Even after controlling for individual differences in response speed, results were identical to those reported in the text.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Untransformed response latencies in the individual and physical presence condition as a function of the race of the prime and the type of target words (Study 2).



