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Cue Me In! the Effect of Attentional Tuning on the Susceptibility to Contextual Cues

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We investigate the influence of basic attentional processes (attentional tuning—narrowing or broadening of attentional scope) on the susceptibility to subtle contextual cues (e.g. colors). We propose that the impact of goal-irrelevant primes is particularly pronounced when people maintain a broader attentional scope, becoming more receptive to goal-irrelevant stimuli.

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Cue me in!
The Effect of Attentional Tuning on the Susceptibility to Contextual Cues

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We investigate the influence of basic attentional processes (attentional tuning—narrowing or broadening of attentional scope) on the susceptibility to subtle contextual cues (e.g. colors). We propose that the impact of goal-irrelevant primes is particularly pronounced when people maintain a broader attentional scope, becoming more receptive to goal-irrelevant stimuli.

Both psychology and consumer research are replete with examples of studies showing evidence of the effects of subtle environmental cues that prime accessible mental states, stereotypes, goals, or motives and profoundly affect judgment, decision-making, and social behavior. For instance, Labroo et al. (2008) demonstrate that even a short exposure to a word evoking certain conceptual associations ('frog') increases preference for a wine that is compatible with this activated semantic concept (a wine with a frog on its label). Strikingly, the role of basic attentional processes that may act as a mental filter at the cue exposure stage has been largely ignored. The present research aims to fill this void and extends previous work by focusing on the role of attentional scope as a key factor modulating the impact of subtle environmental primes on judgment and behavior.

Theoretical background. Attentional tuning refers to the phenomenon of narrowing and broadening one's attention at both a perceptual and conceptual level (Gasper & Clore, 2002). More recent work has stressed the role of motivational intensity—the urge to move toward or away from a stimulus—for this cognitive phenomenon, with higher intensity producing a narrowing of attentional scope and vice versa (Harmon-Jones et al., 2011). Gable and Harmon-Jones (2011) show that people's motivational intensity can be manipulated through either the anticipation versus attainment of monetary rewards.

An intriguing implication of this line of research is that the susceptibility to the influence of incidental environmental cues, unrelated to one's current goals may be a function of attentional tuning. We propose that the susceptibility to goal-irrelevant primes is a function of attentional tuning, such that their impact is particularly pronounced when people are in a reward attainment state and maintain a broader attentional scope, making them more receptive to goal-irrelevant stimuli.

We tested our expectations across three studies. In experiments 1 and 3, Dutch participants were exposed to subtle contextual cues having an orange vs. neutral color. As the color orange reflects Dutch national pride (Lakens, 2011), we expected that nationality-related thoughts would be more accessible when participants are exposed to an orange situational cue. In experiment 2, we assessed the accessibility of aggression-related thoughts, following the exposure to pictures of weapons vs. neutral pictures. Across all studies pre-goal and post-goal states were manipulated as follows: in pre-goal states people first were exposed to a contextual cue during a seemingly unrelated task, crucial DV's were collected and only afterwards they had the opportunity to gain additional money. In contrast, participants in the post-goal states first conducted the task allowing them to win extra money, and only afterwards they were exposed to a contextual cue and responded to our DV measures. In each study participants played an 18-trial game in which they had the possibility to gain extra money (€0.15 per trial).

Study 1

122 Dutch students participated in a 2(pre-goal vs. post-goal state)x2(contextual cue: orange pen vs. orange pen) between-subjects design experiment. We measured our core DV in a knowledge quiz by asking participants to mention the first representative of a given category (writer, scientist, etc.) that comes to their mind in each trial. Participants wrote their responses using either an orange or a black pen.

An ANOVA, with the square-rooted sum of Dutch representatives listed across trials as the DV revealed only a significant interaction effect between goal state and pen color ($F(1, 118) = 4.01$, $p < .05$). Additional simple main effect analyses to probe the interaction corroborated that pen color affected responses to the knowledge quiz under reward attainment (post-goal) conditions ($F(1, 118) = 5.26$, $p = .024$). Participants writing with the orange pen, maintaining a broader attentional scope as a result of experiencing decreased motivational intensity, produced more Dutch exemplars ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.36$) than those writing with a black pen ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.57$).

Study 2

118 international student participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2(pre-goal vs. post-goal)x2(contextual cue: weapon pictures vs. neutral pictures (plants)) between-subjects design experiment. Core DV was measured by means of a modified Stroop task, using both aggression-related (*destroy*) and neutral (*bench*) words. Before engaging in the Stroop task participants were exposed to either pictures of weapons or neutral pictures. Higher reaction times to aggression-related words demonstrate greater accessibility of aggression-related thoughts.

An ANOVA on log transformed mean reaction times to aggression-related words, controlling for log transformed mean reaction times to aggression-related words in neutral trials, revealed only a significant interaction between goal state and type of the picture shown ($F(1,113) = 4.19$, $p < .05$). Additional simple main effect analyses demonstrated that exposure to pictures of weapons affected reaction times to aggression-related words merely under reward attainment conditions, when people maintained broader attentional scope ($F(1, 113) = 3.64$, $p = .059$). Under this condition it took more time to name the color of aggression-related words when they were previously exposed to pictures of weapons ($M = 822.40$ ms, $SD = 111.30$ ms) rather than to neutral pictures ($M = 780.20$ ms, $SD = 99.30$ ms).

Study 3

251 Dutch students participated in a 2(pre-goal vs. post-goal) x2(contextual cue: orange background vs. white background) between-subjects design experiment. The DV was the outcome of 9 dyadic product choices, each consisting of a Dutch and a foreign brand (available in the Dutch market). To cover the true purpose of the choices, five additional choices involving only foreign brands were included. Participants indicated their preference for a particular product on a slider using 100-point scale. Product choices were made on either an orange or a white desktop background.

An ANOVA on the mean preference for Dutch products revealed a marginally significant interaction effect between goal state and color of the desktop background ($F(1, 247) = 2.84$, $p < .1$. Since

we expected the orange background to exert effects only on people in post-goal states, we further explored the interaction through additional simple main effect analyses. Consistent with expectations, we find that the preference for Dutch brands was influenced by the desktop background in the post-goal, reward attainment state ($F(1, 247)=4.62$, $p=.033$). People indicated greater preference for Dutch brands when the product choices were made on an orange ($M=56.15$, $SD=11.88$) rather than white desktop background ($M=52.12$, $SD=10.23$).

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