

The Power of Priming

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THE POWER OF PRIMING

Abstract

Modern day society is always looking to improve. As a result, we tend to overanalyze the many things we do across our day, the choices we make, who we talk to, and how we use our time. What most people fail to address, unfortunately, is what causes them to act in the ways they do, how they interact, and how they manage themselves. In order to enlighten those in search of improving their lives, I decided to conduct research on the effects of priming and how it can be applied day in and day out. To accomplish this, I examined multiple scientific journal entries on how priming affects people, analyzed personal anecdotes from established psychology majors, and looked at various articles emphasizing the many options we have to positively prime ourselves for greatness. From these sources, I learned that the environment we surround ourselves in has a substantial influence on our subconscious mind, we can be primed in ways that increase the likelihood of performing a task, and that priming is a legitimate process whose effects we can manipulate for numerous benefits. Based on these findings, I deduced that the benefits of positive priming know no boundaries and have the potential to remarkably benefit society as a whole in the near future.

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The Power of Priming

The busy society we find ourselves today in greatly emphasizes the importance of efficiency and stresses good decision making. While making crucial conscious choices is key to improving the way we make decisions, enhancing the ability of our subconscious mind to opt for productive courses of action is just as significant. Controlling our below the surface thoughts and urges is a process known as priming, a procedure where someone's environment, interactions, and experiences blend together to the largely unaware person to influence their actions by way of their subconscious thoughts. Although it is often overlooked, priming is a very powerful tool that can be used to our advantage with both individual and societal benefits when properly implemented.

Despite many being unaware of how or when priming takes place, priming is omnipresent and undoubtedly has a powerfully coercing effect on the subconscious mind. In an experiment conducted by Jonathan Bargh designed to measure priming's effect through scrambled-sentence tests on university students, experiments examined the impact the priming had on students' attitude during a conversation with a notably controversial figure. Bargh had been expecting priming to have a minimal effect on the subjects, but much to his surprise, as Malcolm Gladwell illustrates, Bargh discovered, "Of the people primed to be polite, the overwhelming majority - 82 percent - never interrupted at all" (2005, 53). Bargh had never imagined that simply having subjects read a series of related words could so drastically impact a conversation especially with such a repulsive person on the other end of it. Because of the substantial proportion of subjects who managed to remain polite in the presence of a person widely considered detestable, the results of this experiment go very far to show the magnitude of

THE POWER OF PRIMING

priming's influence on our decision making and how we, much like Bargh, underestimate its true power. Similarly, as part of another examination designed to determine the effects of priming on human motivation, it was noticed that “[The experiment's] findings indicate that positive priming of action-concepts unconsciously increases the motivation to engage in the action in general” (Aarts & Van Honk, 2009, 1303). By detailing how, when primed in a specific way, that people may be more open to engaging in certain activities, the results of this study speak greatly to how persuasive priming is and how their decision making can be altered to make them more susceptible to doing different things. Additionally, information gained from a study incorporating the IRAP (Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure), an online test in which subjects group things from two different topics together that often show a certain bias towards subconscious thoughts, provides further insight as to how powerful of a tool priming is.

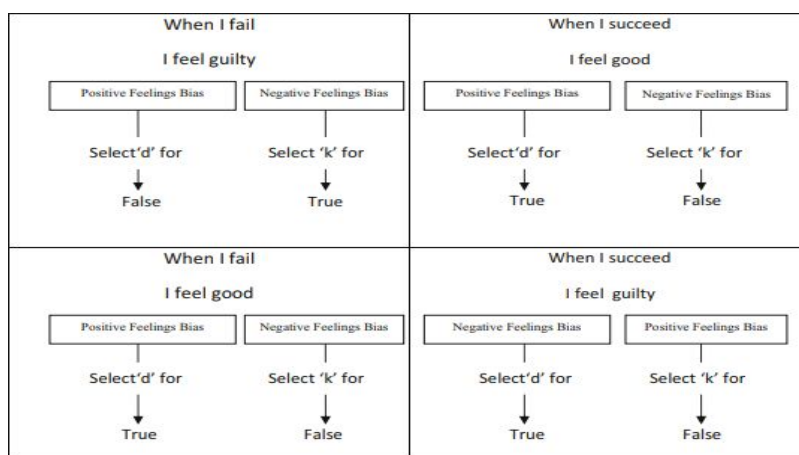


Figure 1: Depiction of what

IRAP test takers see on the computer screen. When responses recorded for certain pairings of statements/thoughts are completed faster, this is indicative of a strong association between the two things and allows for conclusions about the individual to be made based upon the different ways in which the experimenters primed them.

THE POWER OF PRIMING

From the experiment, it is noted that “In terms of the mean trial-type scores recorded with each IRAP, the priming condition appeared to affect performance on the outcomes IRAP” (Bast & Barnes-Holmes, 2015, 677). Much like the last experiment, this study’s findings once more exemplify how different methods of priming affects the way that people perform when evaluated.

While the last three examples all show how well priming works, it is important to understand how exactly we become primed, what primes us most, and how many factors influence our subconscious mind. What primes us most significantly is the environment we find ourselves a part of day in and day out. In an article published by *Time* magazine, many different ways that people can prime themselves are listed. Among the more important of the options were the people that we surround ourselves with and how they can positively alter our subconscious mind (How to Prime Your Mind for Greatness, 2016). The article shows that, the people around us, a large part of what makes up our environment, have an infectious general attitude that can either be beneficial or detrimental to our subconscious, highlighting the true power of environmental priming. Furthermore, psychologist Elizabeth Peterson explains the impact of being primed through environment when she describes a specific experiment that dealt with placing older men in an environment closely resembling the world 20 years ago. Somewhat miraculously, the old men suddenly exhibited greater concentration, memory, and attention skills in addition to being in better physical health (2007, para. 4). By revealing how simple changes and manipulations of an environment can prime different individuals, the study shows that being primed with a certain environment can have many significant benefits and has momentous effects on human behavior. Elsewhere in the same passage, Peterson continues and offers an

THE POWER OF PRIMING

example of how she has been primed by her environment. She reflects on the experience about how painting her bedroom walls yellow had unknowingly primed her with happier thoughts throughout the day (2007, para. 2). This personal anecdote from Peterson shines because it provides a very simple yet specific story about how her environment had such a great effect on her attitude each and every day by positively shaping her feelings on a subconscious level. By now, it has been proven that the community we involve ourselves in often has a great effect on us; it shapes our decision making, attitudes, and productivity. The next step that people can take to make sure they are being primed in the best ways possible is to find ways to become a part of environments and have interactions that do just that.

On that note, there are many different options we have to positively prime ourselves and positive priming carries many valuable benefits. With it now being known that priming done in a positive fashion has been proven to increase human motivation to complete tasks (Aarts & Van Honk, 2009, 1302), it is important that we understand how to change our environments to accommodate for these proven facts. The *Time* magazine article recognizes this, offering varying options for those looking to change the way their surroundings prime them in hopes to live a more successful life, one guided by the positive feelings of their subconscious. Some examples that *Time* offers are reading books concerning personal transformation as a means of gaining confidence and imagining to be in the state of being of which one may desire (How to Prime Your Mind for Greatness, 2016). This emphasizes the notion that there exist many positive outlets that we can use to manipulate the many factors making up the communities and relationships that define our environment and how we are primed, shaping it for the better. In *Blink*, Gladwell looks back on one of the many featured experiments in the novel as he

THE POWER OF PRIMING

reminisces on a study based on two different groups of students' accuracy on a trivia game, noting the shocking 13% difference in scores (2005, 56). Later, an explanation is offered as to how something as simple as priming could have such a profound effect, claiming "[The subjects] weren't smarter or more focused or more serious. They were simply in a 'smart' frame of mind" (Gladwell, 2005, 56). While what Gladwell says is important, the value of the statement lies in possible future application. If we can prime others to put themselves in a more thinking-oriented mindset, their performance when will increase significantly, undeniably changing the way the world around us functions for the better.

While the potentially life-changing effects of priming remain relatively unknown, it does not have to be that way. Understanding what influences the subconscious urges and feelings we experience is important, as highlighted throughout this paper, to improving one's health, productivity, confidence, and many other things of great value. The more widely recognized the effects of priming become, the happier and more efficient of a society we will become. With that, I encourage those who now understand the power priming has on the mind to go forth and enlighten the masses in hopes that we all, as humans, can benefit through the miraculous methods of positive priming.

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