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Disentangling Interpersonal and Societal Social Experiences during the Affective Processing of Words

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Social words were often treated as one category [1]. However, some social experiences are first-hand and more interpersonal (*gossip*), whereas others are more societal (*prejudice*). We hypothesized that grounded social experiences modulate the affective processing of words.

Thirty-three participants judged the affective valences of 360 words varying in social features (interpersonal, societal, non-social) and valence (negative, neutral, positive) during electroencephalography recording. Social features were normed (N=30), and frequency, length, Age-of-Acquisition, valence, arousal, and concreteness [2] were matched across social features within each valence.

At P200, interpersonal words elicited the largest effect in negative valence, indicating enhanced attention. At N400, interpersonal and societal words showed attenuated effect in all valence categories, indicating facilitated lexical retrieval. At LPP, interpersonal words showed the largest effect in all valence categories.

These findings provide evidence that social words can be categorized into at least two types, one of which is grounded in interpersonal experience.