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Short Research Note

Effect of Romantic Relationship on Implicit Regional Prejudice

ZHENG JIN^{1*} and JEFFREY W. SHERMAN²

¹*Institute of Educational Science, Zhengzhou Normal University, China*

²*Department of Psychology, University of California, Davis, CA, USA*

ABSTRACT

The study measures both the implicit regional prejudice and the explicit simple attitude of 93 students of five universities in China, either involved or not in different stages of a romantic relationship and at varying distances from their partners, by using the Brief Implicit Association Test and Explicit Reports. Results indicate that close relationships can contribute significantly to decreasing implicit regional prejudice. Further studies are needed to provide support for the causal mechanism between interpersonal relationships and changes in social attitudes. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: Brief Implicit Association Test; implicit social cognition; intergroup relationships; social attitude; prejudice

Throughout the life span, interpersonal relations are believed to be powerful influences on behaviour, cognition, and emotions (Crowell & Treboux, 2001; Crowell et al., 2002; Waters & Cummings, 2000). It is assumed that people in stable interdependent relationships are generally more secure because such relationships have the potential to satisfy deep needs of stability and security (e.g. Gerstel & Gross, 1982). For example, people are willing to settle for less in their love relationships because of fears about being single, and most people view being single as a threat to a sense of security (Spielmann et al., 2013; Anderson & Stewart, 1994). One of the basic tenets of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982, 1988) is that interactions with others who are available and supportive in times of difficulty facilitate the formation of secure attachments. In turn, secure attachment has a number of positive *sequelae*, including increased exploration (Feeney, 2004) and positive emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013).

Stable-secure relationships have important implications for cognition and social perception. Generally, people in secure relationships tend to appraise threatening events optimistically and

*Correspondence to: Zheng Jin, Zhengzhou Normal University, Institute of Educational Science, Zhengzhou 450044, China.
E-mail: zhjin@ucdavis.edu

believe in their capacity to deal effectively with these events. For example, people in secure relationships are more open to belief-discrepant information (Mikulincer & Arad, 1999). The sense of security derived from relationships leads people to believe that the ambiguity created by belief-discrepant information is resolvable and that they have the skills needed to process this information. In the domain of intergroup perception, contextual activation of the sense of a secure base has been shown to reduce prejudice (Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). When people feel that their own psychological foundation is secure, they are less inclined to react negatively to out-groups (refer to Mikulincer & Florian, 1998, 2000 for a review). The current study further examines the link between stable interpersonal relationships and prejudice.

METHOD

Participants

Ninety-three students attending five universities of Henan Province from the southern and northern regions of China, with ages ranging from 19 to 23 years old ($\text{age} \pm SD$, 21.2 ± 0.9), participated in this experiment. Participants were recruited *via* student union organizations. They were informed of the procedures and gave their informed written consent. Three participants were excluded because of extremely high error rates (more than 20% per block), and six participants failed to finish the task, leaving a final sample size of 84. The remaining participants were divided into three groups: 20 participants with single status, 33 participants in short-term relationships ($M = 6.37$ months, $SD = 1.42$), and 31 participants in long-term relationships ($M = 14.83$ months, $SD = 1.51$). Before the current relationship, the subjects had no other romantic relationship. The geographical distance between the couples was also measured. Among the participants in a short-term relationship, 12 participants had partners from the same province, 10 participants had partners from a different province but from the same region, and 11 participants had partners from a different region. Among the participants in a long-term relationship, 9 participants had partners from the same province, 10 participants had partners from a different province but from the same region, and 12 participants had partners from a different region. The line of the Qinling Mountains and the Huai River served as the criterion delineating the northern and the southern regions of China (People's Republic of China Yearbook, 2004).

Material

Participants completed a Brief Implicit Association Test (BIAT; Sriram & Greenwald, 2009). Of the four categories used in the BIAT, two were concepts associated with regions of China (South and North) and the other two were pleasant and unpleasant attributes. We selected 20 place names that are frequently used in negative news or comments on the most influential Chinese Internet online forums (bulletin board system, such as Baidu, NetEase, Tencent, etc.) that are typical in discussions of north (e.g. Beijing) and south China (e.g. Shanghai).

Ten words for South and ten words for North were rated by 90 participants, answering how much they like or dislike these places (1 to 10 points). The six words that elicited dislike the most were used as *concept* words for the North ($M = 6.83$, $SD = 0.22$) and South ($M = 6.73$, $SD = 0.48$) respectively. These concept words were presented in terms of pictures that represented them. Based on pilot testing, six positive and six negative words

were chosen as *attributes* from the 'Chinese Adjective Dictionary'. The participants in the pilot study did not participate in the main experiment.

Procedure

The participants rated on a scale from 1 to 7 their preference for people from different regions than themselves (either northern or southern regions of China). Higher scores indicated stronger preference for the regions.

The BIAT was used to measure implicit attitudes about North and South China, which represent the in-group or out-group, depending on the participants' home regions. The BIAT assumes that reaction times are shorter when strongly associated concepts (e.g. South and unpleasant) share the same response key and are longer when weakly associated, or even conflicting, concepts (e.g. North and unpleasant) share the same response key.

RESULT

Implicit measures

Performance on the BIAT was coded so that higher scores equal greater implicit bias against the out-group. The alpha level was set at .05 for all analyses. Unless otherwise indicated, nonsignificant effects will not be reported. The 2 (duration: short term and long term) $\times$ 3 (distance: different city, different province and different region) Anova revealed a strong effect of relationship status, $F(1, 58) = 86.02$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .60$. *Post hoc* comparisons, with alpha level adjusted by Bonferroni corrections, showed that participants in a short-term relationship demonstrated significantly less out-group bias ($M = 0.79$; $SD = 0.03$) than did participants in a long-term relationship ($M = 0.40$; $SD = 0.03$), $t(62) = 8.34$, $p < .001$. A strong effect of distance was also found, $F(2, 58) = 11.14$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .28$. Significant differences between all distance levels were found by *post hoc* multiple comparisons ($ps < .001$), except the difference between the group whose partner comes from the same province and the group whose partner comes from a different province but from the same region (Figure 1).

Explicit measures

An explicit report did not show any significant effects. However, for both implicit and explicit measures, participants not involved in a romantic relationship (single group) demonstrated the greatest out-group bias (for the explicit report, $M = 2.70$, and for BIAT, $D = 1.18$).

DISCUSSION

Implicit measure showed that the longer people have been dating, the less bias they have against the out-group and that the farther away partners are from each other, the less bias they have against the out-group. Implicit and explicit attitudes are dissociated in this study that expressions on explicit measures favour the dominant group to a relatively small degree, whereas implicit attitudes demonstrate robust significant preferences. The dissociation between the response latency measures of implicit attitudes and the self-reported attitudes has

Figure 1. *D* value as a function of the relationship duration and the distance between two people.

been widely observed for socially sensitive issues (e.g. Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji,). In the present design, there is no firm evidence that relationships caused reduction of bias because the relation between bias decrease and romantic relationships allows more than one interpretation. For example, it could be as simple as the fact that people who are in longer relationships are nicer people (*cf* Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005), or people who are willing to date partners from farther away are more open minded (*cf* Mikulincer, 1997), so that less prejudice is produced.

The finding suggests that people who are in longer committed relationships are more egalitarian. In line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), negative reactions to out-groups serve a self-protective function, and individuals are motivated to maintain self-esteem, and self-esteem is especially likely to be improved in a secure and stable relationship (Simpson, Rholes, Orina, & Grich, 2002). So, maintenance of such a relationship leads to the out-group's higher value and entails that it identifies with its own groups in terms of characteristics that favour the out-group. According to attachment working models (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994), romantic relationships tend to be reliably maintained within the situations of seeking out supportive others, making contact with others who are seen as a secure base, and preserving the relationship with partners. Moreover, previous studies show that relative to insecure individuals, secure individuals are more empathetic, trustful, open-minded, prosocial, satisfied with life, and better able to handle conflicts and prejudice (e.g. Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer et al., 2005). It fits the present finding that longer relationships led to higher secure base and lower threat appraisal of the out-group, which was reflected in less out-group devaluation.

The greater the spatial, temporal, or social distance from the 'stimulus', the greater the perceived psychological distance (for a simple review, refer to Jimenez, 2010), and some studies assumed that such distancing would lead to greater prejudice (e.g. Phillips, 2012). However, this study indicated that people whose partners are from farther away are more egalitarian. This finding can be explained by Bowlby's theory, which proposes that the quality and stability of romantic relationships are maintained without the physical presence of the partner through a compensatory mechanism involving the perceived availability of

the partner. The mechanism responsible for the effects of a secure base on intergroup bias may be cognitive openness and tolerance to others (Saleem, 2011). People who are dating partners from farther away are assumed to be more open minded and tolerable and associated with smaller intergroup bias.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATION

It is focused on the study of a simple relationship, which, however, has a much differentiated background, for example, the duration of love relationship and education level, but also such as that which is not included into the study, for example, social background, economic level, and so on. Although individual differences functioned as confounding variables or produced high variability in the present results, this study remains optimistic in its view that automatic attitudes do shift in response to interpersonal relationships.

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