

The Modal Boundary Conditions of Automatic Attitude Formation

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It is a fascinating yet disquieting idea that the attitudes governing our everyday behaviors are acquired without engaging in effortful reasoning. Using an evaluative conditioning procedure, the present research attempts to specify and test the boundary conditions under which attitudes are acquired despite concurrent working memory demands. Specifically, we hypothesized attitudes to be conditioned despite concurrent demands if conditioning and a secondary task (i.e., n-back, Kirchner, 1958) involve different modality-specific subsystems for information processing (cf. Baddeley, 1986). The involvement of different subsystems was manipulated via the type of stimuli used for conditioning and the n-back task, respectively. As expected, in two experiments attitude learning was found only in conditions involving different subsystems (i.e., verbal/visual task combinations) compared to conditions sharing a subsystem (i.e., verbal/verbal and visual/visual task combinations). The implications for automaticity research and links to embodied cognition (e.g., Barsalou, 2008; Paivio, 1986) are discussed.

[short]

Two experiments demonstrate the importance of modal boundary conditions for the automatic evaluative conditioning of attitudes. The findings illuminate potential origins of conflicting empirical findings, and constrain theorizing about the underlying learning processes.