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2017

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2017

Priming Meritocracy Increases Implicit Prejudice

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Abstract

Meritocracy is a prevalent norm characterizing most modern societies according to which social status and rewards should depend on individual effort and hard work. Despite its ubiquity, the effects of meritocracy have never been analyzed outside the field of explicit attitudes. Thus, expanding on the small body of studies that focus on the positive factors that promote the emergence of socially negative responses, we investigated the effect of priming meritocracy on the expression of implicit racial prejudice. Results from two experimental studies consistently showed that priming meritocracy results in higher levels of implicit prejudice (Studies 1 and 2) and elicits both inter- (Study 1) and intra-individual (Study 2) variations of the levels of prejudice.

Key words: *meritocracy; implicit prejudice; social norms, legitimation, effort*

Resumo

A meritocracia é uma norma prevalente que caracteriza grande parte das sociedades modernas segundo a qual o estatuto social e recompensas devem depender do esforço individual e do trabalho empregue. Apesar da sua ubiquidade, os efeitos da meritocracia nunca foram analisados fora do campo das atitudes explícitas. Assim, e expandindo no reduzido corpo de estudos que se focam em factores positivos que promovem o surgimento de respostas socialmente negativas, neste artigo investigamos o efeito da saliência da meritocracia na expressão de preconceito racial implícito. Os resultados de dois estudos experimentais mostram de forma consistente que esta saliência da meritocracia resulta em níveis mais elevados de preconceito implícito (estudos 1 e 2) causando variações do nível de preconceito tanto ao nível inter-individual (Estudo 1) como intra-individual (Estudo 2).

Palavras-chave: *meritocracia; preconceito implícito; normas sociais; legitimação; esforço*

PRIMING MERITOCRACY INCREASES IMPLICIT PREJUDICE

"I don't believe in luck, I believe in a work well done"

José Mourinho

This quote is part of a new commercial where José Mourinho, currently one of the most famous and successful soccer managers in the world, stresses the belief that presumably explains his success. This is a recent example of the ever more prevalent norm of meritocracy that characterizes most modern Western societies.

Meritocracy is a social norm according to which social status and rewards should depend on individual effort and hard work (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Though meritocracy is widely seen as a positive norm that regulates society by rewarding people based on their efforts, the fact is that the endorsement of this norm has been shown to be associated with a higher acceptance of intergroup inequalities (McCoy & Major, 2007, Myrdal, 1944)). In line with this, other studies have found a link between meritocracy and explicit racial attitudes (e.g., Biernat et al, 1996; Vala, Lima & Lopes, 2004). As yet, however, the effects of meritocracy have not been analyzed outside the field of explicit attitudes. Considering the importance of implicit prejudice (Strack & Deutsch, 2004) we aimed to analyze how meritocracy impacts on implicit prejudice.

The malleability of implicit prejudice

Some have argued that, due to its automatic nature, implicit prejudice is unaffected by context (Bargh, 1999). However, a consistent body of research emerged showing the malleability of implicit prejudice (Blair, 2002). Most studies on this topic identify factors that inhibit the expression of implicit prejudice (e.g. Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). The few studies that focus on factors that promote the expression of implicit prejudice look at the influence of only clearly negative aspects. For example, Wittenbrink, Judd and Park (2001) found higher levels of implicit prejudice towards Blacks when these were presented in a negative context. An exception is found in the work of Zogmaister and colleagues (Zogmaister, Arcuri, Castelli & Smith, 2008). These authors showed that it is possible to observe an increase of implicit

ingroup favouritism by priming loyalty, an important value, largely shared among individuals (Rokeach, 1967).

We aim to extend research on the effects of positive social factors on the emergence of socially negative responses by analyzing the effects of priming meritocracy on the expression of implicit prejudice. Although meritocracy as a social norm or value is highly accessible in Western societies, and is seen as an important determining fact of life (Katz & Hass, 1988), it has not been studied in terms of its effects on the expression of implicit prejudice.

Meritocracy and implicit prejudice

As mentioned, meritocracy and the set of beliefs that are comprehended in it, such as protestant work ethic, are related to intolerance and dislike of members of stigmatized groups (Furnham, 1985; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). A potential reason for this link is that when meritocratic beliefs are made salient, the stigmatized are not seen as victims of a discriminatory system, instead people construe the negative situation of members of low-status groups as the result of a lack of self- discipline, hard work, and strong moral character (Ledgerwood et al, 2011). This view is the result of a syllogism that can be derived from the general message conveyed by the meritocratic norm which is that if status hierarchy is based on merit, one might infer that those who are in a worse situation (i.e. a low status group) are logically less hard-working and thus less valuable and deserving of their situation. This idea has already garnered some empirical support. For example, McCoy and Major (2007) have shown that, in a condition of meritocracy, members of a low status group (in this case, women) used more internal attributions when trying to explain the reason for being discriminated.

Thus, meritocracy seems to lead to more negative attitudes towards stigmatized and low-status groups and this link seems to operate through the attribution of a more internal locus of control. What we argue is that, over time, the constant occurrence of these kinds of propositional inferences will lead to a change in the associative structure of the representation of groups that are targeted with such internal attributions (Gawronsky & Bodenhausen, 2006). As a result of these propositional processes, the image of low-status groups will be constituted by a complex network of associations in which these specific negative associations are merely one of the several existent associative patterns.

Priming meritocracy at a given moment should then be sufficient to activate these specific implicit associations already existent in memory (Gawronsky & Bodenhausen, 2006). Since these implicit associations are linked to a more negative evaluation of low status groups,

mere exposure to the norm of meritocracy should be sufficient to increase the levels of implicit prejudice towards those groups. Therefore, we expected the activation of a meritocratic norm to increase the expression of implicit prejudice towards low-status groups.

Overview

We report two experiments designed to investigate the effects of priming meritocracy on the levels of implicit prejudice that individuals display towards a low-status group. In both experiments, we measured (Dutch participants') implicit negative associations towards Moroccans, currently a strongly stigmatized low-status group in the Netherlands (Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005) where the studies took place. We manipulate the meritocratic norm in either a more manifest (Study 1) or a more subtle way (Study 2) and we measure implicit prejudice using a Single-Target IAT (Study 1) or an Affective Priming Task (Study 2).

Study 1

In this first study, participants were asked to take part in two supposedly unrelated studies. After arriving in the lab, participants took part in a task presented as a *Text Comprehension Task* that served to manipulate the meritocratic norm. After this first task, all participants completed a Single Target IAT (see, Dotsch & Wigboldüs, 2008; Wigboldüs, Holland & van Knippenberg, 2004). We expected to observe higher levels of prejudice in the condition of meritocracy than in the neutral condition.

Method

Participants and design

Forty-two Dutch students (84% female; mean age = 22.3 yrs) took part in the experiment in exchange for partial course credit or a token with a value of Eur 5. Participants were randomly distributed in a unifactorial between-participants design (Meritocracy vs. Neutral).

Manipulation of meritocracy. The manipulation was presented as a text comprehension task. Participants were invited to carefully read a text in order to subsequently choose the sentence that best expresses the main idea of the text. Two different texts and two sets of sentences represented the two different conditions. In the meritocracy condition, participants read a text explaining how current societies are characterized by the idea of merit

and that we should compensate individuals and groups on the basis of their effort. Moreover, it was explicitly said that a society that does not value these ideas would have serious problems to develop. In the neutral condition, participants read a text about a Dutch supermarket franchise, its history and basic information about the number of branches and functioning hours.

Implicit prejudice. As mentioned above, we were interested in observing the effects of priming meritocracy on implicit prejudice, by considering how meritocracy affects accessibility of negative implicit associations with a certain low status- outgroup. Given this emphasis on the outgroup independently from the ingroup, we decided to use a Single-Target IAT in which the only target group present in the task is the outgroup of interest, in this case Moroccans. Participants were asked to classify Moroccan names (e.g. Achmed, Mustafa) and positive and negative words (e.g., love, peace, war, pain) with two response keys (left and right) in a congruent and an incongruent block. The congruent block consisted of classifying 10 Moroccan names and 10 negative words with the left key, and 20 positive words with the right key. The incongruent block consisted of classifying 10 Moroccan names and 10 positive words with the right key, and 20 negative words with the left key.

Results

To obtain a measure of implicit prejudice, we calculated our measure of association strength analogous to Greenwald and colleagues (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The first two trials of each block were excluded from analysis. Latencies were capped to a range of 300 ms to 3000 ms. Analyzes were performed on log-transformed latencies, but the latencies reported are the untransformed (in milliseconds). Implicit prejudice consists of the difference between latencies in the incongruent block and the congruent block. We subjected these scores of implicit prejudice to a one-way (Meritocracy vs. Neutral) ANOVA. Results indicate higher levels of implicit prejudice towards Moroccans in the condition where the meritocratic norm was made salient (M = 52.8, SD = 71.4) comparing to a neutral condition (M = 13.9, SD = 55.8), F (1, 40) = 4.78; p <.05, η = .11 (see *Figure 1*).

Discussion

This experiment offered first support to the idea that priming meritocracy leads to higher levels of implicit prejudice. To offer further support to this hypothesis, with Study 2 we aimed to replicate these results with a different manipulation of meritocracy and a different

measure of implicit prejudice. Furthermore, we also wanted to test whether the activation of a meritocratic norm elicits intra-individual variation of levels of implicit prejudice.

Study 2

The second study sought to replicate the results of the first study using a different manipulation of meritocracy and a different measure of implicit prejudice. Moreover, in this study, implicit prejudice was measured before and after the experimental manipulation, allowing for the analysis of the intra-individual variations of implicit prejudice as a function of meritocracy priming.

As in the first study, participants were asked to take part in two, supposedly unrelated studies. After arriving in the lab, participants were informed that a new measure of social perception was being tested and therefore they would be asked to take the same task twice to analyze the characteristics of the measure. The "new measure" was in fact an Affective Priming Task (APT) used here for the measurement of implicit prejudice. After the first administration of the APT, participants were told that, in order to fill the free time before the second administration of the measure, they would take part in a *Scrambled Sentence Task* that contained the experimental manipulation. After this task, all participants again completed an APT as the "supposed" second part of test measurement. Once again, we expected to observe higher levels of implicit prejudice in the condition of meritocracy than in the neutral condition. Additionally, we predicted that there should be a significant increase of individuals' levels of implicit prejudice from Time 1 to Time 2 only in the condition where the meritocratic norm was primed.

Method

Participants and design

Thirty-six Dutch students (78% female; M_{age} = 21.2 yrs) took part in the experiment in exchange for partial course credit or or a *Eur* 5 token. Participants were randomly distributed in a 2 (Meritocracy vs. Neutral) X 2 (Time 1 vs. Time 2) mixed model design with repeated measures on the scores of implicit prejudice.

Manipulation of meritocracy. The manipulation was presented as a Scrambled Sentence Task (adapt. from Srull & Wyer, 1979). Participants were asked to transform 18 sets of 5 words into 18 logical 4-word sentences. In the meritocracy condition, 10 sentences conveyed messages related to meritocracy (e.g. "Lazy people are unsuccessful."; "No pain, no

gain.") and 8 presented neutral content (e.g. "A calculator saves time"). In the neutral condition, all 18 sentences presented neutral content (8 of the sentences were the same neutral ones as used in the *Meritocracy* condition).

Implicit prejudice. An *Affective Priming Task* (Hermans, de Houwer & Eelen, 1994) was administered before and after the experimental manipulation. In this task, two affectively polarized stimuli were presented on each trial and participants were asked to judge the affective connotation of the second stimulus. While the first stimulus (the prime) was presented only for a short period of time (200 ms), the second stimulus (i.e., the target) was presented until a response was given. The time needed to categorize the target stimuli as either "positive" or "negative" was registered. The target (second stimulus) was a positive or negative word and the prime was either "Moroccans" or neutral (e.g. chair). Each "pair of target-stimuli" (e.g. Moroccans – Positive Word) appeared five times.

Results

As mentioned in the hypothesis, we were interested in observing the variations in the expression of negative associations with the target-group. Thus, in this task, we focused on the level of facilitation of *negative* words by a "Moroccan" prime compared to a neutral prime. Accordingly, to obtain a score of implicit prejudice, we calculated an index of facilitation of negative words, which consisted of the response time participants used to categorize a word as negative after a neutral prime minus the response time participants used to categorize the same word after the "Moroccans" Prime. This was done separately for Time 1 and Time 2. Higher scores indicate higher facilitation, which indicates higher implicit prejudice.

We subjected the implicit prejudice scores to an ANOVA with repeated measures using *Time* (of administration of the implicit prejudice measure) as a within-participants factor. Analyzes revealed a marginally significant interaction that indicates that the variations of implicit prejudice happened differently between conditions, $F (1, 34) = 2.90$; $p <. 09$. Having specific hypotheses defined, we conducted single-degree-of-freedom contrasts to test them. The contrast comparing levels of implicit prejudice at Time 1 and Time 2 in the neutral condition was non-significant, $B = -2.6$; $F < 1$; $t (34) = -.064$; n.s.. On the contrary, the contrast for the same comparison in the Meritocracy condition was highly significant, $B = 91.3$; $F = 5.82$; $t (34) = 2.41$; $p < .02$. Thus, only in the Meritocracy condition was there a significant increase of implicit prejudice towards Moroccans. Additionally, we tested the difference between conditions at Time 2 and that contrast revealed a marginally significant difference indicating

higher levels of prejudice in the meritocracy condition as hypothesized, $B = 89.5$; $F = 3.02$; $t (34) = 1.74$; $p < .09$. *Figure 2* illustrates levels of prejudice at Time 1 and Time 2 and the variations between those two periods.

Discussion

Results from this second study offer further support to the idea that priming meritocracy increases implicit prejudice. In fact, besides showing higher levels of implicit prejudice at Time 2 for the individuals in the Meritocracy condition, results indicated that only in this condition was there a significant *increase* of individuals' level of implicit prejudice. It is noteworthy that these significant variations of implicit prejudice took place even though the Affective Priming Task was administered twice which might have motivated participants to try to reproduce their response pattern from Time 1.

General Discussion

Taken together, these two studies constitute an initial step to expand our knowledge about the effects of the prevalence of a meritocratic norm on individuals' attitudes and behaviors within a society where such norm is constantly and subtly primed. This research shows that the activation of a meritocratic norm facilitates the expression of implicit prejudice.

One could argue that what triggered the expression of implicit prejudice was the mere reference to groups that was present in the meritocracy condition and absent from the neutral condition. However, it should be mentioned that in Study 2 there is hardly any reference to groups in the experimental sentences included in the Scrambled Sentence Task in the Meritocracy condition. Moreover, previous studies used manipulations (of equality) with references to groups that, on the contrary, caused a decrease of implicit favoritism (Zogmaister et al, 2008).

Two additional steps that should be addressed in future studies would complement on two limitations of the current preliminary research: 1) the identification of the underlying mechanism and 2) the analysis of the impact of meritocracy on actual behavior. Regarding the mechanism through which this facilitation occurs, we find it unlikely that a process of justification is taking place here. Justification seems to be a valid explanation in the case of more reflective processes (Stack & Deutsch, 2004; Pereira, Vala & Leyens, 2009), which would be in line with the *Justification Supression Model* (JSM; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). In fact, according to JSM, people carry both a genuine prejudice and a need to act in a non-prejudiced

manner. To solve this conflict, people seek justifications that allow them to express prejudice without being publicly or psychologically censored. Thus, the existence of justifications facilitates the expression of prejudice and meritocracy may serve as one of these justifications (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). However, justification is probably not a prerequisite for meritocracy to have its effect in the case of implicit prejudice. The current effect seems to reflect more associative processing.

Alternatively, one could construe the effect of meritocracy as an alleviation of the individual's automatic tendency to suppress prejudiced associations. In fact, earlier research as shown that people – with chronic egalitarian goals - are able to suppress the effects of unwanted implicit associations (Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel, & Schaal, 1999). It may be the case that meritocracy temporarily "suppresses the suppression" which results in stronger levels of implicit prejudice. This alternative explanation is actually concordant with the lack of implicit prejudice we observed in Study 2 at Time 1 (cf. *Figure 2*). Both the hypothesis that the facilitation of negative associations derives from inferences caused by the activation of meritocracy and the idea of an alleviation of a suppression tendency need to be tested more directly in future research.

In respect to the impact of meritocracy on actual behavior, we would expect such a link presumably through the changes occurring at the implicit prejudice level. That is, considering that implicit prejudice is a significant predictor of impulsive behavior (through a basic affective reaction, Dotsch & Wigboldüs, 2008), we would hypothesize that priming meritocracy would, indirectly, lead to a more aversive behavioral reaction towards a low-status group.

The current research further expands on what is known about the malleability of implicit prejudice by showing that, also the activation of ideas with an *a priori* positive nature may lead to socially negative responses such as implicit prejudice. In fact, in trying to understand the nature of a process we benefit as much from knowing the factors that inhibit it as from knowing the factors that promote it. This is even more significant when we investigate how a core value of western societies may carry such aversive effects.

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