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Priming good parenting: Can positive affective priming influence fathers' causal attributions and consequent disciplinary responses for child misbehaviour?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis combines affective priming with the cognitive processes and behavioural sequences found in parenting decisions, to explore whether a father's attributions for child misbehaviour and consequent disciplinary responses can be influenced by a priming intervention. Forty eight fathers of children aged between 5 and 12 years were questioned on their opinions regarding the causes of child behaviour, and how they would choose to respond to or discipline such behaviour, before and following a priming intervention consisting of full-colour images of fathers interacting with their children. These primes differed in content in both emotional valence and the fathering roles depicted dependent upon the group to which participants were randomly assigned. These groups were General Positive, General Negative, Evolutionary Positive, and Evolutionary Negative priming images. Results showed that all research groups were successfully primed, as measured by a word completion task, however consistent and expected changes in attributions for child behaviour and disciplinary choices did not occur due to the priming intervention. Proposed reasons for this include unforeseen priming effects obscuring the main effect, additional corrective cognitive factors altering or obscuring the priming effect, or difficulties with the way the cognitive and behavioural changes were measured. Proposed methods for further exploration in future research regarding how to translate a priming effect into meaningful and consistent change are discussed. Priming as an adjunctive parenting intervention remains an interesting and worthwhile consideration, and ideas around utilisation of this technique are discussed in light of the results of this research.

PREFACE

This thesis started its life as an honour's project, undertaken in 2011 with the guidance of my supervisor, Professor Ian Evans. I was interested in anything to do with child psychology and parenting, and Ian had a project in mind regarding priming for parents. A pilot of the current project was therefore conceived. Although just 12 fathers were interviewed and undertook a priming intervention, it provided the valuable groundwork for a doctoral thesis on the same subject. With what we learned from attempting a priming intervention with those 12 fathers we were able to design the current experiment and expand the sample size. In the five years I've been working on this topic, I've learned so much about fathering and priming that I will take with me into the next part of my career as a practicing child and family psychologist.

This thesis has been the biggest and most challenging project I've ever undertaken, and it couldn't have happened without the help and support of many people. Firstly and most importantly my family, who have backed me through more than eight years of study to the conclusion of this research project. The largest thank you must go to my parents, who have helped me financially, emotionally, practically – in every way imaginable, so that I could stick with this process until the very end. It is because of my Dad, who always told me I could do anything I wanted, that I had the courage to try out for the competitive Clinical Psychology program in the first place. My extended family have been confident that I would finish this project even when I wasn't sure of it myself; I will always value your belief in me.

I only managed to write this thesis with the guidance of many very smart and talented people. A huge thank you goes to my supervisors, all of whom contributed to essential aspects of the project. Dr Heather Buttle, although we did not get to work together in person much, you provided inspiration for the research design that proved crucial to the meaningful interpretation of the results. Associate Professor John Podd – it may not have seemed like much at the time, but without your guidance in data quantification and ideas for statistical analysis, I wouldn't have even known where to start googling. And of course Professor Ian Evans, who contributed so much

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