

Applying interdisciplinary innovations to advance theories of social behavior:

Response to Van Dessel and colleagues

David M. Amodio

New York University, University of Amsterdam

Address correspondence to

David M. Amodio
Department of Psychology
New York University
6 Washington Place
New York, NY 10003
Email: david.amodio@gmail.com

I thank Van Dessel, Gawronski, and De Houwer [1] for their thoughtful response to my article [2]. However, their core objection, regarding the validity of the multiple systems account of learning and memory, appears misplaced. The contribution of my article was not to propose this broad framework for learning and memory; the memory systems framework was already firmly established as a mainstream view in cognitive psychology and neuroscience [3,4].

Van Dessel et al.'s main argument is that evidence for multiple memory systems from behavioral tasks alone is ambiguous. On this, I agree. If one considered only the kinds of behavioral tasks used in conventional social cognition research, it would be difficult to discern single-system and multi-system models. However, my article presented findings from an extensive body of behavioral, neuroimaging, and lesion research in human and non-human animals which, taken together, overwhelmingly supports a multiple memory systems model. Outside of social psychology, there is relatively little debate on this [5]; the focus now is on refining the specific computations and functions of memory systems, their precise neural substrates, and their interactive roles in learning, decision-making, and behavior [e.g., 6,7].

Van Dessel et al. also cast doubt on evidence for memory system dissociations from lesion patient studies (e.g., comparing hippocampal and Parkinson's Disease patients). However, this doubt is not supported well by the articles they referenced; these offer only speculation about a single system account [8] or broadly support a multiple memory systems account [6]. Although single-system computational models can be constructed to explain behavior ascribed to different neural systems, they rarely, if ever, explain more than this. When computational and predictive coding models incorporate architecture of multiple memory systems, they explain a broader range of behavior than single-system models [9,10].

What is gained by maintaining a single-system view of social cognition? This is less clear from Van Dessel et al.'s response. Although single-system models offer stimulating counterpoint to multi-system theories, they rarely generate predictions for how learning and memory interact with other psychological processes (e.g., of emotion, perception, motivation) or how knowledge is expressed through particular channels of behavior. Moreover, as hypothetical cognitive accounts, they are inherently disembodied and indifferent to biological plausibility. Indeed, such limitations led me to explore a memory systems model of social cognition in the first place.

Van Dessel et al. also highlighted an issue that was not central to my article and thus not a point of disagreement: the extent to which learning is propositional or associative and retrieval is implicit or explicit. However, many prominent theoretical frameworks now posit that learning and memory systems are not easily characterized in terms of their implicit or explicit operation [4]. Thus, rather than emphasize processing mode, the memory systems approach focuses on questions about computation, representation (i.e., algorithm), and implementation. Nevertheless, the memory systems model offers clarity on the conditions under which learning and behavior operate more or less implicitly.

But again, the point of my article was not to propose the memory systems model as if it were a new idea in learning and memory. What my article *did* do was present this model as an opportunity for social psychologists to update and advance their thinking on social cognition and attitudes. I described how this framework offers novel and testable predictions for the variety of ways impressions and attitudes are formed and represented, expressed in thought, emotion, perception, and behavior, and potentially changed. The goal was not to propose *more* systems, but to discuss how the operations of known memory systems can provide a better explanation of social cognition and behavior.

In doing so, my article encourages researchers to move beyond single-system models and the narrow set of behavioral methods that, being ambiguous about underlying mechanisms, may thwart theoretical advance. A case in point is my 2006 article [11], which Van Dessel et al. criticized as ambiguous evidence for the notion of memory systems in social cognition. But the purpose of that work was not to propose a new multiple memory systems model, as it was already established. Rather, the goal was to test new predictions from the model to clarify an enduring puzzle in prejudice research: why behavioral measures of implicit bias are so tenuously linked to social outcomes. We found that separate implicit association tests (IATs), constructed to reflect different underlying Pavlovian and semantic memory systems, did provide clearer predictions of racial discrimination.

Yet, as discussed in Amodio and Devine, our theoretical model did not translate well to the conventional tasks of social cognition and, indeed, the behavioral tasks we used (IATs) could not provide direct evidence for separate underlying memory systems on their own. Hence, a major take-away was that new methods were needed to clarify the mechanisms underlying implicit bias and its expression in behavior. For example, research using physiological and neuroimaging methods, in combination with behavior, has provided more direct evidence for when prejudices and stereotypes emerge from a single semantic associative system or different memory systems [12,13].

My hope is that the memory systems framework, and its broad body of evidence in learning psychology and neuroscience, will inspire new ideas about attitudes and social cognition, along with an expanded methodological approach. With the appropriate tools, we can begin to explore the many new predictions offered by the memory systems model. More broadly, by discussing and debating the merits of various perspectives, as in this exchange, we may integrate the best aspects of each approach to advance our shared goal of understanding of social behavior.

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