Predicting behavior requires the development of implicit measures of values and expectancies of behavior options rather than of attitudes towards stimuli

Agnes Moors

Recent meta-analyses show low correlations between implicit attitude measures and behavior, suggesting that these measures are weak predictors of behavior. This has led some authors to challenge the construct validity of implicit measures (Oswald et al., 2013), whereas others argue that low correlations are obtained because theoretical constraints are overlooked (Brownstein, Madva, & Gawronski, 2017). I propose to approach this debate from the perspective of theories of behavior causation. Dual process models of behavior causation distinguish between (a) a stimulus-driven process in which a stimulus activates the association between the representation of stimulus features and the representation of a response (S-R) and (b) a goal-directed process in which the value and expectancy of the outcomes of one or more behavior options are weighed before an action tendency is activated (S:R-O $\rightarrow$ R). Traditional dual process models have a default interventionist architecture in which the stimulus-driven process is automatic and therefore the default determinant of behavior whereas goal-directed processes are nonautomatic so that they can only intervene when there is sufficient opportunity and motivation. Many attitude researchers seem to subscribe to a default- interventionist version of dual process theory: An attitude, which can be considered as the representation of a stimulus feature (i.e., valence: positive/negative), is directly connected to the representation of a response (e.g., approach/avoidance). This stimulus-driven process can be overruled by a goal-directed process but only when there is enough opportunity and motivation. Implicit measures are supposed to tap into the stimulus-driven process, and explicit measures in the goal-directed process. I proposed an alternative dual process model (Moors, Boddez, & De Houwer, 2017) in which stimulus-driven and goal-directed processes can both be automatic, which implies that they often operate in parallel and enter in competition (i.e., a parallel-competitive architecture). The model, moreover, assumes that when both processes do enter in competition, the goal-directed process should win because it is more likely to lead to optimal behavior. On this view, the goal-directed process determines the lion share of behavior whereas the stimulus-driven process determines behavior only in exceptional cases.

From the perspective of the traditional dual process model, which assumes that most behavior is determined by a stimulus-driven mechanism, it makes sense to continue measuring attitudes, especially with implicit measures because they allow bypassing the regulatory attempts of goal-directed processes. From the perspective of the alternative dual process model, however, which assumes that most behavior is determined by a goal-directed mechanism, it makes more sense to focus on measuring the values and expectancies of behavior options. Here too, implicit measures are needed, because values and expectancies are not always consciously reportable. In our lab, we have taken the first steps to design implicit measures that can assess these constructs, using variants of the IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), the IRAP (Barnes-Holmes, Barnes-Holmes, Stewart, & Boles, 2010), and the RRT (De Houwer, Heider, Spruyt, Roets, & Hughes, 2015).