Primed to Perceive Harm: People’s Responses to Ambiguous Statements as a Function of Priming

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Method

The questionnaire began with the following introductory material:

“Research suggests that the typical person engages in some form of conversation, however short or long, with over 25 people each day.”

The next sentence was the manipulation. It showed up in one of three versions:

- **Control Condition**
  “Through the course of so many interactions with strangers, friends, teachers, etc., people say or ask about all kinds of different things. How do you interpret each of the following statements/questions?”

- **Unintentional Harm Condition**
  “Through the course of so many interactions with strangers, friends, teachers, etc., sometimes people say or ask things that they don’t really mean.”

- **Intentional Harm Condition**
  “Through the course of so many interactions with strangers, friends, teachers, etc., sometimes people intentionally say or ask things that are harmful and can create a hostile environment for others.”

Then participants were asked, “How do you interpret each of the following statements/questions?” Participants then saw five statements, 5 of which were selected as benign and 7 as ambiguous. These ratings were on a seven-point scale ranging from Harmless to Neutral to Harmful.

Table 1: Links between participants’ emotional instability and the degree to which they perceive other’s words as harmful.

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<th>Benign Statements</th>
<th>Ambiguous Statements</th>
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References