Evaluative Conditioning without awareness:

Replicable effects do not equate replicable inferences

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Moran et al. (2019) successfully replicated the surveillance task effect obtained by Olson and Fazio (2001). This effect is often treated as evidence for attitude formation in the absence of awareness. However, such an inference requires that ‘aware’ participants are successfully excluded from consideration. We present evidence that the awareness exclusion criterion used by Olson and Fazio (2001) – the only one to produce a significant effect in Moran et al. (2019) – is a poor measure of awareness: it is overly lax, noisy, and demonstrates heterogeneity between sites. Two new meta-analyses, which (a) used a stricter compound awareness criterion and (b) controlled for differences in awareness rates between sites, both demonstrated non-significant, near-zero effect sizes (*g*s = -0.02 to 0.00). When subjected to more severe testing, Moran et al.’s (2019) data does not support the ‘unaware Evaluative Conditioning’ hypothesis.

Olson and Fazio (2001) presented evidence that changes in evaluative responding due to the pairing of stimuli (i.e., Evaluative Conditioning effects: ‘EC’) can take place even when people are ‘unaware’ that stimuli have been paired. Recently, Moran et al. (2019) conducted a close replication.[[1]](#footnote-1) While Moran et al.’s (2019) results replicated the original effect reported in Olson and Fazio (2001), we argue that both Olson and Fazio (2001) and Moran et al. (2019) represent weak tests of the underlying verbal hypothesis of ‘unaware EC’.

Let us be clear: we are not arguing the EC effect produced by Olson and Fazio’s (2001) surveillance task does not replicate. The results of Moran et al. (2019) indicate that it does. Rather, we are arguing that this experimental setup is a poor test of the verbal hypothesis that is ultimately of interest. In our opinion, the surveillance task and awareness measures produced replicable *effects,* but unreplicable *inferences* regarding ‘unaware Evaluative Conditioning’ (for more on this distinction, see Hussey & Hughes, 2020; Yarkoni, 2019).

To briefly recap, Moran et al. (2019) examined if EC effects on the surveillance task were present across four different awareness[[2]](#footnote-2) exclusion criteria (i.e., the ‘Olson & Fazio, 2001’, ‘Olson & Fazio, 2001 modified’, ‘Bar-Anan, De Houwer, & Nosek, 2010’, and ‘Bar-Anan et al., 2010 modified’ criteria; for details of each see Moran et al., 2019). Their confirmatory analysis was based on the original authors’ exclusion criterion (i.e., ‘Olson & Fazio, 2001’) which, when applied, led to a significant effect (Hedges’ *g* = 0.12, 95% CI [0.05, 0.20], *p* = .002). Applying any of the other three (pre-registered) exploratory exclusion criteria did not lead to significant EC effects (all *g*s = 0.03 to 0.05, all *p*s > .241).

Of course, testing the ‘unaware EC’ hypothesis requires a reliable and valid measure capable of excluding participants who were ‘aware’ of the stimulus pairings. What Olson and Fazio (2001; and by extension Moran et al., 2019) failed to do, in our opinion, was to consider the structural validity of these four awareness exclusion criteria as measures. Recent work has argued that such concerns around measurement are common in psychology and serve to threaten our research findings (Flake et al., 2017; Flake & Fried, 2019; Hussey & Hughes, 2020).

In our opinion, the confirmatory effect obtained in Moran et al. (2019) was primarily driven by the fact that the exclusion criterion used in that analysis failed to exclude individuals who were aware, with the observed effect driven by these ‘aware’ participants. In this paper we therefore (1) assess the validity of the four awareness criteria and conclude that they are poor and noisy measures of awareness, and (2) conduct stricter tests of the core verbal hypothesis and conclude that the evidence does not support it.

# Not all measures of awareness are created equal

**Reliability between criteria**

As we previously mention, the ‘Olson and Fazio (2001)’ criterion used in the confirmatory analysis was the only criterion under which a significant EC effect was found. What Moran et al. (2019) do not directly address is that this criterion was also the most liberal one by far: it scored only 8% of participants as ‘aware’, whereas other exclusion criteria scored up to 48% of participants as ‘aware’ (‘Olson & Fazio, 2001 modified’ criterion = 31%; ‘Bar-Anan et al., 2010’ criterion = 48%; ‘Bar-Anan et al., 2010 modified’ criterion = 27%).

What this shows is that there were meaningful differences in the exclusions rates observed between criteria. In an everyday sense, they differed in their relative strictness. More formally, ‘strictness’ in this context is a quantifiable statistical property referred to as the degree of conformity to a Guttman structure, which is testable using methods from Item Response Theory modelling. Specifically, if these measures demonstrated perfect reliability we would expect the proportion of Guttman errors (*G*) to be very small (i.e., approach 0). In contrast, if they were unreliable we would expect *G* to approach 1.

Results demonstrated that measures were indeed quite unreliable. Nearly half of participants had scores on one or more awareness criteria that indicated such errors, *G* = ﻿﻿47.5%, 95% CI [45.5, 49.5], *G*\* = 11.9%, 95% CI [11.4, 12.4] (see Meijer, 1994; and see Supplementary Materials for full details, data, code, and results of all analyses). In other words, in about half of participants, a supposedly more lenient criterion actually scored them more strictly than a supposedly stricter criterion. Results therefore demonstrate that the awareness exclusion criteria demonstrated poor reliability and are relatively ‘noisy’ measures.

**Reliability between sites**

There was also a great deal of variation in the exclusion rates between data collection sites. For example, exclusion rates using the ‘Olson and Fazio (2001) modified’ criterion varied between 15% and 74% between sites. This was quantified using meta-analyses of the proportion of ‘aware’ participants between sites for each of the exclusion criteria. Results demonstrated large between-site heterogeneity (all *I*2 = 54.7% to 91.7%, all *H*2 = 2.2 to 12 between the four criteria). Differences in between-site awareness rates therefore did not represent mere sampling variation but rather between-site heterogeneity. Given that all measures and instructions were delivered to participants in a standardized format, this degree of heterogeneity represents evidence that the awareness measures may not be as reliable or valid as assumed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This could be attributed to the somewhat subjective nature of the ‘Olson and Fazio (2001)’ criterion in particular, which (a) asks participants the broad question of whether they “noticed anything odd during the experiment”, (b) collects open-ended responses, and (c) require these to be hand scored. This method leaves room for a great degree of variation in interpretation between participants and sites which ultimately could lead many ‘aware’ participants to be scored as ‘unaware’. To take just one example, an individual who is fully ‘aware’ of the pairings in the surveillance task might reasonably consider the stimulus pairings to be unremarkable and not odd at all, but merely a normal and obvious part of the task, and therefore respond and be scored as ‘unaware’. This method of reporting on one’s own ‘awareness’ arguably involves a relatively complex form of meta cognition or perspective taking regarding what one noticed but which the researcher intended you would not.

The preceding two sections suggest that the awareness criteria demonstrated poor reliability and structural validity, and therefore likely failed to exclude participants who were actually aware. In our opinion, it was this that this led to the significant effect in Moran et al.’s (2019) confirmatory analysis (i.e., its reliance on the worst of a bad bunch). If we want to conclude that EC effects can be demonstrated in the absence of awareness then more severe testing of the verbal hypothesis is required.

# A severe test of the ‘unaware EC’ hypothesis

With the above in mind, we created a stricter exclusion criterion that maximized our changes of excluding ‘aware’ participants. Specifically, we excluded participants if *any* of the four criteria scored them as being aware. This provided a more severe test of the verbal hypothesis. This compound criterion excluded 54% of participants, leaving 665 in the analytic sample.

Using the same power analysis method employed by Moran et al. (2019), to detect an effect size as large as that observed in the published literature (i.e., *g* = 0.20) with this sample size, power was > .99. Stated another way, at power = .80, the minimum detectable effect size was Cohen’s *d* = 0.10. Power estimates were comparable when we employed what we considered to be a more appropriate method of power analysis for meta-analysis models (see Valentine et al., 2010): to detect an effect size of *d* = 0.20, power was = .95. At power = .80, the minimum detectable effect size was *d* = 0.16.

After excluding participants using the compound criterion, we fitted a new meta-analysis model that was otherwise identical to that employed in Moran et al.’s (2019) confirmatory analysis. The meta-analyzed EC effect was a non-significant, well-estimated effect size that was exceptionally close to zero, Hedges *g* = 0.00, 95% CI [-0.11, 0.10], *p* = .983. No heterogeneity was observed between sites, *I*2 = 0.0%, *H*2 = 1.0.

A Bayes Factor meta-analysis model using Rouder & Morey’s (2011) method was also fitted to quantify the evidence in favor of the null hypothesis. Default JZS + Cauchy priors were employed to represent a weak skeptical belief in the null hypothesis (location = 0; scaling factor *r* = .707 on fixed effect for condition and *r* = 1.0 on random effect for data collection site, see Rouder & Morey 2011). Strong evidence was found in favor of the null hypothesis (BF10 = 0.04, effect size δ = 0.00, 95% HDI [-0.08, 0.07]).

# Accounting for re replication’s significant result

We noted above that there was evidence of a large degree of heterogeneity in awareness rates between sites. We also suggested that the criteria likely failed to exclude participants who were actually aware, and it was this that lead to a significant effect in Moran et al.’s (2019) confirmatory analysis. These two premises lead to a testable hypothesis: if the differential application of the criteria between sites is what ultimately drove the observed EC effect, then statistically controlling for the awareness rate at each site should reduce the EC effect to zero. Toward this end, we conducted a moderator meta-analysis of EC effects that controlled for site awareness rate. This was highly similar to previous meta-analysis but with two modifications. First, we made no exclusions based on awareness but instead used the full sample (*N* = 1450). Second, we calculated the proportion of participants who were ‘aware’ at each site according to the compound criterion created above and entered this as a moderator. Model predictions demonstrated that if site awareness was 0%, the ‘unaware EC’ effect was non-significant and also close to zero, *g* = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.35, 0.31], *p* = .223. No heterogeneity was observed between sites, *I*2 = 0.0%, *H*2 = 1.0.

# Conclusions

Olson and Fazio’s (2001) study and Moran et al.’s (2019) replication both rely on the successful exclusion of ‘aware’ participants. However, neither study assessed the reliability or validity of their awareness criteria. Our analyses suggest that the criteria are, individually, relatively poor measures of awareness that likely fail to exclude ‘aware’ participants. When subjected to two methods of more severe testing, Moran et al.’s (2019) data does not support the ‘unaware Evaluative Conditioning’ hypothesis.

Results serve to highlight the importance of distinguishing between a replicable *effect* and a replicable *inference* regarding the verbal hypothesis, as well as highlighting the need to pay greater attention to measurement if our inferences are to be both replicable and valid. Such calls have been made within other areas of psychology (see Flake et al., 2017; Flake & Fried, 2019; Hussey & Hughes, 2020), but rarely within experimental social psychology.

# Notes

## Author contributions

IH conceptualized the study and analyzed the data. SH provided critical input into the design and analysis. Both authors wrote the article and approved the final submitted version of the manuscript.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

IH and SH declare we have no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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1. We are third and second authors (respectively) of Moran et al. (2019). Given the large number of authors involved in Moran et al. (2019), there was a diverse set of opinions on the concept of ‘awareness’ and how results in that article should be interpreted. Moran et al. (2019) represents the consensus opinion among that study’s authors, whereas this commentary provides our own opinions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Moran et al. (2019) note, there is debate as to whether the exclusion criteria capture ‘awareness’ of the stimulus pairings, ‘recollective memory’ of this awareness, or both (see Gawronski & Walther, 2012; Jones et al., 2009). Here we refer to the criteria as measures of awareness throughout the current article. Rather than focus on what is being measured, we focus on the more fundamental question of whether they are reliable measures in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is worth noting that the first author was responsible for the creation and distribution of the measures used in Moran et al. , and as such is highly familiar with them and the efforts to standardize them between sites. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)