

Contextual recruitment of selective attention can be updated via changes in task-relevance

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Abstract

Evidence across a wide variety of attention paradigms shows that environmental cues can trigger adjustments to ongoing priorities for attending to relevant and irrelevant information. This context-specific control over attention suggests that cognitive control can be both automatic and flexible. For instance, in selective attention tasks, congruency effects are larger for items that appear in a context associated with infrequent conflict than in a context associated with frequent conflict. Since the to-be-presented context cannot be predicted or prepared for in advance, attention is assumed to be rapidly updated on-the-fly, triggered by the currently presented context. Context-specific control exemplifies how learning and memory processes can influence attention to enable cognitive flexibility. However, what determines the use of previously learned associations still remains unclear. In the current study, we examined whether task-relevance would influence the learning and use of context cues in a flanker task. Using a secondary counting task, context dimensions associated with differing levels of conflict were made task-relevant or -irrelevant across the experiment. In short, we found that making new contextual information task-relevant caused participants to ignore a previously learned context-attention association and adopt a new context-specific control strategy; all without changing the experimental stimuli. This result suggests that task-relevance is a key determinant of context-specific control.

Keywords: Attention, Memory, Cognitive Control, Conflict Adaptation, Context-specific, Task Relevance

Word count: 4024

Public Significance Statement: Contextual cues have been shown to automatically trigger adjustments in selective attention independent of awareness and intention. Here, we find that task-relevance plays an important role in determining which context cues are used to direct attention. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how context-dependency might occur in more complex environments and more generally, how learning and memory processes enable flexible control over attention.

Contextual recruitment of selective attention can be updated via changes in task-relevance

Selective attention is commonly investigated using interference paradigms like the Stroop (1935) and flanker (Eriksen & Eriksen, 1974) tasks, where participants identify a target while ignoring a response-congruent or -incongruent distractor. Performance is typically better on congruent versus incongruent trials and the difference—the congruency effect—taken as an index of attentional priorities. Large congruency effects are thought to reflect ineffective filtering of the distracting stimuli whereas small congruency effects are thought to reflect effective filtering. By probing factors that systematically alter congruency effects, we can then make inferences about processes that control attentional filtering. For example, manipulating the frequency of conflict via the proportion of congruent versus incongruent trials has shown to influence the size of the congruency effect. Typically, a high proportion congruent experiment produces large congruency effects, whereas a low proportion congruent experiment produces small congruency effects (Logan & Zbrodoff, 1979; Lowe & Mitterer, 1982; West & Baylis, 1998). This result is usually explained as strategic control, where participants increase attentional control under high-conflict demands and relax attentional control under low-conflict demands (Logan, 1980; Logan & Zbrodoff, 1979; Logan, Zbrodoff, & Williamson, 1984; Lowe & Mitterer, 1982). Recent work however, has demonstrated that attentional control is not only adjusted by top-down regulation, but can also be triggered automatically by environmental cues (Brosowsky & Crump, 2018; Bugg & Crump, 2012; Egner, 2014; Fischer & Dreisbach, 2015; King, Korb, & Egner, 2012; Mayr & Bryck, 2007).

For example, Crump, Gong, and Milliken (Crump, Gong, & Milliken, 2006; see also, Corballis & Gratton, 2003) presented Stroop stimuli in one of two randomly chosen locations and manipulated the frequency of conflict associated with each location. One location was associated with a high frequency of conflict (25% congruent trials) and the other with a low frequency of conflict (75% congruent trials). Overall, the proportion of congruent trials was 50% and randomized such that the upcoming location could not be predicted. Even so, congruency effects were shown to be smaller for trials where the stimulus appeared in the high conflict location as compared to the low conflict location. This effect, known now as the context-specific proportion congruent effect (CSPC), has now been replicated in a number of different selective attention paradigms (e.g., Alards-Tomalín, Brosowsky, & Mondor, 2017; Blais, Harris, Sinanian, & Bunge, 2015; Bugg, 2014; Crump, 2016; Crump, Milliken, Leboe-McGowan, Leboe-McGowan, & Gao, 2018; Fischer, Gottschalk, & Dreisbach, 2014; Hübner & Mishra, 2016).

Critical evidence however, that CSPC effects reflect context-specific control rather than other non-control learning processes (e.g., Schmidt & Besner, 2008), comes from work showing that CSPC effects can transfer to frequency unbiased items (Brosowsky & Crump, 2016; Crump & Milliken, 2009; Weidler & Bugg, 2016; Weidler, Dey, & Bugg, 2018; though, see Hutcheon & Spieler, 2017). Crump and Milliken (2009), for example, divided Stroop items into two mutually exclusive sets (e.g., RED/GREEN and BLUE/YELLOW). One set was defined as the frequency biased set, and presented with 75% congruency in one location, and 25% congruency in the other. The second set however, was presented with 50% congruency in both locations. Nevertheless, they found smaller congruency effects for unbiased items presented in the high conflict location as compared to the low conflict

location.

One explanation for CSPC effects is that the repeated application of attentional priorities in a particular context creates an associative link in episodic memory between the attentional control procedures and the contextual information (Abrahamse, Braem, Notebaert, & Verguts, 2016; Brosowsky & Crump, 2018; Crump, 2016; Egner, 2014). Once the associative link is established, processing the context is assumed to trigger the retrieval of previous experiences, automatically reinstating associated attentional priorities. As a result, automatic memory-based retrieval allows attentional priorities to be rapidly adjusted in a context-appropriate fashion. How the learning and reinstatement process works however, remains largely unclear.

The current study addresses two related issues: First, how is attentional control resolved when multiple contextual features could be used as cues? And second, what determines the expression of previously learned attentional associations?

Real-world environments are complex and contain many potential context cues. For instance, consider someone writing in a coffee shop. The coffee shop is a rich environment with numerous context cues (e.g., pictures on the wall, chairs, coffee, laptop), each of which we have different experiences with and afford different learned associations. Although a laptop could cue attentional processing helpful for writing, other features of the coffee shop might cue attentional processing related to other experiences like socializing and people-watching. Given that all of these cues are available to set attentional priorities, what determines which associative relationships will be used to guide attention? On the one hand, context-based retrieval of attentional priorities might be completely obligatory: the mere presence of learned cues might trigger attention in a ballistic manner (e.g., Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). A writer's attention in this case would be at the mercy of the environment and attention is guided by the strongest association. On the other hand, our current task-goals might constrain the expression of previously learned associations. The writer's current goals may allow the laptop to take priority over other environmental cues that are irrelevant to the task at hand.

Historically, perspectives of automaticity and attentional control have emphasized the role of practice and likened the learning process to the development of automaticity in skill-learning (Logan, 1988, 1992; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). Under this view, forming an association requires many repeated experiences pairing a cue with a set of attentional priorities. Once formed however, it becomes habitual or hard-wired and the mere presence of the cue is sufficient to automatically adjust attention. Learned associations are therefore ballistic, difficult to suppress, and difficult to unlearn (e.g., Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Posner & Snyder, 1975a, 1975b; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977; Treisman, 1960, 1964, 1969). This view is reflected in modern work on contextual cuing where it is assumed that learned associations require practice (e.g., Lehle & Hübner, 2008; Crump, 2016), form without awareness or intention, and are triggered automatically by the mere presence of the cue (Crump et al., 2006; Crump & Logan, 2010; Crump, Vaquero, & Milliken, 2008; King et al., 2012; Reuss, Desender, Kiesel, & Kunde, 2014; though, see Brosowsky & Crump, 2016).

Memory-based perspectives however, take a more nuanced view (Abrahamse et al., 2016; Brosowsky & Crump, 2018; Crump, 2016; Egner, 2014; Norman, 1969, 1976). Here, practice is only important to the extent that it improves memory retrieval. Learning an

association is the process of encoding experiences where attentional priorities and cues co-occur. The expression of previously learned associations however, is dictated by memory retrieval—a similarity-based, cue-driven process (e.g., Jacoby, 1978; Hintzman, 1984, 1986, 1988). Presumably, the features of our immediate environment automatically cue memory and reinstate the retrieved attentional priorities (Logan, 1988, 1992). If a few prior experiences are easily retrievable (i.e., memories are distinct or very similar to the retrieval cue), they could support the reinstatement of a learned attentional association despite very little practice (e.g., Brosowsky & Crump, 2018). Conversely, if prior experiences are difficult to retrieve (i.e., memories are indistinct or low in similarity to the retrieval cue), then learned associations may not be expressed, even after much practice. To the extent that you could manipulate memory retrieval, you should also be able to manipulate the expression of learned associations.

Here, we examine whether task-relevance influences the retrieval of previously used attentional priorities. We hypothesized that the cue-driven, memory-retrieval process might be constrained to the features of our environment that are relevant to our on-going task and goals. If this is the case, then a previously learned association should be easily ignored if that feature was made irrelevant to the task because that feature would no longer contribute to memory-retrieval. Furthermore, it would suggest that the mere presence of a cue is not sufficient for automatically directing attention, but instead requires some task-integration.

Recent work lends some credence to the possibility that task-relevance is necessary for establishing new context-attention associations. Crump, Vaquero, & Milliken (2008) used a Stroop prime-probe task where the distractor word is presented first followed by a color patch probe. Critically, they used the shape of the color patch probe, either a square or a circle, as the contextual dimension; one associated with a high frequency of conflict, the other with a low frequency. In one experiment participants were made aware of the shape-proportion contingencies but given no additional instructions. In the second, participants were given a secondary task to count the number of trials that contained a square. The first experiment failed to find evidence for context-specificity, whereas the second did. Although not testing task-relevance directly, Cañadas, Rodríguez-Bailón, Milliken, and Lupiáñez (2013) found similar effects. In this study they used images of male and female faces as context cues in a flanker task. When given instructions to think of the faces as members of the gender categories they found CSPC effects, but when given instructions to think of the faces as individuals they did not. These results suggest that making a context dimension relevant to the on-going task is important for establishing new associations and producing CSPC effects. However, the extent to which task-relevance influences the expression of previously learned associations is still unknown.

Experiment 1

Prior work suggests that the task-relevance of contextual information could be important for establishing new associations between context cues and attentional priorities. Simply put, CSPC effects tend to emerge when context cues are somehow made relevant to the task, but do not when made irrelevant (Cañadas et al., 2013; Crump et al., 2006, 2008). However, what determines the learning and expression of context-attention associations

remains unclear. In the current study, we examined whether manipulating task-relevance would allow participants to ignore a previously learned association and adopt a new context-specific control strategy.

A flanker task was used to measure attentional control in an adapted CSPC design (Crump, Brosowsky, & Milliken, 2017; Crump & Milliken, 2009). Similar to previous studies, flanker stimuli were presented in contexts associated with differing levels of conflict (0%, 50%, or 100% congruent). However, unlike previous CSPC designs where contexts were defined by a single discriminating feature (e.g., upper vs. lower screen locations), contexts were defined by two feature dimensions (see Figure 1A). In one condition, for example, contexts were defined by object identity (hat or chair) and color (blue or green). Only three out of the four possible feature combinations were presented, each associated with a different proportion of congruent trials (0%, 50%, or 100% congruent). Critically, the frequency unbiased context (50% congruent) always shared a feature with each of the frequency-biased contexts (0% and 100% congruent). The frequency biased contexts (0% and 100% congruent) however, did not share any features (see Figure 1C for an example).

A secondary counting task was used to manipulate the task-relevance of the context dimensions (Crump & Milliken, 2009) which critically, switched halfway through the experiment. Participants were instructed to keep a running count of one of the overlapping features (e.g., “count whenever a hat is presented”) which was associated with either a high or low frequency of conflict. Halfway through the experiment they received new instructions to count the other overlapping feature (e.g., “count whenever a green item is presented”). Critically, the set of context images remained the same throughout the experiment (see Figure 1C for an example) and the task-relevance of the context dimensions was the only aspect of the experiment that changed from the first to second phases.

The critical measure of interest is the congruency effect produced in the frequency unbiased context. If, on the one hand, task-relevance has no impact on the use of context-attention associations we would expect no differences between the congruency effects when the high-conflict context dimension is made task-relevant or the low-conflict context dimension is made task-relevant. This could occur because all three contexts are treated as individual contexts throughout the whole experiment (e.g., Cañadas et al., 2013). Or it could occur because associations formed in the first block interfere with learning new associations in the second (e.g., Brosowsky & Crump, 2016). On other hand, task-relevance may dictate the expression of previously learned associations. In this case, we would expect smaller congruency effects when the high-conflict context dimension is made task-relevant as compared to when the low-conflict context dimension is made task-relevant. This would demonstrate that participants were able to ignore a previously learned association and adopt a new context-specific control strategy.

A secondary goal was to conceptually replicate previous findings and test the generalizability of any task-relevance effects. Therefore, we included three conditions that differed only in the kinds of stimuli used to create context cues. In one condition we used face images where context dimensions were defined by social categories, similar to Cañadas et al. (2013). However, they found that social categorization occurred spontaneously and it was unclear what impact that would have on the current results. Therefore, we included another condition that used images of simple objects where context dimensions were defined by object features. Finally, Cañadas et al. (2013) also found that context effects

generalized to novel face images. In our third condition we used non-repeating face exemplars to examine whether any task-relevance effects would also generalize in our design or if learning would be image-specific.

Methods

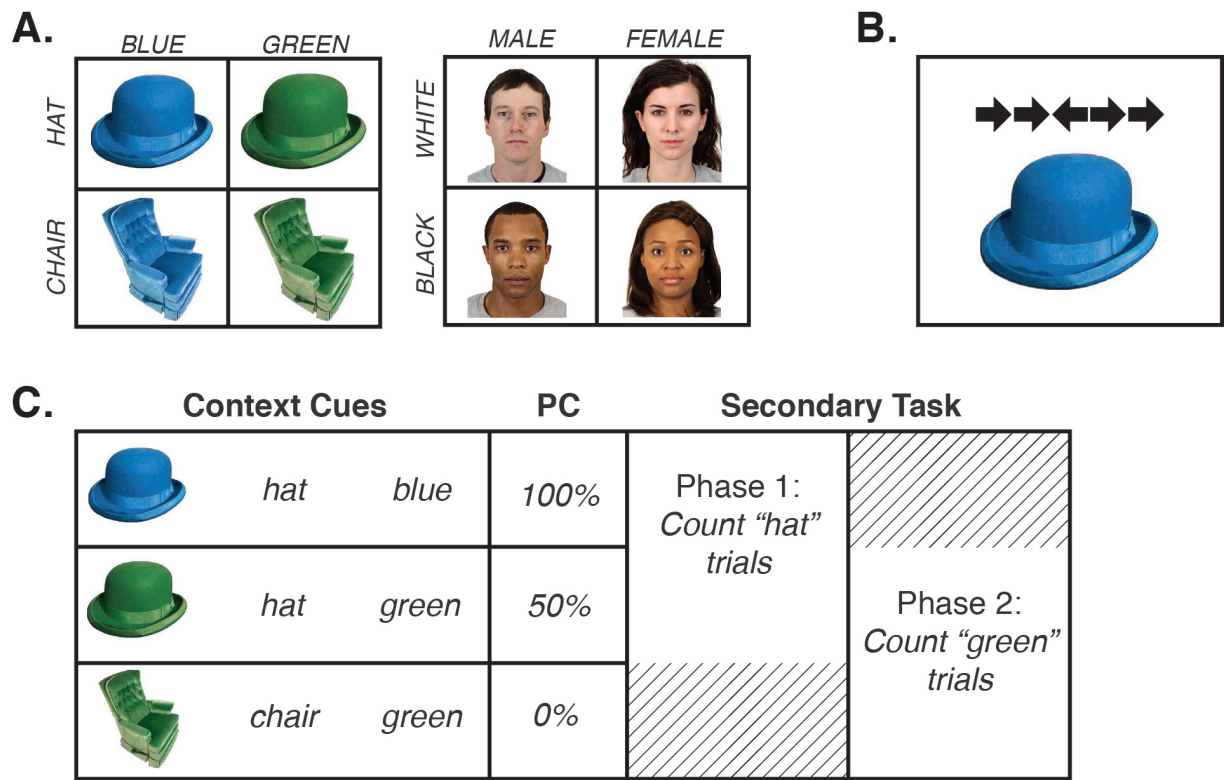


Figure 1. Illustration of the stimuli and trial construction. Figure 1A shows the feature dimensions for each of the conditions. Figure 1B shows an example trial stimulus containing both the context and flanker images. Figure 1C shows an example of how feature dimensions could have been assigned to each proportion congruency (PC) condition, and an example of the secondary task assignments. The secondary task order, as well as the feature and congruency assignments were all randomized for each participant.

Participants

All participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) and compensated \$2.00 for participating. The amount compensated was calculated by estimating the maximum amount of time required to complete each experiment and multiplying by \$6.00 per hour. For each experiment the number of HITs (Human intelligence tasks, an Amazon term for a work-unit) refers to the number of participants who initiated the study. Participants were included in the study if they completed all trials. We posted 150 HITs and 144 participants completed all trials.

Apparatus & Stimuli

The experiments were programmed using JavaScript, CSS and HTML. The program allowed participants to complete task only if they were running Safari, Google Chrome, or Firefox web browsers. Flanker stimuli consisted of images of five arrows pointed left or right presented at 250 x 50 pixels (each arrow was 50 x 50 pixels). Context stimuli were constructed using images selected from Brady, Konkle, Gill, Oliva, and Alvarez (2013) color-rotated to blue and green, and face images from the Chicago Face Database (Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015), supplemented with the NimStim Set of Facial Expressions (Tottenham et al., 2009). The object images were displayed at 250 x 250 pixels, while the face images were displayed at 250 x 313 pixels. The experiment ran as a pop-up window that filled the entire screen. The background was white, and stimuli were presented in the center of the screen.

Design

Experiment 1 used a 2x2x3 mixed design with task-relevant context (0% and 100%) and unbiased-item congruency (congruent and incongruent) as within-subject factors, and context-type (object, social, and social/non-repeating) as the between-subjects factor.

All three conditions were constructed using the same general method. The experiment was divided into two phases. Each phase consisted of 144 flanker trials (48 trials per context), and 13 count response trials for a total of 314 trials. On the count response trials, participants indicated how many trials they had counted until that point. The count response trials occurred once for every 12 flanker trials and was randomly inserted between trial 6 and 12 of each 12-trial block. Each phase ended with one additional count response trial.

On every flanker trial, participants were presented with flanker stimuli paired with one of three contexts. Each context was associated with a different proportion congruency such that two cues were associated with a biased frequency (0% and 100% proportion congruency), while one was associated with an unbiased frequency (50% proportion congruency). The feature dimensions and corresponding context images assigned to each of the biased and unbiased item sets were randomly determined for each participant. However, context images used for the frequency biased trials never shared features, while the frequency unbiased context image always shared a feature with each of the frequency biased context images (see Figure 1). Additionally, the feature assignments remained the same throughout phases 1 and 2, and critically, the only change to the task was which feature the participant was instructed to count (see Figure 1C for an example).

All critical aspects of the task were randomized between participants. This includes the three chosen context images, the features assigned to proportion levels, the features assigned to each counting condition, the secondary task order, and the order of trials.

Procedure

All participants were AMT workers who found the experiment using the AMT system. The participant recruitment procedure and tasks were approved by the Brooklyn College Institutional Review Board. Each participant read a short description of the task

and gave consent by pressing a button acknowledging they had read the displayed consent form. Participants then completed a short demographic survey, and proceeded to the main task, which was displayed as a pop-up window. Participants were instructed to identify the direction of the center arrow on each trial as quickly and accurately as possible by pressing “z” if the arrow pointed left, and “m” if the arrow pointed right. Additionally, they were instructed to silently keep count of the number of trials that contained a feature. In the object context condition, they were asked to count trials that contained a certain color (blue or green) or object-identity (hat or chair) and in the social context conditions they were asked to count the number of trials that contained appeared a certain gender (male or female) or race (black or white). Periodically throughout the experiment, participants were asked to report how many trials they had counted until that point and to restart their count from 0. Halfway through the experiment participants received new instructions about which feature to count (see Figure 1C).

Each trial began with a blank inter-stimulus interval (ISI) of 400 ms, followed by a fixation cross presented in the center of the screen for 200 ms, then a second blank ISI of 400 ms. Next, the flanker and context stimuli appeared in the center of screen (the flanker above the context image; see Figure 1B) and remained on screen until a response was made. Following a response, accuracy feedback was presented for 1000 ms. A response automatically triggered the next trial.

Halfway through the experiment (157 trials), participants received new instructions about which feature to count and to press the button on-screen when they were ready to continue.

Data Analysis

All analyses in this and the following experiments were performed in R (R Core Team, 2019) using a variety of R packages and resources (Aust & Barth, 2018; Wickham, 2016; Wickham, François, Henry, & Müller, 2019; Wilke, 2019). Of particular note: we used the *afex* and *car* packages to perform all the Null Hypothesis Significance Tests (Fox & Weisberg, 2019; Singmann, Bolker, Westfall, & Aust, 2019), the *BayesFactor* package to perform Bayesian analyses (Morey & Rouder, 2018), and the *conflictPower* package to perform the simulation-based sensitivity and power analyses (Crump & Brosowsky, 2019). All data and scripts can be found on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/ztcyb/>).

We supplemented each Null Hypothesis Significance Test with a Bayes Factor analysis (Rouder, Speckman, Sun, Morey, & Iverson, 2009). Using conventional frequentist testing it is not possible to quantify the evidence for a null effect. A Bayes Factor, however, is a continuous measure of the relative strength of evidence and can quantify the degree to which the data are compatible with the null over the alternative hypothesis (Dienes, 2014; Rouder et al., 2009). All Bayesian analyses were performed using the R package *BayesFactor* and Bayes Factors (BFs) were calculated using its default settings (Morey & Rouder, 2018). BF_{10} indicates evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis whereas BF_{01} indicates evidence in favor of the null hypothesis. To simplify the interpretation, we report the Bayes Factor in the direction the data supports (e.g., BF_{01} when there is more evidence in favor of the null over alternative hypothesis). As per previous recommendations, we refer to a $BF > 3$ as “moderate” and $BF > 10$ as “strong” evidence (Jeffreys, 1961; Rouder

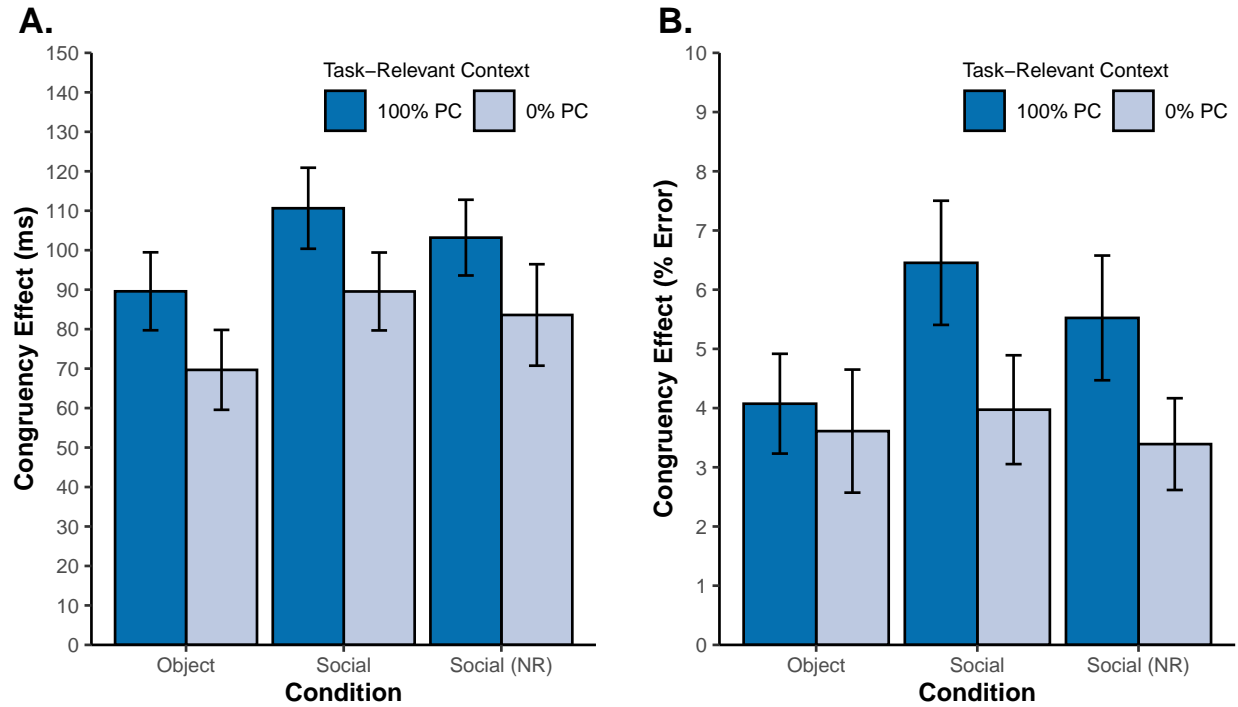


Figure 2. Results from Experiment 1 showing congruency effects (incongruent - congruent) for frequency unbiased items in reaction times (left) and error rates (right) as a function of the task-relevant context (100% proportion congruent versus 0% proportion congruent). Task-relevance was manipulated by the secondary feature-counting task.

et al., 2009).

Results

Participants with mean error rates greater than 25% were excluded from the analyses, eliminating 13 participants. For all remaining participants, the correct RTs from frequency unbiased trials in each condition were submitted to an outlier removal procedure. The non-recursive Van Selst and Jolicoeur outlier removal procedure was applied after removing response times greater than 3000 ms (Van Selst & Jolicoeur, 1994). This procedure removed 3.39% of the total observations.

The primary question of interest was whether the task-relevance of context features associated with different levels of conflict would influence the size of the congruency effect for frequency unbiased items (see Table 1). To that end, congruency effects (incongruent minus congruent performance) from frequency unbiased trials were submitted to a mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with task-relevant context (0% and 100% PC) as the within-subjects factor and context-type (object, social, and social/non-repeating) as the between-subjects factor. We supplement each Null Hypothesis Significance Test with a corresponding Bayesian analysis.

The results of the reaction time analysis revealed a significant effect of the task-relevant context, $F(1, 128) = 8.30$, $MSE = 3,217.08$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .061$, 90% CI

[0.01, 0.14], with moderate evidence in favor of the alternative, $BF_{10} = 6.87 [\pm 1.41\%]$. Specifically, we found smaller congruency effects when the context dimension associated with high conflict was made task-relevant as compared to when the low conflict dimension was made task-relevant. The main effect of context-type, however, was non-significant, $F(2, 128) = 1.51$, $MSE = 6,368.18$, $p = .225$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .023$, 90% CI [0, 0.07], with moderate evidence in favor of the null hypothesis, $BF_{01} = 3.96 [\pm 1.52\%]$. The two-way interaction between the task-relevant context and context-type was also non-significant, $F(2, 128) < 0.01$, $MSE = 3,217.08$, $p = .996$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 < .001$, 90% CI [0, 1], with moderate evidence in favor of the null hypothesis, $BF_{01} = 7.9 [\pm 1.49\%]$. Finally, the preferred model containing only the task-relevant context was preferred over the model containing the both factors and the interaction by a factor of 54.25 $[\pm 2.05\%]$. Therefore, congruency effects did not vary across context-types and, more importantly, the effect of task-relevance did not vary across context-types.

Similarly, the corresponding error analysis also resulted a significant effect of the task-relevant context, $F(1, 128) = 6.72$, $MSE = 27.87$, $p = .011$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .050$, 90% CI [0.01, 0.12], with moderate evidence in favor of the alternative evidence $BF_{10} = 3.13 [\pm 5.2\%]$; A non-significant effect of context-type, $F(2, 128) = 0.81$, $MSE = 51.40$, $p = .449$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .012$, 90% CI [0, 0.05], with moderate evidence for the null hypothesis, $BF_{01} = 7.54 [\pm 1.22\%]$; And a non-significant interaction between task-relevant context and context-type, $F(2, 128) = 0.92$, $MSE = 27.87$, $p = .400$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .014$, 90% CI [0, 0.05], with strong evidence in favor of the null hypothesis, $BF_{01} = 15.04 [\pm 2.57\%]$. Therefore, the congruency effects in error rates were also smaller when the context dimension associated with high conflict was made task-relevant and effects did not vary across context-type, corroborating the results of the reaction time analysis.

Exploratory analyses: Order effects

Previous work has shown that shifting between list-wide proportion congruent phases produced asymmetrical effects. Abrahamse, Duthoo, Notebaert, and Risko (2013) found that shifting from a mostly-congruent to mostly-incongruent list produced a large change in the size of the congruency effect, whereas shifting from a mostly-incongruent to mostly-congruent list produced a relatively small change in congruency effects. The authors posited a learned attentional modulation in the mostly-incongruent block had carried over into the mostly-congruent block reducing what, typically, would be a large congruency effect. In our study, we were primarily interested in whether (a) participants could use context cues despite the presence of competing, contradictory cues, and (b) whether participants could switch from the use of one context cue to another. We therefore randomized the order across participants to control for the effects of order. However, given that we did find systematic shifts in the CSPEC effect for unbiased items, we can also ask whether the shift between phases was asymmetrical.

To address this question, we collapsed over context-type and categorized participants according to the order of the counting task: 100% congruent to 0% congruent (100%-0%) or 0% congruent to 100% congruent (0%-100%). We again removed participants with error rates greater than 25% and adopted the same outlier removal procedure as described above. We submitted congruency effects for frequency unbiased items to a 2x2 mixed

ANOVA with task-relevant context (0% and 100% PC) as within-subject factors and phase order (100%-0% and 0%-100%) as the between-subjects factor, and supplemented each test with a corresponding Bayesian analysis.

Consistent with the original analysis, the effect of task-relevant context was significant, $F(1, 129) = 8.92$, $MSE = 3,255.69$, $p = .003$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .065$, 90% CI [0.01, 0.14], with moderate evidence in favor of the alternative, $BF_{10} = 8.11$ [$\pm 0.83\%$]. However, the two-way interaction between task-relevant context and phase order was non-significant, $F(1, 129) = 2.56$, $MSE = 3,255.69$, $p = .112$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .019$, 90% CI [0, 0.07], with moderate evidence in favor of the null hypothesis, $BF_{01} = 4.92$ [$\pm 2.95\%$]. Therefore, we did not find statistical support for a list-shift asymmetry. Additionally, the (non-significant) asymmetrical effects we do see in this sample is in the opposite direction than would be predicted given the prior research (e.g., Abrahamse et al., 2013).

We also conducted an additional, more severe, test of the list-shift hypothesis. Given that the asymmetry is interpreted as resulting from a carry-over of learned attentional modulation across phases, we might expect that any asymmetry would be exaggerated near the point of transition. We therefore repeated the above analysis but restricted it to the 24 trials immediately before the transition and 24 trials immediately after the transition.

Again, the interaction between task-relevant context and phase order was non-significant, $F(1, 129) = 0.02$, $MSE = 5,732.31$, $p = .902$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 < .001$, 90% CI [0, 0.01], with moderate to strong evidence in favor of the null $BF_{01} = 8.88$ [$\pm 2.88\%$]. Interestingly, the main effect of task-relevant context was still significant, $F(1, 129) = 6.65$, $MSE = 5,732.31$, $p = .011$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .049$, 90% CI [0.01, 0.12], with moderate evidence in favor of the alternative, $BF_{10} = 3.22$ [$\pm 2.16\%$]. This result supports the conclusion that there was no asymmetry. Additionally, the the shift in context-dependent effects appears to have taken place almost immediately after the transition.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 1, we found that

We made two assumptions in the design of Experiment 1: First, we assumed that task-relevance was required for participants to learn about the associations between context cues and the biased proportion congruency manipulations. Our task was inspired by Crump and Milliken (2009) who failed find context-specific effects using a task-irrelevant shape cue until they used a counting task to make the shapes relevant. However, location is the most-often used context cue in these kinds of paradigms (e.g.,). In these cases, no task-relevance manipulation is necessary to produce CSPC effects using location cues. Though, it is arguable whether location is truly task-irrelevant when localizing the target is necessary for responding. Regardless, it is unclear in our paradigm whether participants required the counting task to learn about the biased proportion congruency manipulations.

Second, we assumed that the biased proportion congruency manipulations would have no systematic effect on the unbiased items without the counting task. Although we randomized all aspects of the task across participants to control for potential confounds, it still remains unclear whether the biased items would influence how participants responded to the unbiased items.

Experiment 2, therefore, serves as a control experiment to test these two assumptions.

Table 1

Reaction times and error rates from Experiment 1.

Task-Relevant Context	Condition	PC	Congruent		Incongruent	
			RT	ER	RT	ER
100% PC	Object	0%	-	-	693 (26)	4.17 (0.73)
		50%	585 (23)	0.74 (0.27)	675 (28)	4.81 (0.82)
		100%	587 (25)	0.69 (0.23)	-	-
	Social	0%	-	-	745 (25)	5.86 (0.77)
		50%	612 (21)	0.39 (0.19)	722 (26)	6.78 (1.04)
		100%	616 (20)	0.63 (0.2)	-	-
	Social (NR)	0%	-	-	813 (25)	5.04 (0.74)
		50%	689 (23)	0.19 (0.14)	793 (27)	5.72 (1.06)
		100%	689 (25)	0.48 (0.17)	-	-
0% PC	Object	0%	-	-	649 (16)	3.84 (0.6)
		50%	587 (17)	0.56 (0.21)	657 (17)	4.17 (1.02)
		100%	634 (18)	2.69 (0.58)	-	-
	Social	0%	-	-	722 (23)	5.77 (0.92)
		50%	633 (20)	0.78 (0.5)	722 (25)	4.75 (0.9)
		100%	673 (21)	1.84 (0.47)	-	-
	Social (NR)	0%	-	-	807 (26)	4.55 (0.8)
		50%	735 (28)	0.87 (0.36)	818 (30)	4.26 (0.8)
		100%	779 (34)	2.03 (0.4)	-	-

Note: RT = Reaction Time (ms); ER = Error Rates (%); PC = Proportion Congruent; NR = Non-Repeating; Standard Errors are presented in parantheses.

Experiment 2 is identical to Experiment 1 with two important changes: First, we removed the counting task and gave no explicit instructions about how to use the context cues; We only informed participants that images would be present throughout the task. This allowed us to determine if there was any systematic effect of biased items on the unbiased items absent the counting task. Second, we altered the proportion congruency of the biased item sets from 100%/0% to 75%/25%. This allowed us to measure the congruency effect for the biased item sets to determine whether participants learned about the associations between proportion congruency and the context cues without the counting task (e.g., Crump & Milliken, 2009). If this were the case, we would expect larger congruency effects for the 75% proportion congruent items as compared to the 25% proportion congruent items.

Methods

Participants

All participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) and compensated \$2.00 for participating. The amount compensated was calculated by estimating the maximum amount of time required to complete each experiment and multiplying by \$6.00 per hour. For each experiment the number of HITs (Human intelligence tasks, an Amazon term for a work-unit) refers to the number of participants who initiated the study. Participants were included in the study if they completed all trials. We posted 50 HITs and 50 participants completed all trials.

Apparatus & Stimuli

The apparatus and stimuli were identical to Experiment 1. The context stimuli were identical to those used for the object condition in Experiment 1.

Design

Experiment 2 used a 2x3 within-subjects design with proportion congruent (25%, 50%, and 75%) and congruency (congruent and incongruent) as factors. The experiment consisted of 288 flanker trials (96 per proportion congruent condition) and did not include any counting trials or instructions informing participants about the proportion manipulations. The design in every other respect was identical to Experiment 1.

Procedure

All participants were AMT workers who found the experiment using the AMT system. The participant recruitment procedure and tasks were approved by the Brooklyn College Institutional Review Board. Each participant read a short description of the task and gave consent by pressing a button acknowledging they had read the displayed consent form. Participants then completed a short demographic survey, and proceeded to the main task, which was displayed as a pop-up window. Participants were instructed to identify the direction of the center arrow on each trial as quickly and accurately as possible by pressing “z” if the arrow pointed left, and “m” if the arrow pointed right.

Each trial began with a blank inter-stimulus interval (ISI) of 400 ms, followed by a fixation cross presented in the center of the screen for 200 ms, then a second blank ISI of 400 ms. Next, the flanker and context stimuli appeared in the center of screen (the flanker above the context image; see Figure 1B) and remained on screen until a response was made. Following a response, accuracy feedback was presented for 1000 ms. A response automatically triggered the next trial.

Results

Participants with mean error rates greater than 25% were excluded from the analyses, eliminating 3 participants. For all remaining participants, the correct RTs from frequency unbiased trials in each condition were submitted to an outlier removal procedure. The non-recursive Van Selst and Jolicoeur outlier removal procedure was applied after

removing response times greater than 3000 ms (Van Selst & Jolicoeur, 1994). This procedure removed 3.14% of the total observations.

The questions of interest were whether participants would learn the associations between the context cues without the task-relevance manipulation (i.e., the counting task) and whether responding to the unbiased cues would be influenced by the presence of the biased cues. To that end, congruency effects (incongruent minus congruent performance) for RTs and error rates were submitted to an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with proportion congruency (25%, 50%, and 75%) as the sole within-subject factor.

The results of the RT analysis revealed the effect of proportion congruency to be non-significant, $F(2, 92) = 0.85$, $MSE = 997.11$, $p = .431$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .018$, 90% CI [0, 0.07], with moderate evidence in favor of the null, $BF_{01} = 6.91$ [$\pm 0.9\%$]. Similarly, the corresponding error analysis also resulted in a non-significant effect of proportion congruency, $F(2, 92) = 0.45$, $MSE = 9.23$, $p = .641$, $\hat{\eta}_p^2 = .010$, 90% CI [0, 0.05], with strong evidence in favor of the null, $BF_{01} = 9.93$ [$\pm 1.03\%$]. Therefore, there was no evidence that the context cues, absent the counting task, systematically influenced the congruency effects in any way.

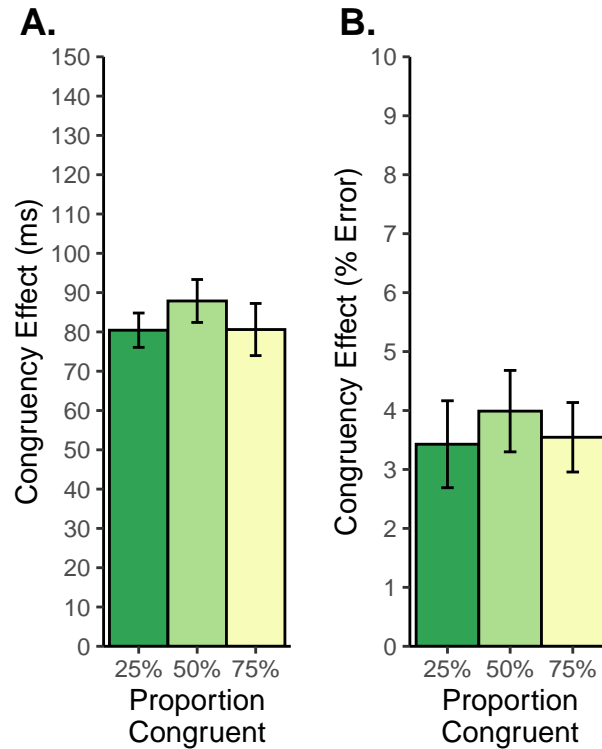


Figure 3. Results from Experiment 2 showing congruency effects (incongruent - congruent) across proportion congruency (25%, 75%, and 100% PC) in reaction times (left) and error rates (right).

Experiment 3

In the current study, we have been homing in on the importance of task-relevance for the contextual recruitment of selective attention. In Experiment 1, we found that

task-relevance allowed participants to exploit context cues in the presence of a competing, contradictory cue and subsequently ignore the previously learned association in favor of a different context cue. In Experiment 2, we conceptually replicated previous work showing that task-relevance was necessary for participants to learn about the biased proportion congruency associations (e.g., Crump & Milliken, 2009) and ruled out possible confounding effects of the biased items.

Methods

Participants

All participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) and compensated \$2.00 for participating. The amount compensated was calculated by estimating the maximum amount of time required to complete each experiment and multiplying by \$6.00 per hour. For each experiment the number of HITs (Human intelligence tasks, an Amazon term for a work-unit) refers to the number of participants who initiated the study. Participants were included in the study if they completed all trials. We posted 50 HITs and 50 participants completed all trials.

Apparatus & Stimuli

The apparatus and stimuli were identical to Experiment 1. The context stimuli were identical to those used for the object condition in Experiment 1.

Design

Experiment 3 used a 2x3 mixed design with task-relevant context (0% and 100%) and unbiased-item congruency (congruent and incongruent) as the within-subject factors. The experiment consisted of 288 flanker trials (96 per proportion congruent condition) and did not include any counting trials. However, participants were explicitly informed about the proportion congruency manipulations and instructed to make use of the context cues (see the Procedure section below for more details). Therefore, unlike Experiment 1, context images were made task-relevant through explicit instructions rather than the counting task. The design in every other respect was identical to Experiment 1.

Procedure

All participants were AMT workers who found the experiment using the AMT system. The participant recruitment procedure and tasks were approved by the Brooklyn College Institutional Review Board. Each participant read a short description of the task and gave consent by pressing a button acknowledging they had read the displayed consent form. Participants then completed a short demographic survey, and proceeded to the main task, which was displayed as a pop-up window. Participants were instructed to identify the direction of the center arrow on each trial as quickly and accurately as possible by pressing “z” if the arrow pointed left, and “m” if the arrow pointed right.

Importantly, participants were given further instructions to exploit the proportion congruency associated with context cues.

Each trial began with a blank inter-stimulus interval (ISI) of 400 ms, followed by a fixation cross presented in the center of the screen for 200 ms, then a second blank ISI of 400 ms. Next, the flanker and context stimuli appeared in the center of screen (the flanker above the context image; see Figure 1B) and remained on screen until a response was made. Following a response, accuracy feedback was presented for 1000 ms. A response automatically triggered the next trial.

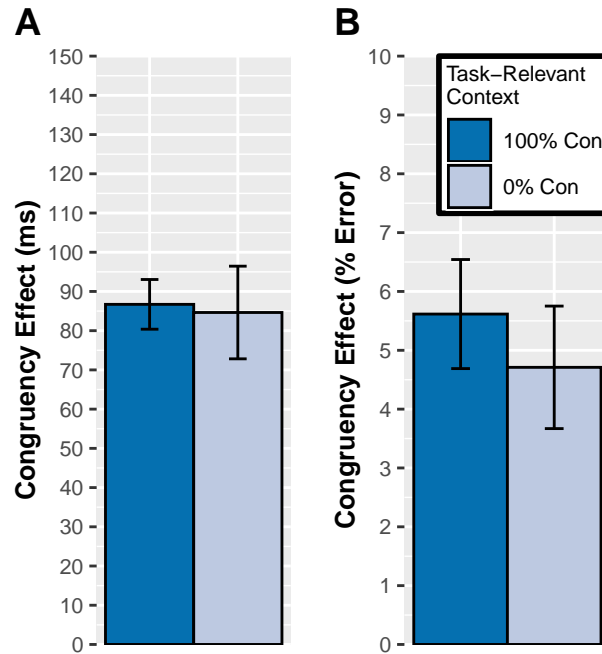


Figure 4. Results from Experiment 3 showing congruency effects (incongruent - congruent) for frequency unbiased items in reaction times (left) and error rates (right) as a function of the task-relevant context (100% proportion congruent versus 0% proportion congruent). Task-relevance was manipulated through explicit instructions.

Results

Participants with mean error rates greater than 25% were excluded from the analyses, eliminating 4 participants. For all remaining participants, the correct RTs from frequency unbiased trials in each condition were submitted to an outlier removal procedure. The non-recursive Van Selst and Jolicoeur outlier removal procedure was applied after removing response times greater than 3000 ms (Van Selst & Jolicoeur, 1994). This procedure removed 3.42% of the total observations.

The primary question of interest was whether the task-relevance of context features (made relevant through explicit task instructions) associated with different levels of conflict would influence the size of the congruency effect for frequency unbiased items. Mean correct RTs and mean error rates from frequency unbiased trials were submitted to an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with task-relevant context (0% and 100% PC) and unbiased-item congruency (congruent and incongruent) as within-subject factors.

The results of the RT analysis revealed the critical, two-way interaction between task-relevant context and unbiased-item congruency to be non-significant, . Similarly, the corresponding error analysis also resulted in a non-significant two-way interaction between the task-relevant context and unbiased-item congruency, .

Estimating reproducibility by simulation-based sensitivity- and power-analyses

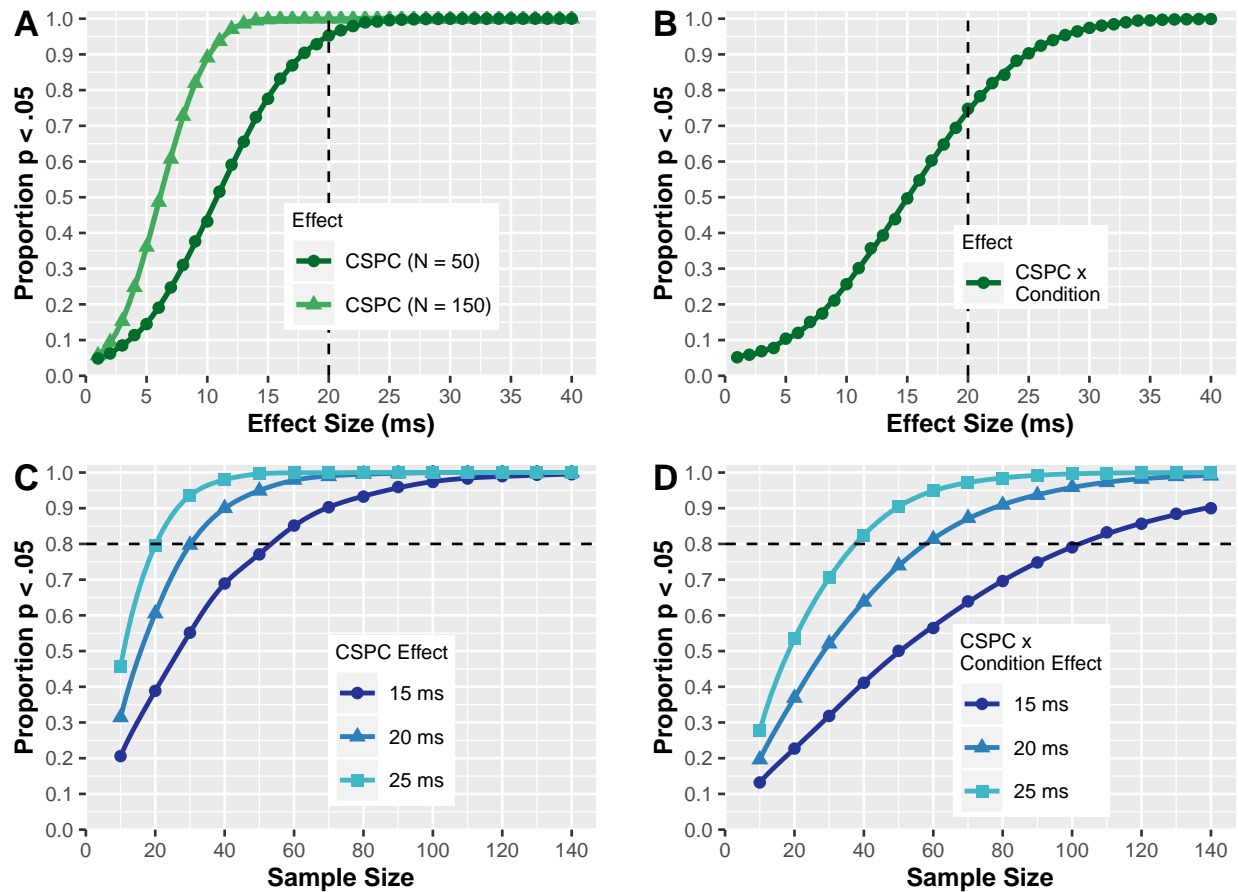


Figure 5. Results from Experiment 3 showing congruency effects (incongruent - congruent) for frequency unbiased items in reaction times (left) and error rates (right) as a function of the task-relevant context (100% proportion congruent versus 0% proportion congruent). Task-relevance was manipulated through explicit instructions.

General Discussion

The aim of the current study was to determine whether task-relevance plays a role in the contextual recruitment of selective attention. In Experiment 1, we tested whether manipulating the relative task-relevance of context cues could cause participants to ignore a previously learned context-association and apply a new association. We created a frequency unbiased context cue that shared features with two frequency biased contexts and used a feature-counting task to manipulate the task-relevance of context dimensions across two

blocks of trials. Critically, halfway through the experiment participants received new instructions changing the task-relevant feature from one frequency biased cue to the other.

The key finding was that the congruency effects for the frequency unbiased items were significantly larger when the low-conflict context was made task-relevant as compared to when the high-conflict context was made task-relevant. This result is consistent with prior CSPC effects and, like the previous work, suggests that the context cues triggered rapid adjustments to attentional control (Crump & Milliken, 2009). However, unlike prior studies, we were able to experimentally manipulate the CSPC effect across blocks of trials without changing any of the physical properties of the stimuli. This novel finding demonstrates that participants were able to learn and apply one context-attention association in the first phase, and subsequently ignore that association to learn a new association in the second phase.

This result implicates an important role for task-relevance in producing CSPC phenomena. Crump et al. (2008) used shapes as context cues in a prime-probe Stroop task and did not find CSPC effects until the context cues were made task-relevant. Similarly, Cañadas et al. (2013) eliminated the CSPC effect by making the contextual cue effectively unrelated to the task. These studies suggest that task-relevance plays an important role in establishing associations between contextual information and attentional priorities to produce CSPC effects. Our finding extends this work in two important ways. First, we show that changing the task-relevance of the presented cues corresponded with a change in attentional control in the predicted direction. This demonstrates that task-relevance is also a key determinant of whether a previously learned attention-context association will be used or ignored in favor of a new association. Second, we show that task-relevance allowed participants resolve competition between two competing contextual cues, responding on the basis of one at the expense of the other. To our knowledge, this is the first demonstration that CSPC effects can be produced when there are multiple, overlapping contextual cues available.

In light of prior work, we take this as evidence that the contextual recruitment of selective attention, although likely implicit, is not obligatory (e.g., Brosowsky & Crump, 2016), requiring that environmental information be incorporated into the task representation. Similarly, there appears to be flexibility in which environmental features are selected and used to guide attention, which can be rapidly updated depending on the task-relevance of those features. Such a result lends some insight into how context-specific control might operate in more complex, real-world environments, where there is an over-abundance of environmental features that afford many different learned associations. From a theoretical perspective, this result is consistent memory-based accounts of CSPC phenomena (Brosowsky & Crump, 2018; Bugg & Hutchison, 2013; Crump et al., 2017, 2018; Crump & Milliken, 2009). Under this view, a memory process encodes attentional priorities in the representation of individual experiences and, as a result, become associated with the environment where they were used. The subsequent reoccurrence of a prior context triggers the retrieval and reinstatement of those attentional priorities. Our results show however, that all the features of the environment may not be treated equally and that only task-relevant features are used to probe memory and guide attention.

Another key result of this study concerned the different stimuli used as context cues. Across the three conditions, we varied the type of context image and dimensions. We

manipulated the type of image presented, including both objects (identity and color dimensions) and faces (gender and racial dimensions). We also manipulated whether a single set of three repeating images were presented (object and social) or a set of non-repeating images were presented (social/non-repeating). Across all three conditions, we found no evidence that using different stimuli had an influence on the size or direction of the CSPC demonstrating generalizability of this phenomenon. Furthermore, CSPC effects were present even when using non-repeating images which suggests that context-dependency did not rely on image-specific associations but higher-order, learned categorical information.

Traditional models of person perception posit that social categories are automatically activated in the presence of social stimuli (e.g., Brewer, 1988; Devine, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Cañadas et al. (2013) however, found that directing participants to think about faces in terms of individual features eliminated context-specific attention effect and suggested that momentary motivations may influence the automaticity of social categorization. Our results add to this literature by observing the influence of momentary motivations (i.e., task-relevance) when there is competition between two salient social categories. Specifically, we found that participants could categorize on the basis of one social cue at the expense of the other, and subsequently switch between them. These findings may speak to issues of automaticity in social categorization (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001) as well as understanding how the situational context can prime one social identity over another (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007). Furthermore, we found no evidence for differences between the social and object conditions. This suggests that categorization within the CSPC task is quickly and easily learned when the task supports such learning and is non-unique to social stimuli.

In sum, our results provide new evidence that changes in task-relevance can update the contextual recruitment of selective attention in a CSPC flanker task. We demonstrated that making one context cue task-relevant produced a CSPC effect, even in the presence of a competing contextual cue. More important however, we found that changing the task-relevance of the contextual cues across blocks of trials was accompanied by predictable changes in the congruency effects. These effects were found to be generalizable across two different kinds of stimuli and occurred even when using non-repeating images, and implicate an important role for task-relevance in producing context-dependency and are consistent with memory-based accounts of CSPC phenomena.

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