

AUTOMATIC VERSUS CONTROLLED PRIMING IN INDIVIDUALS WITH SCHIZOPHRENIA

M. R. Melinder,* D. M. Barch

*Department of Psychology, Washington University, St. Louis,
MO, USA*

Disorganized speech, termed thought disorder, is a primary symptom of schizophrenia. Researchers have proposed at least three ways in which semantic system disturbances in individuals with schizophrenia may lead to thought disorder; 1) degraded storage, 2) abnormal spreading activation, and 3) impaired strategic access. Semantic priming paradigms have long been used to assess access to, and the integrity and organization of, the semantic system. However, the results from such studies in individuals with schizophrenia have been mixed. These mixed results may be attributable, in part, to the use of different methodologies across studies. One can find different priming studies in individuals with schizophrenia, each using slightly different methodologies, that have found results consistent with each of the hypotheses outlined above. Few priming studies in individuals with schizophrenia have been explicitly designed to compare and contrast these different hypotheses. This study compares these three hypotheses about semantic system disturbances leading to disorganized speech in individuals with schizophrenia. We tested these hypotheses by conducting a study of semantic priming in individuals with schizophrenia and healthy controls using a lexical decision task that allows us to assess the integrity of both automatic spreading activation and expectancy processes. The task manipulates the expectancy of prime-target pairs, at three different stimulus onset asynchronies (250 ms, 1750 ms, and 3250 ms). Results will be discussed in terms of the support for each of these three theories, as well as the relationship to subject performance on measures of strategic control and other measures of semantic memory.