

Who's in Charge? Effects of Situational Roles on Automatic Gender Bias

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Sixty European American male and female participants' implicit gender-related attitudes were assessed prior to engaging in a cross-gender dyadic interaction, according to one of three situational roles (superior, subordinate, or equal-status partner). Results revealed that the social roles affected male participants' gender attitudes. Specifically, male participants who anticipated an interaction with a female superior revealed negatively biased evaluative attitudes about women. By contrast, males who expected to interact with a female equal-status partner or subordinate revealed attitudes that were biased in favor of women. This finding highlights the importance of situational factors in the generation of implicit attitudes regarding social groups. Specifically, the present data point to the influence of situational status on males' attitudes regarding women. Implications of this work for integration and diversity initiatives are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 40 years there have been considerable increases in the representation of individuals from different racial and ethnic groups, as well as the presence of women, in a variety of social arenas. Social-psychological theory, such as the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), predicts that such inclusion should, in turn, lead to the attenuation of intergroup tension.

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Ironically, these advances in numerical representation have been accompanied by several side effects for both members of stigmatized groups and members of nonstigmatized groups (Blalock, 1967; Kanter, 1977; Yoder, 1991). For example, members of stigmatized groups report feeling frustrated by barriers to successful promotion, being filtered into stereotypical roles, and being kept out of prestigious positions in their organizations (Brass, 1985; Catalyst, 1996; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998). Further, members of nonstigmatized groups report finding newly diversified workplaces difficult to navigate (Kanter, 1993), and feeling less committed to them (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). Thus, diversity initiatives can sometimes have unexpected effects, exacerbating, rather than reducing, tension.

Why would the presence of members of stigmatized groups increase intergroup tension in the workplace? In 1967, Blalock hypothesized that the sudden increase of members of underrepresented groups into work environments would be perceived by members of majority groups as an "intrusion," and, as a result, would increase bias. Sociological research on the group-position theory of prejudice (Blumer, 1998) has also revealed that high-status group members' attitudes toward low-status groups become increasingly negative as perceived threats to the status of the high-status group increase—as when minority group members occupy high-status positions (Bobo, 1998). This work suggests that majority group members' attitudes toward minority groups become increasingly negative as more minority group members occupy social roles that are incongruent with their sociocultural status.

The purpose of the present study was to examine this process from a social-cognitive perspective, at a micro level of analysis. Do individuals' implicit attitudes toward an outgroup vary according to their social roles vis-à-vis individual outgroup members? We examined male and female participants' reactions to being assigned the role of a superior, peer, or subordinate, relative to a person of the opposite gender. Consistent with group-position theory, we predicted that males (i.e., dominant group members) assigned to a low-status role relative to an outgroup member (i.e., female partner) would exhibit more negative attitudes regarding women, compared to males assigned to a high-status role. By contrast, women's gender attitudes were not expected to differ as a function of their relative status for an anticipated interaction with an outgroup member (i.e., male partner).

Assessing Attitudes

Because of their strong associations with group memberships, stereotypes and attitudes can often be activated automatically and implicitly (e.g., Banaji & Greenwald, 1995; Bargh, Chaiken, Gøvender, & Pratto, 1992;

Devine, 1989; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). For example, Fazio et al. (1995) demonstrated the automatic activation of racial attitudes. Specifically, White participants respond faster to negative target adjectives when they were preceded by primes that were African American faces, compared to when they were preceded by Euro-American faces. Presumably because participants held negative attitudes toward African Americans, it was easier for them to process, and, therefore, to respond to adjectives that were also negative (i.e., congruent with the valence of the prime), compared to processing negative adjectives preceded by Euro-American faces.

Based on the same logic, Greenwald and his colleagues have developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to assess the strength with which individuals associate concepts and categories with attributes (e.g., evaluations and traits, see Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998 for more details). In the IAT, individuals categorize items belonging to particular concepts/categories (e.g., male and female names) as well as items belonging to the attribute of interest (e.g., pleasant and unpleasant words for an evaluation attribute) that are presented on a computer screen by pressing specific keys on a keyboard. Research employing this methodology has found that individuals complete the categorization task more quickly when highly associated concepts and attributes are procedurally linked (i.e., by sharing a response key), compared to when weakly associated concepts and attributes are similarly linked (again, see Greenwald et al., 1998; Ottaway, Hayden, & Oakes, in press). For instance, because most individuals hold fairly positive attitudes toward flowers and fairly negative attitudes toward insects, most find it easier to categorize flower names and pleasant words when they require the same key press for categorization (and, therefore, insect names and unpleasant words when they require the same key press), than when the procedural links are reversed (i.e., flower names and unpleasant words paired; insect names and pleasant words paired, Greenwald et al., 1998; Ottaway et al., in press). Similar to Fazio et al.'s method (Fazio et al., 1995), therefore, the IAT is sensitive to the differential association of concepts and categories with positive and negative evaluations.

Recent work has found that the IAT can detect differences in the evaluations of social groups, such as racial and gender groups (Banaji, 1999; Carpenter & Banaji, 1998, 1999; Dasgupta, McGhee, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2000; Greenwald et al., 1998; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, in press; Ottaway et al., in press; Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). For instance, Greenwald et al. (1998, Exp. 2) found that Korean and Japanese participants revealed intergroup favoritism in an IAT measuring response latencies for categorizations of Korean and Japanese first names and pleasant/unpleasant words. When Korean first names and "pleasant" words required the same key press

for categorization, Korean participants responded faster than when Korean names and “unpleasant” words required the same key press. Japanese participants showed the same trend, but with Japanese names instead of Korean names. Thus, Korean participants showed a bias in favor of Korean first names and Japanese participants showed a bias in favor of Japanese first names (Greenwald et al., 1998, Exp. 2). Similarly, Dasgupta et al. (2000) found that Whites associated “pleasant” words and Caucasian names and faces more readily than “pleasant” words and African American names and faces.² These results were interpreted as evidence for White participants’ implicit racial bias, that is, their automatic preference for White Americans over African Americans.³ Several other studies have also found evidence for White Americans’ automatic racial bias (Greenwald et al., 1998, Exp. 3; Lowery et al., in press; Ottaway et al., in press). In the present study, we employed the IAT to assess the gender attitudes held by both males and females. Further, we examined whether individuals’ automatic gender bias differed after assignment to status-congruent, compared to status-incongruent, roles for a cross-gender dyadic interaction.

To examine the impact of social roles on gender attitudes, it is important first to consider the attitudes generally held regarding women. Unlike attitudes regarding other stigmatized groups (e.g., African Americans, the obese), attitudes regarding women have been found to be surprisingly positive (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). But this positive bias in favor of women may not extend to women in nontraditional roles. Attitudes toward women in leadership positions are often quite negative (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Recent theoretical work on the social psychology of Sexism suggests that certain forms of modern Sexism exclude women from high-status roles (e.g., leaders, employers), as well as protect and revere women in traditional roles (e.g., mothering, nurturing), without the antipathy often associated with prejudice. Thus, individuals may simultaneously hold positive attitudes about women, yet negative attitudes about women who take on nontraditional, high-status roles. Consistent with this work, the subcategory “female leaders” was found to evoke different automatic attitudes from the general category “females” (Carpenter & Banaji, 1998). Specifically, male participants revealed an implicit preference for women in an IAT when classifying male and female names, but not when classifying names of

²The stimuli used were names that had been pretested to be stereotypically associated with White Americans or Black Americans, or faces of White and Black Americans.

³It is possible that these findings were due to the fact that White names and faces are generally more familiar for White Americans than Black names and faces. Since familiarity is associated with greater liking or preference, these results could reflect such a bias. However, recent work equalizing the familiarity of the stimulus items suggests that the IAT effects are not due to differential familiarity (Dasgupta et al., 2000).

famous male and female leaders (Carpenter & Banaji, 1998). Taken together, this work suggests that counter-stereotypical exemplars of a particular social group (e.g., female leaders) may be associated with different attitudes than more stereotypical members of that group (Rudman, 1998). It follows, then, that anticipating an interaction with a counter-stereotypical token member of a social group may shift attitudes regarding the group as a whole.

The Present Study

We investigated the influence of anticipated interactions with a target group member in an atypical social role on implicit attitudes regarding the target group. Consistent with previous work finding in-group favoring attitudes (Greenwald et al., 1998), female participants were expected to reveal an automatic favorability for female over male. We had no strong predictions regarding how situational roles might moderate the magnitude of female participants’ in-group bias. The question of primary interest, however, was whether attitudes regarding women would differ among males who were anticipating working on a task with a female superior, subordinate, and equal-status task partner. Given the findings that males revealed an automatic bias against female, compared to male, leaders (Carpenter & Banaji, 1998), and that high-status group members feel threatened when low-status group members take on atypical roles (Bobo, 1998), we expected males assigned to the subordinate role to generate attitudes regarding women that were more negative than males assigned to the superior role. Consistent with recent work finding that males hold relatively positive attitudes regarding women when they anticipate working with them on a joint-task (Rudman, 1998), we expected males assigned to the equal-status role to generate more positive attitudes regarding women than males in the superior role.

METHOD

Participants and Design

Thirty European American⁴ male and 30 European American female undergraduate students at a competitive, exclusive, private New England college completed this experiment for a monetary reward of \$5. The design was a 2 (participant gender) × 3 (situational role) factorial.

⁴The race of participants was kept consistent to protect against the potential influence that differences in racial group membership might have on perceptions of relative status.

