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THE EFFECT OF GENDER STEREOTYPES ON PERCEIVED DECISION MAKING ABILITIES

By Frederick J. Nitchie IV, *Arcadia University*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore and study the effects of both positive and negative stereotypes on the perceived decision making abilities of those exposed to them. Past research has indicated that prejudice towards women exists more prevalently and more intensely in society than it does for males. Accordingly, we predicted that women would respond more negatively to such stereotypes than men would when presented with them. We then measured this by asking participants to judge their perceived agency in hypothetical situations that required decision making. We tested this with both positive and negative stereotypes, and also with a control. Our findings did produce significant results showing a main effect of participant gender (female) causing them to rate themselves more negatively than males on average. These results are important because they show that women respond negatively to these pervasive and flawed stereotypes attributed to their gender which could negatively affect their ability to make efficient decisions in everyday life.

THE EFFECT OF GENDER STEREOTYPES ON PERCEIVED DECISION MAKING ABILITIES

This study was conducted to find out if stereotypes have an effect on peoples' perceptions of their own ability to make decisions. This relies on these stereotypes existing pervasively in our society, and also that people (specifically women) are aware of them on at least some level of consciousness. Past research has studied and shown evidence that these stereotypes do in fact pervade throughout society:

“Also, social scientists are in general agreement that women face discrimination in many occupations...”¹

...and are also perceived, both consciously and subconsciously, by both women and men:

“Moreover, women themselves, although not necessarily believing themselves personally deprived, do perceive that women as a group are unjustly treated.”^{2,3}

“...therefore, anti-female bias, often functioning out of people's conscious awareness...”⁴

The fact that these stereotypes exist in society, enough to warrant recognition by many organizations and interest groups raises the question of how they might affect those they are directed towards. From this past research and the questions that followed, we extrapolated that these stereotypes could be having profound effects on both the men and women that they targeted. Specifically, we wanted to know how they may affect the way a person regards their ability to make decisions when presented with hypothetical scenarios. Thusly, we hypothesized that gender stereotypes could ultimately affect a person's perceived decision making abilities concerning future events. We expected to find that when presented with positive stereotypes, participants would perceive themselves as

¹ Eagly, A. H., & Mladinic, A. (1994). Are people prejudiced against women? Some answers from research on attitudes, gender stereotypes, and judgments of competence. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 5, 1-35.

² Crosby, F. (1982). *Relative Deprivation and Working Women*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ Major, B. (1989). Gender differences in comparisons and entitlement: Implications for comparable worth. *Journal of Social Issues*, 45(4), 99-115.

⁴ Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. (1994). Implicit stereotyping and prejudice. In M.P. Zanna & J. M. Olson (Eds). *The Psychology of Prejudice: The Ontario symposium* (Vol. 7, pp. 55-76). Hillsdale, NJ Erlbaum.

being able to make decisions more easily, accurately, etc. and when presented with negative stereotypes, the opposite would occur. Instead of just confirming that these prejudices were in fact real and affective, our study was utilized to look at exactly how these stereotypes would affect those that were presented with them.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 98 (50 female, 48 male) Arcadia University students who were recruited through the university's SONA System website. Psychology students were incentivized with 0.5 course credits. Two additional males had participated but their results were disregarded due to a failure to follow experimental instructions.

DESIGN

The independent variable of this experiment was the valence of the stereotypes written into the paragraphs the participants read. These were either positive or negative stereotypes for either gender, plus a control group without stereotypes, resulting in a 2x3, between-subjects design (participant's gender:male, female) X stereotype valence: positive, negative, control).

MATERIALS

DECISION MAKING TASK

As a distractor task, participants were asked to complete a short decision making questionnaire to simulate such a process within the participant before continuing on with the experiment. This task was akin to the one used in Onken, Hastie, and Revelle (1985)⁵ and pertains to decisions based on the participant's ideal living environment. For each of the eight questions, participants could choose one of three answers: small, medium, or large, such as in "What size would you like your living space to be?"

MELBOURNE DECISION MAKING QUESTIONNAIRE

A six-point Likert scale was used for assessing a participant's perceived decision making ability, with 1 being *very unlike you* and 6 being *very much like you*. Participants were asked questions that assessed different aspects of decision making such as procrastination and vigilance. Participants were asked such questions as "I consider all other options before making a decision" and "I prefer to leave decisions to others". This questionnaire consisted of twenty items that measured a variety of different facets of general decision making abilities.

PROCEDURE

Participants were brought in to one of the study rooms located in Boyer Hall and given a consent form explaining the experiment's parameters, and their right to stop whenever they wished. Based on their gender of either male or female, participants were divided at random into one of three groups: positive prime, negative prime, or control. This resulted in a 2 (sex: male, female) x 3 (prime: positive, negative, control) between-subjects design. Participants were then handed a packet which contained all material needed to complete the first part of the study. First, they read a short paragraph that contained either positive or negative stereotypes (Appendix A) or, if in the control group, no paragraph at all. Participants then completed a short-decision making task, although in truth this was a distractor task (Appendix B). After they were finished, the experimenter collected all of these materials and administered the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (Appendix C). After

⁵ Onken, J., Kastie, R., & Revelle, W. (1985). Individual Differences in the Use of Simplification Strategies in a Complex Decision-Making Task. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 11, 14-27.

they had completed this, the experimenter would collect the completed scale and give the participant a short demographic sheet which contained two manipulation check questions as well (Appendix D). Control participants did not need to fill out the manipulation check questions, as they pertained to the paragraphs in the experimental conditions. Participants were then debriefed on the true nature of the study, thanked for their participation, and given course credit if necessary.

RESULTS

In order to find whether participants in the negative stereotype condition had rated themselves lower than those given positive stereotypes, ratings from the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire were separated into four categories. As previously shown in Mann, Burnett, Radford, and Ford (1997)⁶, every question belonged to one of four categories pertaining to decision-making. These categories were vigilance (Figure 1), buck-passing (Figure 2), procrastination (Figure 3), and hypervigilance (Figure 4). The averages for all four of the categories, and genders, were calculated and are displayed within Table 1. After running a univariate ANOVA between-groups analysis of variance we found no significant interactions between participant gender and stereotype valence on decision making self-report. However, we did find that gender had a significant effect on hypervigilance scores (Figure 4), $F(1,92) = 10.112$, $p = .002$. Specifically, this seems to indicate that women, on average, are more sensitive to how they believe others perceive them than men are. While there were no significant effects found in any other categories when considered by themselves, a one-way ANOVA between groups analysis revealed that gender did elicit a significant main effect across categories, $F(4,89) = 2.542$, $p = .045$. Put simply, when considering the four categories as a whole, overall, women are consistently more likely to perceive they have less agency over making their own decisions as compared to men. To finish, another univariate ANOVA between-groups analysis was run to see if any significant effects were to be found between researchers, of which there were none.

DISCUSSION

To summarize, even though our original hypothesis was not supported, the subsequent main effect of gender that was found does shed some interesting light on the topic. Due to this, we now know that the prejudices that pervade our culture can indeed have unintended and negative effects on the way individuals perform, especially women. With this new information, we can infer that women may be experiencing detrimental effects when it comes to making decisions in general. Even though hypervigilance was the only category to attain significant results, it is important to note that women did score higher and therefore more negatively than men in the categories that were measured. This seems to indicate that women, on average, do find themselves to be poorer at decision making compared to men. As mentioned in Eagly and Mladinic (1994)⁷, such pervasive thoughts could be a contributing factor as to why women find it harder to excel in male-dominated workplaces; they may be experiencing much more self-doubt than men when it comes to making decisive calls. The implications of this suggest that we as a culture need to emphasize the importance of teaching girls at a young age their opinions matter just as much as any man's, and that they have just as much right and capability to make important and effective decisions as men do.

Future research into this topic is needed in order to continue to refine its findings. While it is true that our study did not produced the results we expected, it is important to note that the measures we used did reveal significant trends throughout the data that showed evidence for the role gender plays on decision making.

⁶ Mann, L., Burnett, P., Radford, M., & Ford, S. (1997). The Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire: An Instrument for Measuring Patterns for Coping with Decisional Conflict. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 10, 1-19.

⁷ Eagly, A. H., Karau, S. J., & Makhijani, M. G. (1995). Gender and the effectiveness of leaders: A meta-analysis review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 125-145.

Future experimenters could attempt to build off of and expand such research in order to gain a clearer insight into what is evidently an important topic of gender biases and stereotypes.

It is important to remember that this study had participants self-report their own perceptions of their decision making abilities; no other behavior was measured. While this information will certainly prove to be helpful, it would be prudent to conduct a study where some type of actual decision making behavior is measured in a controlled environment. For example, future research might exclusively study female behavior now that we know males are not affected nearly as much by stereotypes pertaining to their own gender. In addition to this, participants might be asked to make a series of decisions after being primed with similar stereotypes and researchers could then measure the amount of time it takes participants to make those decisions, in order to provide more concrete evidence on how their decision making abilities are thusly affected.

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