



The role of leadership self-efficacy and stereotype activation on cardiovascular, behavioral and self-report responses in the leadership domain

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ABSTRACT

This research examines female leaders' responses to the gender–leader stereotype and the role of leadership self-efficacy in these responses. Using the biopsychosocial model of threat and challenge, this laboratory experiment examined women's cardiovascular, behavioral (i.e., performance), and self-report responses to the negative female leader stereotype as a function of leadership efficacy. Female participants, selected on leadership efficacy scores, served as leaders of ostensible three-person groups within an immersive virtual environment. Half were explicitly primed with the negative stereotype. As predicted, women with high, as opposed to low, percepts of leadership self-efficacy exhibited cardiovascular patterns of threat when performing the leadership task, and they performed better in the explicit stereotype activation condition compared to those not explicitly primed. Additionally, this threat was consistent with positive reactance responses on behavioral and self-report measures. Low efficacy leaders were not threatened, but they did show stereotype priming effects by assimilating to the negative stereotype on the self-report and behavioral measures. This research provides greater insight into stereotype reactance effects and highlights the role of self-efficacy in moderating stereotype threat and stereotype priming effects.

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1. Introduction

Perceptions of personal efficacy provide countless personal and social benefits (Bandura, 1997). In particular, leadership self-efficacy- or belief in one's leadership capabilities- positively predicts leadership, group, and organizational outcomes (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Hoyt, Murphy, Halverson, & Watson, 2003; Murphy, 2002). For those with high, as opposed to low, levels of leadership self-efficacy, performing a leadership task is highly self-relevant. This heightened self-relevance may, however, make those with high efficacy more prone to being threatened by negative stereotype-based expectations (Marx & Stapel, 2006a). For example, female leaders with high levels of leadership self-efficacy may be more likely than women with lower levels of self-efficacy to be threatened that they might confirm the negative gender–leader stereotype. Responses to such stereotype threat range from negative vulnerability responses, such as decreased performance, to more positive reactance responses including performance increases (Hoyt & Chemers, 2008; Kray, Reb, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2004; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In previous research, we demonstrated that female leaders with high levels of leadership efficacy show positive reactance responses (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). Although those with higher levels of efficacy showed better behavioral and self-report outcomes under stereotype activation (stereotype reactance) than those with lower efficacy, we contend that they have greater threat-based

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concerns. In this research, we test this assertion by examining the role of leadership self-efficacy and stereotype activation on women's self-report and behavioral responses as well as cardiovascular patterns indicative of threat in a leadership situation.

1.1. Leadership and conflicting stereotypic expectations

A well-documented incongruity exists between female gender stereotypes and the leadership role (Eagly & Carli, 2003, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Pervasive and highly resilient, gender stereotypes generally revolve around communal and agentic attributes, ones that directly relate to the leadership domain (Dodge, Gilroy, & Fenzel, 1995; Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001). Stereotypical attributes of men include "agentic" characteristics emphasizing confidence, control, and assertiveness whereas stereotypical attributes of women include "communal" characteristics, highlighting a concern for others (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Heilman, 2001). Eagly and Karau's role congruity theory maintains that agentic, as opposed to communal, tendencies are often deemed requisite for leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Substantial empirical evidence supports the association between successful leadership and stereotypically male attributes (Arkelin & Simmons, 1985; Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998; Powell & Butterfield, 1979, 1984, 1989; Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989; Schein, 1973, 1975, 2001). According to role congruity theory, the incongruity between female gender stereotypes and the leader role leads to prejudice that accounts for the ample empirical findings indicating less favorable attitudes toward female than male leaders, greater difficulty for women to attain top leadership roles, and greater difficulty for women to be viewed as effective leaders.

1.2. Stereotype priming and stereotype threat

In addition to creating negative expectations and prejudice against members of devalued groups, negative stereotypes can impact the target's own thoughts and behaviors (Eden, 1992; Hoyt & Chemers, 2008). Researchers have distinguished between stereotype priming effects and stereotype threat effects. Stereotype priming can lead to behavior consistent with and thereby confirming a stereotype (Wheeler & Petty, 2001), but it does not involve the critical 'knowing and being' aspect of stereotype threat that requires people to both know the stereotype and be a member of the targeted group (Marx & Stapel, 2006b). Stereotype priming confirmation has been shown across a variety of stereotypes from individuals walking slower when primed with the stereotype of the elderly to people showing enhanced cognitive performance when primed with the professor stereotype (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 1998).

Stereotype threat involves 'knowing and being' and occurs when an individual is in a position to confirm a negative stereotype that disparages the performance ability of members of their own social group. Stereotype threat theory provides a powerful account of how stereotypes can contribute to the underperformance of members of stigmatized groups (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). The majority of the literature on stereotype threat shows that the threat results in deleterious vulnerability responses. Vulnerability effects of stereotype threat have been demonstrated across a wide variety of social groups and domains including African-Americans and Latinos on intellectual tasks (Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer, 1998; Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995), women on math tasks (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Schmader, 2002), and European Americans in sports (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999).

Stereotype threat, however, does not always lead to vulnerability responses. Evidence has begun to accumulate showing that, at times, individuals demonstrate reactance responses when presented with a negative stereotype associated with their group (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007; Kray et al., 2004). Stereotype reactance occurs when individuals primed with a negative stereotype regarding the performance ability of members of their social group react or respond with engagement in counterstereotypical behavior, such as women increasing negotiation performance when relevant gender stereotypes are activated (Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001). The manner in which a stereotype is activated has been shown to play an important role in target's responses to the stereotype. For example, Kray and colleagues found that women demonstrate stereotype reactance in negotiation situations and outperform men, but only when the stereotype has been primed explicitly (Kray et al., 2001, 2004). In sum, stereotype threat has been shown to result in both vulnerability and reactance responses.

1.3. Self-efficacy and stereotype activation effects

Self-efficacy, a key construct derived from Bandura's social-cognitive theory (1986), refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p.3). Self-efficacy is not an assessment of an individual's number of skills but rather represents people's beliefs of what they can do with what they have. A substantial literature on self-efficacy indicates that it is an important motivational construct that influences choices, goals, effort, persistence, thought patterns, performance, and stress reactions (Bandura, 1982, 1986, 1997; Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Bandura & Wood, 1989; Taylor, Locke, Lee, & Gist, 1984). Self-efficacy has been shown to be particularly important construct in the leadership domain (Chemers et al., 2000; Hoyt et al., 2003; Shea & Howell, 1999). The extant research on self-efficacy reveals that people with higher self-efficacy expectancies are generally more successful, effective, and healthier than those with lower levels. Bandura (1997) contends that the "self-concept largely reflects people's beliefs in their personal efficacy" (p. 11). Thus, task performance in a particular domain is highly self-relevant for those with strong self-efficacy percepts in that domain.

Marx and Stapel (2006a,b) have demonstrated the critical role that self-relevance plays in eliciting stereotype threat responses. Specifically, they showed that when a stereotype is self-relevant people demonstrated stereotype threat responses, but when the

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