



Stereotypes and implicit social comparison: Shifts in comparison-group focus

Elizabeth C. Collins*, Christian S. Crandall, Monica Biernat

University of Kansas, USA

Received 14 June 2004; revised 5 May 2005

Available online 16 September 2005

Abstract

Stereotypes affect how people understand implicit comparisons. In two studies, people judged the comparison implied by a statement (e.g., “Math is easy for me,” “I’m really aggressive”) made by an African-American, White, or Asian-American male. Counter-stereotypic comments, such as the African-American saying he was “bad” at basketball, caused participants to think the target was comparing himself to his narrow ingroup; stereotypic statements caused people to infer that the comparison group was broader. When compared to a fixed standard (all people in USA), evidence that people used stereotypes consistently emerged. Whether motivated or not, by narrowing the comparison standard when presented with a counter-stereotypic case, participants constructed an understanding of the target that protected the stereotype from challenge.

© 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Stereotypes; Implicit comparisons; Shifting standards

When a man says “I’m really good at basketball,” there are many different possible standards of comparison. It may seem that he is comparing himself to people in general, but knowledge of context and the culture give information useful in decoding a more complex meaning (Clark, 1985; Kraut & Higgins, 1984). Stereotypes are one source of this context.

Comparative judgments are often made with an implicit ingroup comparison (e.g., “tall for a woman,” “smart for a preschooler”); such comparisons are especially informative. First, if a woman says she is tall, an ingroup comparison pinpoints where she stands among women—in this case she is tall compared to most women. Second, because women as a group are, on average, shorter than men, an ingroup comparison places her more accurately in the height distribution of all people. Ingroup comparisons are comparisons among similar

people, and the similarity principle of social comparison theory suggests that these will be more informative than comparisons of dissimilar people (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000).

Research using the shifting standards model has examined the way people adjust the meaning of words to understand judgments made with subjective terms, such as “good” and “bad” (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997). Subjective language is typically used and understood with reference to the category of the person being described. A man and a woman may be described as “good leaders,” but because expectations for women’s leadership competence are lower than for men, “good” for a woman is likely to mean something objectively less good than “good” for a man. These sorts of standard shifts have been found in judgments of men and women with regard to height, competence, verbal ability, and parenting quality (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991; Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997); and judgments of Caucasians and African-Americans with regard to

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 785 864 5696.
E-mail address: ecollins@ku.edu (E.C. Collins).

athleticism, competence, and mathematics ability (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat et al., 1991; Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997).

According to the shifting standards model, when judging a target on a group-stereotypic dimension, perceivers tend to make a within-group comparison; a man is compared to men; a woman is compared to women. Stereotypes provide information not only about the height distribution among women, but also how women relate to other groups on height (such as men or children).

Grice's (1975) rules of conversation suggest that people usually try to say what they wish to say as clearly and as parsimoniously as possible. The rule of *Manner* indicates that speakers will say their piece with reasonable speed. The rule of *Quality* indicates that people will give as much information as necessary, no more or less. Stereotypes clearly and easily communicate a large amount of information, thus relying on them in communication is parsimonious. Given that people tend to use these stereotypes in conversation for brevity, relevance, and other functions (Kashima, 2000; Ruscher, 1998), if a statement is stereotype-relevant, its stereotypicality will likely dictate how it is decoded.

There is, however, no direct evidence on the question of what comparison group is implicit in subjective judgments. When one hears the evaluation of a female leader, does the listener assume the judge has compared her to standards for women, or that the comparison was made with reference to "all people"? We suggest that there is not a constant inference, but instead that a more complex rule is used to infer the likely comparison group implicated in a subjective judgment. Further, we believe that this rule or heuristic functions to maintain the overall stereotype of the group.

When a subjective statement is counter-stereotypical (e.g., if an African-American male says he is "bad at basketball"), we suggest that perceivers will assume a within group comparison ("he is comparing himself to other African-American males"). That is, *bad* is qualified as *bad compared to African-American males*—a highly athletic group overall—not compared to the population at large. On the other hand, when a statement is stereotypical (e.g., if an African-American male says he is "good at basketball"), one need not presume a within-group comparison, because the statement is plausible as is. We hypothesize that stereotype-consistent statements lead to the inference of a broader, cross-category comparison, simply because a member of a group high in some ability is likely to be better than the general population.

Both of these patterns of inference—narrow within-group comparisons for stereotype-inconsistent statements, broad cross-group comparisons for stereotype-consistent statements—have the effect of upholding the underlying stereotype. People need not be motivated or consciously inclined to interpret comparisons in a way that supports

stereotypes. We suggest that people may be unwittingly influenced by the mere knowledge of those stereotypes, interpreting information in a manner that makes the most sense given their beliefs about social groups. This process is similar to the way people use individuating information about others to make sense of comments and actions.

The present two studies were designed to test the hypothesis that people assume a broad, cross-group comparison for stereotypical statements but a narrow, within-group comparison for counter-stereotypical statements. Furthermore, we examined whether these assumptions may facilitate the maintenance of stereotypes by confirming that race factors into participants' interpretations in a stereotypic manner.

Participants read subjective statements about members of stereotyped groups and indicated the comparison standard they assumed. They then judged the target's ability compared to a fixed standard (e.g., how good is this person at basketball compared to all people?). This question is analogous to a common-rule judgment which, in research on shifting standards, consistently reveals straightforward evidence of stereotyping (Biernat & Manis, 1994). On this fixed standard judgment, we hypothesized, of course, a main effect of the quality of performance indicated by the subjective statement (e.g., targets described as "good at basketball" are better than targets described as "bad at basketball"). More importantly, we also predicted a main effect of target race (African-American targets are better at basketball than White or Asian-American targets) indicating stereotype endorsement, regardless of the quality of the target's performance. Equally important, we predicted *no* interaction between target race and described ability level. The statement's stereotypicality or counter-stereotypicality should not affect people's use of the stereotype. That is, after making differential assumptions about the comparison group implied in stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical subjective judgments—after explicitly attending to a statement's stereotypicality—participants were expected to simply endorse the overall group stereotype even if the target made an explicitly counter-stereotypic self-judgment. Assumptions about comparison groups provide meaning regarding subjective judgments, and the assumptions people make will be based on—and help maintain—cultural stereotypes.

Study 1

In Study 1, the race of a male target (African-American, Asian-American, or White), the dimension on which he made a subjective judgment (Basketball or Mathematics), and his stated skill (High or Low) were manipulated, in a between-subjects factorial design. When judging the breadth of the comparison group, we predict

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات