

Social Identity versus Reference Frame Comparisons: The Moderating Role of Stereotype Endorsement

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Two studies tested the prediction that belief in a negative stereotype about an in-group will cause members to shift from viewing their in-group as a social identity to viewing it as a frame of reference. The stereotype that was the focus of inquiry was the belief that women have less aptitude at math and spatial tasks than do men. In both studies, female participants took a test of math and spatial ability and then received social comparison information about their abilities relative to a male and a female confederate. In Study 1, participants felt enhanced when the two women outperformed the male confederate, even when this meant that the participants themselves performed worse than the other woman. If participants were first reminded of the negative stereotype, however, they felt best when they outperformed the other woman, even if this meant that the two women performed worse than the man. Study 2 showed that the effects of stereotype activation were especially pronounced among female participants who showed moderate to high levels of stereotype endorsement. These findings suggest that belief in stereotypes about the in-group can lead to in-group comparison and contrast, even in contexts in which a group member's ability level challenges the validity of the stereotype. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA)

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The social psychological literature points to two ways in which gender might influence the social comparison of abilities. We label these two theoretical perspectives the *social identity view* and the *reference frame view*. First, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its extension, self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), indicate that increased gender salience might heighten concern for the maintenance of a positive gender identity. When this occurs, individuals will want their “in-group gender” to be positively distinct from their “out-group gender,” and they will view their own self-attributes as psychologically interchangeable with the attributes of other in-group members (Turner, 1985). As a result, upward same-gender social comparisons and downward cross-gender social comparisons should have the potential to raise self-esteem, whereas downward same-gender and upward cross-gender social comparisons should have

the potential to lower self-esteem (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000; see also Blanton, 2001). In contrast to this theoretical view, traditional social comparison theory has considered how people treat their gender as a reference frame, against which their personal abilities are then evaluated. This literature indicates that increased gender salience might heighten concern for doing well in relation to same-gender standards of comparison and simultaneously lower concern for doing well in relation to cross-gender standards of comparison. When this occurs, individuals will view same-gender targets as more relevant standards of comparison than cross-gender targets (e.g., Feldman & Ruble, 1981; Major & Forcey, 1985; Miller, 1984; Suls, Gaes, & Gastorf, 1979). As a result, upward social comparisons should threaten self-esteem, and downward social comparisons should enhance self-esteem to greater degrees, when they are made with same-gender targets of comparison than when they are made with cross-gender targets of comparison (Major, Sciacchitano, & Crocker, 1993; see also Blanton, 2001).

The current studies test the prediction that negative gender stereotypes can alter the manner in which gender influences the social comparison of abilities. Specifically, we predict that the negative stereotype regarding women's math and spatial abilities, when activated, will cause women

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to shift from treating their gender as a social identity to treating it as a reference frame. The rationale for this prediction is based on the social construction of the stereotype regarding women's math and spatial abilities. We argue that women often show some degree of endorsement of these stereotypes. As a result, they will restrict their definitions of "high" and "low" abilities in these domains to same-gender norms when the stereotypes are activated, which will then cause them to use same-gender standards of comparison when evaluating their own abilities. Moreover, we predict that stereotype activation will cause gender to be treated as a reference frame, even in social contexts where it would be treated as a social identity if stereotypes were not activated.

Endorsement of the Gender and Math Stereotype

Many have noted that the psychological dynamics surrounding gender stereotypes are not typical of the dynamics that surround many other social stereotypes. It appears that women, like men, often have what might be termed a "cooperative relationship" with the stereotypes about their group. As Eberhardt and Fiske (1994) have noted, romantic relationships create incentives for heterosexual men and women to accept stereotypical gender roles (see also Eagly, 1987; Peplau, 1983). Reflective of this, gender stereotypes appear to reinforce social constructions of men and women as two different "groups" that possess complementary strengths and weaknesses (Glick & Fiske, 1996). By comparison, constructions of Blacks and Whites often emphasize antagonistic relationships. The result is that women at times view their diminished status relative to men as legitimate, whereas African Americans more typically view their diminished status relative to Whites as illegitimate (see Major, 1994).

One consequence of legitimating status differences is endorsement of in-group stereotypes, even when they are negative (see Jost & Banaji, 1994). As a specific case, it appears that women show some acceptance of the stereotype that their gender possesses less aptitude for solving math and spatial problems than does the male gender. There is strong developmental evidence, for instance, that parents' gender stereotypical beliefs undermine girls' belief in their math abilities (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Frome & Eccles, 1998; Jacobs & Eccles, 1992), and there is evidence that socialization contexts that increase the salience of young girls' gender diminishes their aspirations in male-stereotypical ability domains (Abrams, Sparkes, & Hogg, 1985; Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 1990). These findings suggest that gender socialization often undermines women's confidence in their math and spatial abilities and that this can flow from informal pressures to adopt gender stereotypes. Admittedly, however, these findings fall short of showing that women often take the next step and internalize beliefs that the stereotypes about their abilities are true. For instance, women may be more likely than men to believe

that they have poor math abilities but still reject the stereotype that women *as a group* have less math ability than do men *as a group*.

There is reason to believe, however, that women will often show signs of stereotype endorsement. Laboratory studies suggest, for instance, that young women have at least implicit belief in gender stereotypes. Various research projects have shown that the increased salience of gender stereotypes undermines women's performance on math tests (e.g., Gonzales, Blanton & Williams, 2001; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). This suggests that women often possess some degree of internalization of the stereotypical view, even if they do not explicitly endorse the stereotype as true. It seems likely, however, that many will take the next step as well and explicitly endorse gender stereotypes. In fact, some theoretical perspectives within the psychological community have suggested that women *should* believe the stereotype related to their abilities. This is because some psychological researchers have argued that gender differences in ability do exist and that they reflect biological differences in aptitude (e.g., Benbow & Stanley, 1983).

Although most women will not be familiar with the specific reports that take this view, many appear to believe that "research has shown" that women are less able than men in these domains. We became aware of this while running pilot studies that lead to the studies presented here (see Blanton, 2001). In an initial study, female participants interacted with a male experimenter who made an offhand comment that he did not think women were as capable as men at tasks requiring math and spatial ability. When asked during the debriefing whether they had been offended by this statement, many participants stated that they had not been because they had assumed that the statement was accurate. This anecdote certainly is not a systematic demonstration that women often buy into the stereotypes about their math and spatial abilities, but the passive acceptance we observed in this pilot work stands in stark contrast to the response we might expect from members of many other stereotyped groups.

In summary, there is good reason to believe that women often show some degree of belief in or endorsement of the stereotypes that women have worse math and spatial abilities than do men. Although the belief in these in-group stereotypes might not be high in absolute terms, it seems likely that it is higher than would be found for most targets of negative stereotypes. To the extent that women buy into negative gender stereotypes, this should have dramatic consequences for social comparisons of ability.

Stereotype Endorsement and Social Comparison

If a negative ability stereotype about one's own group is true, then in-group members are more relevant standards of comparison than are members of the advantaged out-group

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