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The detrimental effects of a suggestion of sexism in an instruction situation ☆

Glenn Adams [a,*], Donna M. Garcia [b], Valerie Purdie-Vaughns [c], Claude M. Steele [d]

[a] Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5S 3G3
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, KS 66045-7556, USA
[c] Department of Psychology, Yale University, 2 Hillhouse Ave. (Box 208205), New Haven, CT 06520-8205, USA
[d] Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Jordan Hall, Bldg 420, Stanford, CA 94305-2130, USA

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Abstract

This research investigates the hypothesis that the mere suggestion of sexism can harm women's experience of an instruction situation. Across three experiments, women exposed to the suggestion about the sexism of a male instructor reported a less positive experience, performed worse on a logic test, and rated the instructor as less competent than did women who were not exposed to the suggestion. The same harmful consequences did not befall men, even when they were potential targets of the alleged sexism. To interpret results, the authors emphasize the concept of social identity threat: the concern that one will be the target not only of stereotypes about inferiority, but also a more general hostility based on a salient social identity. Results suggest the need to expand conceptions of discrimination to include systemic forms of identity threat that can be sufficient to produce harm, even in situations where differential treatment is initially absent.
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Consider the situation of a male instructor conducting a tutorial for a female student. Now imagine that this situation becomes tainted with the suggestion of sexism. How does the suggestion of sexism change the instruction experience? Does it transform the situation into one that demands greater vigilance and causes distraction? Does it spoil the interpersonal dynamics of the situation, increasing the woman's discomfort and damaging her rapport with the instructor? In short, is the mere suggestion of sexism—apart from the issue of actual discrimination—sufficient to cause harm to potential targets of sexism? Such questions are hard to answer in everyday life because suggestions of sexism and actual discrimination often co-occur. In the present research, we use a laboratory paradigm to investigate the consequences of a suggestion of sexism while holding constant the potential for discriminatory treatment.

Direct and indirect consequences of systemic devaluation

Women in contemporary American settings face systemic devaluation associated with an environment of sexism (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000). This environment of sexism impacts women's lives through direct acts of differential treatment. With respect to education, women face barriers to success in domains like math and science. These barriers include gendered socialization practices in which girls learn to devalue these domains (e.g.,

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: adams@psych.utoronto.ca (G. Adams).

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Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990). They also include blatant discrimination from classroom authorities, as when teachers treat girls in ways that suggest low expectations (e.g., Constantinople, Cornelius, & Gray, 1988).

As serious as these direct forms of discrimination are, we propose that the harmful consequences of an environment of sexism are not limited to such acts of differential treatment. In addition, the realistic threat of discrimination, rendered plausible by a cultural legacy of sexism, can be sufficient to poison interaction and elicit harmful outcomes—even in circumscribed situations that would otherwise appear to be free from differential treatment. One can consider these outcomes to be consequences of systemic devaluation to the degree that they reflect and require a cultural environment of sexism. These outcomes constitute *indirect* consequences of systemic devaluation to the extent that they occur in the absence of direct, differential treatment.

Detrimental effects of a suggestion of sexism

To investigate the hypothesis that the threat of discrimination can be sufficient to produce discrimination-like outcomes, we conducted a series of three experiments in which we manipulated the threat of discrimination by having a confederate either mention or not mention that an instructor seemed sexist. Although ideological prescriptions and anecdotal evidence propose that this suggestion of sexism might increase women's motivation to do well, previous research indicates that the mere suggestion of sexism may have multiple negative consequences.

Comfort

First, regardless of whether an instructor is actually sexist, the mere suggestion of sexism may constitute a "threat in the air" (Steele, 1997) or contribute to a "chilly climate" (Constantinople et al., 1988; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Hyde & Kling, 2001) that not only renders the instruction situation less comfortable for potential targets of the alleged sexism, but also fosters short-term disengagement from the instruction situation (Major, Spencer, Schmader, Wolfe, & Crocker, 1998) and long-term disidentification with the instruction domain (Major & Schmader, 1998; Major et al., 1998; Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001). One source of discomfort triggered by the suggestion of sexism is the localized threat of unfair treatment inside the circumscribed instruction setting. Learning that an instructor may be hostile toward one's gender could cause anyone—man or woman—to experience discomfort about the instruction situation. An additional source of discomfort that may be specific to women is a more systemic threat associated with broader devaluation outside the instruction setting. For women, the suggestion of sexism in a circumscribed instruction setting may activate associations to the larger environment of sexism, triggering a more general sense of hostility that men do not share.

Learning and performance

Second, regardless of whether an instructor is actually sexist, the mere suggestion of sexism may be sufficient to interfere with learning and performance. The suggestion of sexism may interfere with learning by distracting attention and resources away from the content of instruction to the task of monitoring the situation for signs of sexism (Frable, Blackstone, & Scherbaum, 1990; Lord & Saenz, 1985). The person need not believe the suggestion for such distraction to occur; instead, the suggestion may trigger an *automatic vigilance* (Pratto & John, 1991) for threat-related information that has a similarly distracting effect.

Likewise, the suggestion of sexism may interfere with performance not only by increasing distraction, but also through mechanisms like anxiety, disengagement, or evaluation apprehension (e.g., Geen, 1991; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Wine, 1971). Again, targets of the alleged sexism need not believe the suggestion for such harms to occur. Instead, the suggestion of sexism may be sufficient to trigger a diffuse arousal that interferes with learning or test performance, even if the target concludes that sexism is not relevant (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; O'Brien & Crandall, 2003).

Evaluations of the instructor

Third, regardless of whether an instructor is actually sexist, the mere suggestion of sexism may be sufficient to harm evaluations of the instructor. People exposed to the suggestion may perceive the instructor to be less fair, less warm, or less effective than people who are not exposed to the suggestion (see Brown & Dobbins, 2004). The importance of this outcome lies in its potential to interfere with the instructor–student relationship. The suggestion of sexism may be sufficient to taint evaluation of the instructor, decrease interpersonal rapport, and ultimately produce a less positive interaction.

Varieties of social identity threat

An overarching framework from which to consider these detrimental consequences is the concept of *social identity threat*: the broad set of concerns that arise when some aspect of the environment signals the danger that a person might be evaluated on the basis of a threatened social identity (Steele et al., 2002; see also Branscombe, 1998). This concept is an extension of the more specific predicament of *stereotype threat*: the concern that one's performance will confirm or be interpreted in light of cultural stereotypes about inferiority in a specific performance domain (Steele et al., 2002). Social identity threat refers to the broader concern that one will be the target not only of specific stereotypes about inferiority, but also a more general hostility or prejudice directed against a salient social identity.

To clarify the distinction between the general phenomenon of social identity threat and the more specific instance

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