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Contrast Effects of Stereotypes: “Nurturing” Male Professors Are Evaluated More Positively than “Nurturing” Female Professors

The stereotype that men are less nurturing than women frequently leads people to evaluate men less favorably than they evaluate equivalent women in situations that require nurturance and care. Nevertheless, theories of expectancy-violation suggest that such stereotypes may lead people to evaluate men who are unambiguously nurturing in such situations more positively than they evaluate equivalent women. Consistent with predictions, participants evaluated a hypothetical male professor who was described as “particularly nurturing” more favorably than they evaluated an equivalent female professor. This finding suggests that negative stereotypes do not always lead to less favorable evaluations; rather, negative stereotypes that are violated by unambiguous information can lead to more favorable evaluations through contrast effects.

Keywords: stereotypes, expectancy-violation, contrast effects, sexism

There is a pervasive belief that men are less nurturing and caring than women. People expect men to be less empathic than women (Graham & Ickes, 1997), for example, less warm than women (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972), less nurturing than women (Bem, 1974; Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Sprague & Massoni, 2005), and more aggressive than women (Broverman et al.).

Such stereotypes can lead people to evaluate men less favorably than they evaluate equivalent women in domains that require nurturance and care. One function of stereotypes is that they lead to stereotype-consistent perceptions through processes of perceptual confirmation—the tendency to interpret the details of an event in a manner that is consistent with expectancies (Miller & Turnbull, 1986; see Abel & Meltzer, 2007). Such processes can lead people to perceive men as less nurturing than they perceive equivalent women and, accordingly, to evaluate those men more negatively than they evaluate those women in domains that require nurturance. Several studies provide sup-

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port for this possibility. For example, fathers are sometimes seen as poorer caretakers than mothers (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986). Male mental health professionals are sometimes preferred less than female mental health professionals (Kerssens, Bensing, & Andela, 1997). And male teachers are sometimes evaluated more poorly than equivalent female teachers (Bennett, 1982; Williams, 1992).

But, there are theoretical reasons to believe stereotypes, such as those regarding men's lack of nurturance, may sometimes lead people to evaluate stereotyped targets more *positively* than they evaluate equivalent non-stereotyped targets (Biernat, 2003; Burgoon, 1986; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Kahneman & Miller, 1986). Although *ambiguous* information tends to be perceived in ways that confirm existing stereotypes, *unambiguous* information can violate existing stereotypes (Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1993; see also Biernat, 2003). According to expectancy-violation theory (Burgoon, 1986; Jussim et al., 1987), if unambiguous information about a target violates a stereotype, that information can lead to expectancy-inconsistent perceptions of that target that appear more extreme in contrast to the stereotype (see also Kahneman & Miller, 1986). Accordingly, unambiguous information that indicates a man is in fact nurturing may serve to make him look particularly nurturing and therefore lead people to evaluate him more positively than they evaluate an equivalent woman in situations that require nurturance. Because women are already expected to be nurturing, however, such contrast effects should not influence evaluations of equivalent women who are equally nurturing.

Indeed, contrary to studies demonstrating that people evaluate men more negatively than they evaluate equivalent women in domains that require nurturance, several other studies indicate that people sometimes evaluate men more favorably than they evaluate equivalent women in such domains (Ambert, 1982; Boulware & Holmes, 1970; Williams, 1992). For example, fathers are not always evaluated less positively than mothers—sometimes fathers are evaluated as better caretakers than mothers (Ambert, 1982). And male mental health professionals are not always evaluated less positively than female mental health professionals—sometimes male health professionals are favored (Boulware & Holmes, 1970). It may be that participants in those studies evaluated men more positively than women because unambiguous information indicated those men were nurturing—which violated the stereotype that men are less nurturing and thus made them look particularly nurturing by comparison. Indeed, the fathers who were evaluated more positively than mothers in Ambert's (1982) study were custodial fathers and thus may have been perceived to be especially nurturing.

Of course, to actually demonstrate that unambiguous information that indicates men are nurturing leads people to evaluate those men more positively than they evaluate equivalent women, research would need to randomly assign participants to receive or not receive such information. Although we are aware of no studies that have used such methods to demonstrate that information that violates stereotypes of men leads to stereotype-inconsistent evaluations of those men, at least two studies have demonstrated that information that violates stereotypes of women leads to stereotype-inconsistent evaluations of those women (Luthar, 1996; Taynor & Deaux, 1973). Taynor and

Deaux, for example, asked participants to read a scenario in which an equivalent male or female target provided help in a masculine-oriented emergency situation (i.e., the perpetrator possessed a gun). Likely due to the violation of the stereotype that women are less helpful than men in dangerous situations (Eagly & Crowley, 1986), participants evaluated the helping female more favorably than they evaluated the identical helping male. Nevertheless, given recent evidence that stereotypes shape perceptions of female targets more than they shape perceptions of male targets (Sekaquaptewa & Espinoza, 2004), such stereotype-inconsistent evaluations may only emerge in evaluations of women.

OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

The current study examined whether information that violates a stereotype about men leads to more positive evaluations of a male target compared to an equivalent female target. Specifically, participants evaluated an ostensible male or female candidate for a job as a university professor who either violated or did not violate the stereotype that men are not particularly nurturing. The university classroom is an ideal context in which to examine this issue because university professors are expected to be at least somewhat nurturing and prior research demonstrates that students expect male professors to be less nurturing than female professors (Sprague & Massoni, 2005). Based on expectancy-violation theory, we predicted that participants would evaluate a “particularly nurturing” male professor more favorably than an identical “particularly nurturing” female professor.

METHOD

Participants

Data were available from 157 male and 158 female college students between the ages of 17 and 50 ($M = 19.35$, $SD = 2.56$). We dropped 6 participants (2 males and 4 females) who were 17 years old because they participated despite the minimum age criterion of 18 years set by the local Institutional Review Board (IRB). Thus, the final sample used in the analyses was comprised of 309 participants with a mean age of 19.39 years ($SD = 2.56$). Participants were run in sessions of up to 30 participants each and received research credit for participating. All participants were randomized to conditions.

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants read and signed a consent form approved by the IRB. The experimenter requested participants’ assistance with an ostensibly separate task—helping the Psychology Department evaluate a job candidate. Specifically, the participants were told:

Because this person will be teaching several undergraduate classes, and because the University has adapted a policy of shared governance, we need to get some feedback on some of our top considerations. Rather than provide all the informa-

tion to all of you, we are going to provide each of you with a summary of one of several candidates. All summaries were created by the search committee and contain the most important information. Please carefully read the qualifications and rate him [her] on your best guess regarding his [her] effectiveness in the classroom.

Participants were randomly assigned to receive a summary that described a fictitious professor named either Dr. Michael Smith or Dr. Michelle Smith. Each description detailed identical educational backgrounds, research experiences, research interests, and publications. Crossed with the Sex of Professor manipulation, participants were also randomly assigned either to receive information describing Dr. Smith as “particularly nurturing” (Nurturing condition) or to receive no information about whether or not Dr. Smith was nurturing (Control condition). Specifically, for participants in the Nurturing condition, the summary indicated that Dr. Smith’s previous students had described him/her as “intelligent, clear, hard working, available, organized (or disorganized; part of a broader aim of the study and controlled in primary analyses), and particularly nurturing.” For participants in the Control condition, the summary indicated that Dr. Smith’s previous students had described the professor as “intelligent, clear, hard working, available, and organized (or disorganized; controlled in primary analyses).” After evaluating the candidate, participants reported demographic information and completed a packet of individual difference measures that was beyond the scope of the current study.

Materials

Professor evaluation. After reading the description of the professor, participants responded to the following 7 items on 4- or 5-point Likert scales: “Do you think Dr. Smith will be well organized and prepared for class sessions?,” “Do you think Dr. Smith will speak clearly and distinctly?,” “Which do you think would best describe Dr. Smith’s attitude toward the subject matter?” (ranging from “doesn’t like the subject” to “great enthusiasm for the subject”), “Do you think Dr. Smith would return assignments and examinations in a reasonable period of time?,” “Do you think Dr. Smith’s responses to students’ questions in class would be helpful?,” “If you needed assistance from Dr. Smith outside of class, do you think you would be able to make satisfactory arrangements for a timely meeting?,” and “How do you think you would rate Dr. Smith’s overall performance in this course?” All scores were standardized, appropriate items were recoded, and all items were averaged to form a mean evaluation score for which more positive scores indicated more positive evaluations. Internal consistency was slightly lower than desired ($\alpha = .61$) which may call into question any null results.

RESULTS

We tested the primary hypothesis that participants would evaluate a male professor who violated the stereotype that men are not particularly nurturing more positively than an equivalent female professor through a 2 (Sex of Professor) X 2 (Nurturing) AN-

COVA that controlled for participant sex and whether the professor was described as organized or disorganized.

Results are presented in Table 1. As can be seen there, the overall model was significant. The Sex of Professor and the Nurturing main effects did not reach significance, suggesting that participants did not evaluate the male and female professors differently or the Nurturing and Control professors differently, on average. Nevertheless, as predicted, there was a significant Sex of Professor X Nurturing interaction. That interaction is depicted in Figure 1. As can be seen there, consistent with predictions, the interaction emerged because being described as nurturing provided the male professor with a significantly larger evaluative boost than the identical female professor. In fact, pairwise comparisons revealed that the Nurturing male professor ($M = 0.12, SE = 0.06$) was evaluated significantly more positively than the Control male professor ($M = -0.03, SE = 0.06$) and the Nurturing female professor ($M = -0.09, SE = 0.06$) and marginally more positively than the Control female professor ($M = -0.01, SE = 0.06$). Notably, a test of the Sex of Professor X Nurturing X Sex of Participant interaction indicated that this effect was not moderated by participant sex, $F(1, 300) = 1.36, ns$.

DISCUSSION

Prior work demonstrates that gender stereotypes can lead to evaluative differences of the sexes (see Kunda & Thagard, 1996). Nevertheless, the majority of that work has demonstrated the role of those stereotypes in producing stereotype-consistent evaluations of the sexes, particularly when information about the target is ambiguous. The current work, in contrast, tested the prediction that unambiguous information about a male target that violates an existing stereotype that males are not particularly nurturing can produce stereotype-inconsistent evaluations of him relative to an identical female target in situations that require nurturance. Data were consistent with predictions. Specifically, a male professor described as “particularly nurturing” was evaluated more positively than an identically described female professor, likely due to the violation of

Table 1
Analysis of Covariance for Professors’ Overall Performance Evaluations

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>
Overall	5	8.11***
Sex of Participant	1	0.27
Sex of Professor (S)	1	2.55
Nurturing (N)	1	0.48
S X N	1	3.72*
Error	303	(0.28)

Note: $N = 309$. Value enclosed in parentheses is mean square error.
* $p < .05$, one-tailed. *** $p < .001$.

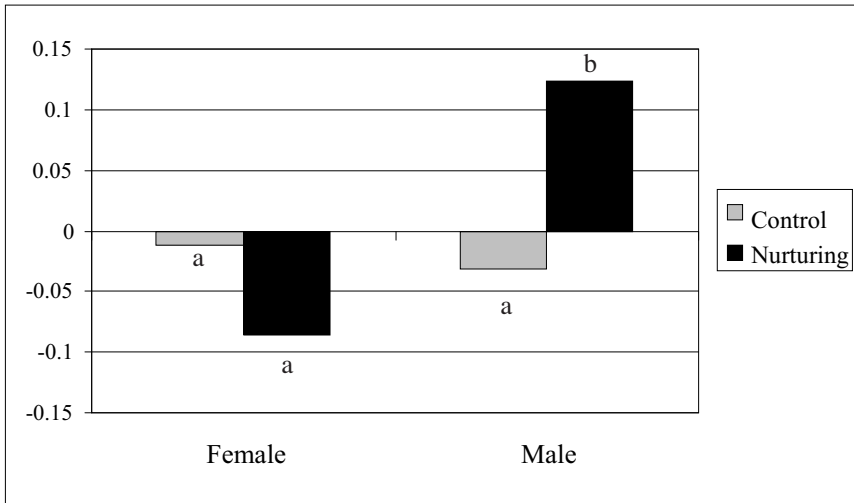


Figure 1. Evaluations of male and female professors.

Note. Different letters indicate means that were different at $p < .05$, one-tailed.

the stereotype that men are not particularly nurturing compared to women (Bem, 1974; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Sprague & Massoni, 2005).

This finding has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this finding extends previous research on the role of gender stereotypes in evaluations of the sexes. Although several theories (e.g., Biernat, 2003; Jussim et al., 1987; Kahneman & Miller, 1986) suggest that unambiguous information that violates existing stereotypes of men may lead to more favorable evaluations of those men, previous research has only provided strong evidence of such effects in evaluations of women (e.g., Luther, 1996; Taynor & Deaux, 1973). Although stereotypes appear to affect the way people process information about women more strongly than they affect the way people process information about men (Sekaquaptewa & Espinoza, 2004), the current study indicates that stereotypes can have such contrast effects in evaluations of men as well.

Practically, the current findings suggest ways in which people may not only escape the negative implications of various negative stereotypes, but benefit from them. Specifically, in contrast to previous research demonstrating that negative stereotypes can lead people to perceive *ambiguous* behaviors, even those that may actually contradict that stereotype, in a stereotype-consistent manner (see Miller & Turnbull, 1986), the current research indicates that *unambiguous* information can violate negative stereotypes and make targets look more positive by comparison. Accordingly, people from any group that faces a negative stereotype (e.g., men, women, African Americans, Muslims, Caucasians) may actually be able to capitalize on that stereotype by engaging in unambiguous stereotype-inconsistent behaviors that violate the stereotype.

Limitations

Several qualities of this research limit conclusions until these findings can be replicated and extended. First, the fact that the current study examined evaluations of a hypothetical professor limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research may benefit by systematically examining whether similar effects emerge in more ecologically valid settings (e.g., the classroom). Second, although the homogeneity of the samples increased our power to detect effects, it also limited generalizability of the findings. Although we are not aware of any research or theory suggesting that contrast effects may have emerged more readily in the current sample, future research may benefit by examining whether the same effects emerge in other populations. Finally, the current study examined the effects of only one stereotype against one group of people. Future studies may benefit from examining the effects of other gender stereotypes or negative stereotypes about other groups.

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