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COGNITIVE DISTRACTION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ENDORSEMENT OF GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effect of cognitive distraction on the endorsement of gender role stereotypes in one sample of African American female participants. Participants' awareness and endorsement of gender role stereotypes for male and females was assessed. Following random assignment to distraction or no distraction conditions, they each completed a series of questionnaires assessing beliefs about gender role stereotypes. Participants who were distracted showed differences in endorsement of male gender role stereotypes from those who weren't distracted but not for female gender role stereotypes. Results underscore the effect of cognitive distraction on gender stereotyping. Findings contribute to understanding of social cognitive processing and extend the small body of research in this area that focuses on African Americans.

INTRODUCTION

Despite modern day resistance, research has shown that stereotypes and prejudice against women still exists (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Although women have made great strides in terms of equality of status with men, many people still hold stereotyped views of women. Many see women as kind and nurturing, but this is at the cost of being considered incompetent and incapable of caring for themselves (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Hostile and Benevolent Sexism

Swim and Cohen (1997) proposed several definitions of sexism: They defined overt sexism as “unequal and harmful treatment of women that is readily apparent, visible, and observable, and can be easily documented” (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1986). They defined covert sexism as the harmful treatment of women that occurs in a concealed manner. Subtle sexism is openly sexist behavior that goes unchecked because it is considered normal behavior (Swim & Cohen, 1997).

Glick and Fiske (1996) suggest that the study of sexism must include an investigation of the extent to which people endorse gender role stereotypes, both positive and negative, as well as their beliefs about gender equality. In their theory of Ambivalent Sexism, Glick and Fiske (1996) suggest that benevolent and hostile sexism are the components of ambivalent sexism; a construct synonymous with what has been previously defined as sexism. Benevolent sexism involves idolizing and protecting women while expecting their adherence to traditional gender role norms.

Hostile sexism involves having negative affect toward women who do not follow traditional societal norms. Hostile sexism occurs when women who have traditionally masculine traits or feminist beliefs are held in contempt (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2000). What is novel about examining sexism in this way is that Glick and Fiske (1996, 2000) propose both hostile and benevolent attitudes are usually held simultaneously. A man who may cherish a woman who conforms to restrictive gender role stereotypes may easily despise a woman who does not. Glick and Fiske (1996) created the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) to test the theory (Cronbach’s alphas for the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory ranged from .82 to .91).

Attitudes toward Men

Glick and Fiske (1996) also hypothesized that women have ambivalent feelings towards men (Glick & Fiske, 1999). Consequently, they created a scale to investigate women’s feelings towards men based on the resentment and benevolent feelings that women may feel towards men. The Ambivalence toward Men Inventory (AMI) was created as a result of the theory that women simultaneously hold hostile and benevolent feelings toward men (with Cronbach’s alphas averaging .76 and .77 for the Hostility toward Men and Benevolence toward Men respectively). The AMI has two sub-scales, the Hostility toward Men sub-scale and the Benevolence toward Men sub-scale.

An earlier scale, the Attitudes toward Men Scale (AMS) was also designed to empirically assess women’s feelings about men (Iazzo, 1983). The AMS has four factors: “Marriage and Parenthood,” “Sexuality,” “Work,” and “Physical and Personality Attributes.” The “Marriage

and Parenthood” factor assesses how people perceive men in marriage and parenthood. Maltby and Day (2001) performed a regression analysis using correlates of attitudes toward men, including the AMS, as well as several other measures and found the AMS to be relevant almost 20 years after its initial design. Finally, Glick and Fiske (1999) noted that the AMI is positively correlated with the AMS. Both scales were used in the present study, their utility will be explained below.

Cognitive Distraction

Today, it is socially unacceptable to appear to be openly sexist. Consequently, people who do harbor such attitudes may seek to hide these feelings in order to avoid the negative consequences of the use and endorsement of gender role stereotypes. In the current research, a manipulation involving cognitive distraction was used in order to avoid potential social desirability concerns about appearing sexist.

Cognitive distraction occurs when an individual’s attention is not focused solely on one object. Allport’s (1954) idea of cognitive economy posits that people rely on stereotypes because it takes less effort than using individuating information. Moreover, when people are cognitively taxed, they should be more likely to rely on stereotypes than individuating information. Indeed, it has been found that when people are cognitively distracted, they are less able to suppress their true beliefs because they do not have the cognitive capacity to do so, while trying to complete an unrelated task (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991).

The Present Study

The primary goal of the present study was to determine whether individuals who are low in sexist beliefs and the endorsement of gender role stereotypes would endorse gender role stereotypes when cognitively distracted.

The present study used Gilbert and Hixon’s (1991) method of activating stereotypes. According to this line of research, a stereotype must first be activated or primed in order to be used, and, usually, the stereotyped object serves as the prime for the use of the stereotype (Brewer, 1989; Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Evans, and Tyler, 1986; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). Thus, in the first phase of the current study, participants were primed with gender role stereotypes by completing the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1974). The BSRI is an inventory on which an individual is instructed to identify masculine, feminine and socially desirability traits that are characteristic of themselves. Next, participants were given the ASI and AMI to determine whether they were high or low in sexism towards both women and men. Following this, half of the participants were cognitively distracted by memorizing an 8-digit number. All participants then completed the AWS and the AMS.

This study’s participants were African Americans. The few existing studies that focused on African Americans have found mixed results (Lewis, 1975; Smith & Midlarsky, 1985; Bailey, Silver & Oliver, 1990; Dade & Sloan, 2000). Although it has been proposed that African Americans believe that masculinity and femininity are necessary components of every person (Lewis, 1975), empirical research has in no way been conclusive. Given the dearth of research

in this area that focuses on African Americans, this research addressed the following research question: Does cognitive distraction affect the endorsement of gender role stereotypes among African-Americans?

Hypothesis

Previous research has found that there are specific stereotypes associated with gender roles, and that although the use of these stereotypes may be diminishing, they continue to be in use. Empirical research studying these phenomena among African Americans is lacking; however considering the previously mentioned theories, as well as past empirical research, it was hypothesized that:

1. African Americans would be aware of gender role stereotypes.
2. African Americans would be more likely to use and endorse the use of gender role stereotypes when cognitively distracted than when not cognitively distracted.

METHOD

Participants

A power analysis was computed using G*Power, (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner 1996) and determined that 79 participants would lend a power value of .81, with the standard appropriate power value being .80 (Cohen, 1992). Importantly, because of the disproportionate ratio of males to females at the university, although males were recruited, only 17 participated. The data from male participants is not included in the current analysis. Seventy-nine women from an introductory psychology course participated in exchange for partial course credit. Data from two participants were excluded due to incomplete questionnaires.

This limitation has implications for the focus of the research question. Given that an individual's use and endorsement of gender role stereotypes is likely to be greatest for the other gender, and given that our experimental sample is limited to women, responses to the dependent variable containing the Attitudes toward Men Scale (AMS) is now of greatest interest. In order to ascertain whether cognitive distraction results in greater endorsement of gender role stereotypes, we will first examine responses to the AMS, followed by the responses to the AWS.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were given an informed consent form, followed by a 20-item questionnaire created for this study that assessed the participants' general awareness of common gender role stereotypes, called The Awareness of Gender Roles Scale. This scale was compiled specifically for the current research and was based on gender role stereotypes presented by Bem (1974) as well as Glick and Fiske (1996, 1999). The scale was used to determine the extent to which participants were aware of the gender role stereotypes in American society. Participants were instructed to indicate to what degree they believed most people agreed with each of the gender role stereotypes on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Higher scores on this scale indicated disagreement with the belief that the stereotype

was widely held. Participants were also given three forms of Bem's (1974) Sex Role Inventory, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and Glick and Fiske's (1999) Ambivalence toward Men Scale. Participants also completed Spence et al.'s (1973) Attitudes toward Women Scale, and Iazzo's (1983) Attitudes toward Men Scale. Finally, participants were given a manipulation check, a demographic questionnaire, and a debriefing statement.

Experimental Manipulation

After completing these measures, participants returned materials to the researcher and were randomly assigned to the experimental or control condition. Those participants assigned to the experimental condition were cognitively distracted, and told that they would be tested on how well they could do two tasks at once. Participants were given an 8-digit number to memorize without writing it down. Previous research found this number to be difficult enough to induce cognitive distraction (Cralley & Ruscher, 2005). Participants viewed a projected image of the 8-digit number for 10 seconds. The participants assigned to the control condition were only asked to answer each question on the scales they were given to the best of their ability. In order to make their experience similar to those in the experimental condition, there was a ten second pause before participants were instructed to complete the final scales.

Following the manipulation, participants completed the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973), and the Attitudes toward Men Scale (AMS) (Iazzo, 1983) in order to determine whether they were high or low in the endorsement of gender role stereotypes. At the conclusion of the study all participants were provided a debriefing statement, thanked for their participation and dismissed.

RESULTS

Effect of Cognitive Distraction

Two Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were employed to determine whether the cognitive distraction manipulation had an affect on participants' scores on the Attitudes toward Men Scale (AMS), and the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS). The first ANOVA testing the effect of cognitive distraction on endorsement of male gender role stereotypes indicated a significant effect such that scores on the Attitudes toward Men Scale differed for the experimental group and the control group, $F(1, 59) = 4.377, p < .05$. Participants who were cognitively distracted had higher scores on the AMS ($M = 93.08, SD = 13.95$) than participants who were not cognitively distracted ($M = 99.53, SD = 11.59$). The cognitively distracted group more strongly endorsed traditional male gender role stereotypes.

The second ANOVA testing effects of the manipulation on endorsement of gender role stereotypes for women did not reveal a significant difference between participants in the experimental condition and the control condition for scores on the AWS with $F(1, 59) = 2.49, p < .05$. Participants who were cognitively busy did not have significantly different scores on the AWS ($M = 20.92, 9.73$) than participants who were not cognitively distracted ($M = 17.06, SD = 8.18$). There was no significant difference in endorsement of female gender role stereotypes.

Additional Analyses Examining the Interrelationships Among the Dependent Variables.

A set of ANOVAs were performed to determine whether the extent of gender role awareness was associated with whether participants were high or low in endorsement of traditional gender role stereotypes and sexist attitudes toward both men and women as indicated by scores on the Ambivalence toward Men Inventory and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. As expected, whether participants scored above or below the mean on the Awareness of Gender Roles Scale had no effect on whether participants scored above or below the mean on the Ambivalence toward Men Inventory and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory.

Results of the first ANOVA yielded $F(1, 77) = 1.60, p < .05$. Those who were high in the awareness of gender role stereotypes ($M = 2.59, SD = .679$) did not significantly differ on the AMI from those who were low in the awareness of gender role stereotypes ($M = 2.77, SD = .748$). The second ANOVA indicated that those who were high in the awareness of gender stereotypes ($M = 2.41, SD = .522$) also did not significantly differ on the ASI from those low in the awareness of gender role stereotypes ($M = 2.29, SD = .578$) with $F(1, 77) = .08, p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine whether cognitive distraction affects endorsement of gender role stereotypes. It was found that women who were cognitively distracted more strongly endorsed male gender role stereotypes than did those who were not distracted. These results reveal that participants were not differentially aware of common gender role stereotypes. This finding suggests that any differences in rates of endorsement of gender role stereotypes between participants in the experimental (i.e., cognitively distracted) and control (i.e., not cognitively distracted) conditions were due to the experimental manipulation.

This study was limited to the responses of African American women. Findings in this study differed from those found in past studies which typically focused on responses of White participants. For example, results from the current sample's responses to ASI and AMI are different from what Glick and Fiske (1996, 1999) found in their studies. In the present study, there was a negative correlation between the ASI and the AMI scales, but according to Glick and Fiske (1999) scores on the AMI and the ASI should correlate positively because one who is high in sexist beliefs about men, or ambivalence toward men, should also be high in sexist beliefs about women, or ambivalent sexism.

In the present study, there was a negative correlation between benevolence toward men and hostile sexism and a negative correlation between benevolence toward men and benevolent sexism. In other words, the higher women scored in benevolence toward men (agreeing with positively valenced stereotypes about men), the lower they scored in hostile sexism (feeling hostility toward nontraditional women). Also, the higher women scored in benevolence toward men, the lower women scored in benevolence toward women (agreeing with positively valenced stereotypes about women). This means that women who endorsed positive traditional gender role stereotypes about men agreed with women taking on nontraditional gender roles. The opposite was true for women who did not endorse positive traditional gender role stereotypes about men.

In the present study, participants appear to believe that it is acceptable for women to no longer adhere to traditional gender role stereotypes and concurrently believe that men are still obligated to fulfill the more positively valued masculine stereotypes. This way of thinking is rational given that it provides women (the study's participants) with more domestic and career freedom, while at the same time ensuring that men continue to provide for and protect them.

Limitations

This study was limited by the lack of adequate data from male participants. When examining the effect of cognitive distraction, it was found that there was a significant effect for attitudes toward men, but no significant effect for attitudes toward women. Had there been an appropriate number of male participants, it may have been possible to detect differences in their attitudes as a function of cognitive distraction.

CONCLUSION

As Devine (1989) found with racial prejudice, there are conditions in which those who try to suppress their prejudicial beliefs cannot do so, and this is not due to lack of knowledge of common prejudices. In this study cognitive distraction impaired participants' ability to suppress the use of gender role stereotypes.

Future research should include data from male participants in order to determine whether the gender of the participant has an influence on the endorsement of gender role stereotypes. It should also be determine whether this is true with a manipulation that involves face to face interaction with other people, as well as the effect that individuating information has on the general use of gender role stereotypes.

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APPENDIX

The Awareness of Gender Roles Scale

Please indicate to what degree you agree with each statement presented below.

1. Most people think men are aggressive.
2. Most people think women are more suited for parenthood than men.
3. Most people think women are nurturing.
4. Most people think women are more emotional than men.
5. Most people think men are better able to financially support their families than women.
6. Most people think it is important for men to hide their feelings.
7. Most people think women like to take care of others.
8. Most people think women are considerate of others.
9. Most people think men are better at math than women.
10. Most people think men appreciate sports more than women.
11. Most people think women should take care of all domestic matters in the home.
12. Most people think men are more likely to make their own decisions than women.
13. Most people think women are gentler than men.
14. Most people think women can be easily influenced.
15. Most people think men are logical.
16. Most people think men are strong leaders.
17. Most people think women have a hard time making decisions.
18. Most people think men are the head of their households.
19. Most people think women are more able to decipher others feelings.
20. Most people think men are willing to take chances when they have to.

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