

DOES BEING AN ATHLETE HELP A WOMAN? EXAMINING HOW SUBTLE BIAS IN PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL DIFFERENTIALLY IMPACT MALE AND FEMALE ATHLETES

**LAURA BURTON**

— Neag School of Education
University of Connecticut

**LUCY GILSON**

— School of Business
University of Connecticut

**CAREN GOLDBERG**

— Facultad de Negocios
Universidad Peruana de Ciencias Aplicadas
College of Business
Bowie State University

**KEVIN LOWE**

— Business School
University of Auckland

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo estudia las percepciones con relación al potencial de liderazgo de atletas hombres y mujeres, evaluando particularmente como aquellos que sostienen un sesgo sutil hacia las mujeres influyen estas percepciones. Se evaluaron doscientos treinta y un participantes ($n = 231$), atletas hombres o mujeres (en un deporte de género neutro o género específico) u hombres o mujeres no atletas, con relación a su potencial de liderazgo en un contexto simulado de empleo. Adicionalmente, se midió el nivel de sexismo entre los participantes. Se analizaron los resultados para evaluar la interacción entre participación en deportes, sexo del postulante y nivel de sexismo del participante. Por sí misma, la participación en deportes no afectó el puntaje de potencial de liderazgo de las mujeres postulantes a un trabajo, sin embargo, los hallazgos apoyaron la presencia de un sutil sesgo hacia las atletas y no atletas mujeres, entre cierto tipo de evaluadores. Específicamente, los evaluadores que calificaron más alto en sexismo, tendieron a evaluar a las mujeres atletas tan alto en potencial de liderazgo como a las mujeres no atletas. Estos hallazgos se discuten en el contexto de la teoría de congruencia de rol.

Palabras claves: Potencial de liderazgo, Teoría de congruencia de rol, Estudios de género.

ABSTRACT

This study examined perceptions of leadership potential for male and female athletes particularly evaluating how those holding a subtle bias towards women influence these perceptions. Two-hundred and thirty-one ($n = 231$) participants evaluated either a male or female athlete (in a gender neutral or gender specific sport) or a male or female non-athlete, for leadership potential in a simulated employment context. In addition, participant level of sexism was measured. Results were analyzed to examine the interaction among participation in sport, sex of applicant, and participant level of sexism. By itself, sports

participation did not affect the leadership potential ratings of female job applicants. However, findings supported the presence of subtle bias toward female athletes and female non-athletes, among certain types of raters. Specifically, raters who held low levels of sexism rated female athletes and non-athletes as having highest leadership potential. In contrast, raters who were higher on sexism tended to rate female athletes as higher in leadership potential than female non-athletes. These findings are discussed in the context of role congruity theory.

Key Words: Leadership potential, Role congruity theory, Gender studies.

INTRODUCTION

Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions across industries in the United States although they constitute close half of the labor force in the U.S. (43.7%). Only 20% of CEO positions are held by women and merely 18.5% of corporate boards of directors positions (Catalyst, 2013). "Men fit cultural construals of leadership better than women do and thus have better access to leader roles and face fewer challenges in becoming successful in them" (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011, p. 637). Scholars examining why so few women are represented in leadership positions have partially attributed this issue to conflicting cultural expectations regarding perceptions of men, women, and leaders, as the expectations held for men and leaders are congruent and those held for women are incongruent with those held for leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These cultural expectations, or social roles, hold that women are more communal (e.g. nurturing, sensitive, warm) and men are more agentic (e.g. dominant, aggressive, self-confident) (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). However, participation in sports is an area where a woman can be ascribed the characteristics associated with more agentic roles instead of the more commonly prescribed social roles (i.e., communal) (Harrison & Lynch, 2005). The purpose of this research is to examine perceptions of leadership potential for male and female athletes particularly examining how those holding a subtle bias towards women influence these perceptions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Leadership as masculine

To better understand why women are underrepresented in leadership, one primary area of scholarship focuses on gender role stereotyping and the stereotyping associated with position of leadership. Expectations regarding the roles men and women fill in society are understood through the lens of social role theory, which contends that there are behavioral tendencies and qualities that are believed to be desirable for each sex. Further, social role theory contends that there are cultural expectations regarding the roles men and women should occupy. Communal characteristics are used to describe women (e.g., being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturing, and gentle). In contrast, agentic characteristics are typically used to describe men, and include being aggressive, dominant, forceful, self-confident and self-sufficient (Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000).

Social role theory explains that gender role stereotypes contain both descriptive and prescriptive components. Prescriptive gender role stereotypes explain how men and women should behave, whereas descriptive stereotypes explain what women and men are like (Heilman, 2001). Descriptive stereotypes indicate that men are more agentic and women are more communal. In keeping with this perspective, prescriptive gender role stereotypes indicate women should behave in more communal roles and not in agentic roles and men should behave in more agentic roles and not communal roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). In short, social role theory suggests that members of each sex are rewarded for behaving in a manner consistent with the stereotype of their sex and punished for behaving in a manner inconsistent with the stereotype of their sex.

In a recent meta-analysis of research examining leadership stereotypes, Koenig and her colleagues (2011) reported "the masculinity of the cultural stereotype of leadership is a large effect that is robust across variation in many aspects of leaders' social context" (p. 637). Women face significant challenges when seeking to obtain leadership positions, as the prescriptive gender role stereotypes applied to women describes them as more sympathetic and nurturing therefore lacking the self-confident dominant or masculine, qualities necessary for leadership positions. Further, if women do demonstrate leadership qualities, they are seen as violating their required or descriptive gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These stereotypes of leadership will continue to constrain women's access to positions of power and influence within organizations (Koenig et al., 2011).

2.2 Favorable violations of social roles?

Diverging from the arguments above, there is a line of inquiry within leadership research that has debated the potential for a female leadership advantage (Eagly, 2007; Rosette & Tost, 2010). One area of inquiry has examined whether "perceived incompatibility between agentic and communal characteristics may be mitigated or even reversed at the top levels of organizational hierarchy" (p. 221). In exploring this potential for a female leadership advantage, Rosette and Tost (2010) revealed contexts within which women may favorably violate prescribed gender roles. When women leaders were provided

credit for success in leadership positions, they were evaluated as comparable to male leaders on leadership effectiveness and also evaluated as possessing more agentic and more communal characteristics than male leaders.

Another area in which women have the potential to violate social roles favorably, is in the context of participation in sports. For women, sports participation is “not aligned with preferred femininity and descriptive gender roles” (Ross & Shiner, 2008, p. 53). That is, rather than experiencing the negative consequences of stereotype incongruence, sports is an arena where exhibiting the masculine characteristics of aggressiveness, dominance, and self-confidence results in favorable outcomes for women. Thus, female athletes have an opportunity to negotiate an identity that allows them to view themselves both as women and also as serious competitive athletes. When considering how others perceive the social roles ascribed to athletes, further work has noted female athletes were ascribed social roles based more on the type of sport played rather than on their gender. Female athletes who played basketball and football were perceived to be higher in agency and more masculine than other women who played more traditional women’s sports (e.g., gymnastics) (Harrison & Lynch, 2005; Koivula, 2001).

2.3 Benefits Of Athletic Participation For Women In Leadership Positions

In the summer of 2013, Ernst and Young, in support of their newly established Women Athletes Global Network, released a widely circulated report regarding women in leadership positions and the influence of sport participation on their leadership careers (Perspective on Teams, 2013). Some of the highlights in the report included that 55% of women in C-level positions participated in university-level sports. The report further noted that women executives almost all stated that having played Sports resulted in a positive role with regard to their leadership development. This supports a previous report by MassMutual Financial group indicating that 69% of the female executives surveyed for their report believed that sports helped them to develop leadership skills that contributed to their professional success (2002).

In an effort to better understand how sport participation has benefitted women in management and leadership, scholars have explore whether the perceived benefits that women have attributed to sport participation (i.e., EY report cited above) are related to positive social role violations ascribing female athletes social roles more congruent to those attributed to leadership (e.g., self-confident, aggressive, dominant) (Burton, Grappendorf, Henderson, Field, & Dennis, 2008; Grappendorf & Burton, 2014). Findings from this work have been equivocal, as female athletes were not considered more competent or hireable for entry-level managerial positions; however, they were perceived as more likeable than equally qualified female non-athletes. This finding does provide some support for the notion of a favorable violation of a social role for women (Burton et al., 2008). Further work noted that within the financial services industry, female athletes were perceived as being more competent and hireable for entry-level positions within this industry when compared to equally qualified female non-athletes (Grappendorf & Burton, 2014). However, neither study accounted for perceptions of leadership or evaluation of leadership potential and whether there is a possibility that a favorable violation of social roles, being agentic, would lead to favorable evaluations for leadership or leadership potential. In addition, these studies did not take into account the type of sport played by the athlete. Though Harrison and Lynch (2005) noted that male athletes playing a stereotypical feminine sport (e.g., cheerleading) did not lose agency, playing a stereotypical masculine sport (e.g., baseball) could reinforce agency.

3. MODEL STATEMENT

3.1 Potential Factors Influencing Evaluation of Leadership

Considering the consistent links between leadership and masculine characteristics, and support for perceived role incongruence between women and leadership, we must account for how sexist beliefs influence evaluation of leadership potential. Scholars examining the influence of sexism on evaluations of women note that as hostile or blatant sexism toward women has declined in the U.S., a more subtle form of sexism, often termed modern sexism, has emerged (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Modern sexism includes myths that sexism is no longer a problem in the U.S. and that women are “using unfair strategies to advance their privilege and power” (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013, p. 1581). Those holding more modern sexist views have evaluated women less competent for positions that were stereotyped as more masculine (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012).

Additional possible influences on evaluation of leadership potential include the similarity-attraction paradigm (Bryne & Newman, 1992) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Similarity-attraction paradigm indicates that people are more attracted to those they perceive as similar, and as such, this attraction could then lead to more positive evaluations of similar others. Social identity theory describes that people make positive attributions to those similar to themselves (in-group) when compared to attributions towards members of an out-group, so as to maintain a positive self-identity. When considering the influence of the similarity-attraction paradigm and social identity theory on perceptions of competence, there have been conflicting findings regarding how these frameworks influence women (Goldberg, 2005; Graves & Powell, 1995). However, work has noted that perceptions of similarity account for a high percentage of variance when explaining evaluations of competence and hiring for entry-level management positions (Burton et al., 2008; Grappendorf & Burton, 2014).

Based on the research presented, the following hypotheses were proposed to examine perceptions of leadership potential for male and female athletes, particularly examining how subtle biases towards women influence these perceptions.

Hypothesis 1: Sports participation and job applicant sex will influence perceptions of leadership potential.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of sports participation x applicant sex will be moderated evaluator bias, such that male athletes will be perceived as having the highest leadership potential by those evaluators who hold more sexist attitudes.

Hypothesis 3: Type of sport played and job applicant sex will influence perceptions of leadership potential, and will be moderated by evaluator bias, such that male athletes playing a sport will be perceived as having higher leadership potential by those evaluators holding more sexist attitudes toward women.

3.2 Method

Following previous research that has examined perceptions of competence based on salience of applicant sex, job-sex type, amount of job related information that could impact discrimination against male and female applicants (e.g. Davidson & Burke, 2000; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012) and other work that has evaluated perceptions of competence based on participation in sports (Burton et al., 2008; Grappendorf & Burton, 2014), this study followed a simulated employment context as a way to test evaluation of leadership potential based on sex of applicant and applicant participation in sport.

3.3 Participants

Data were collected from students enrolled in MBA courses at two participating universities (southeastern U.S. and northeastern U.S.). Participants for the study included 86 women and 145 men ($n = 231$). More than half (56%) identified as White, while 29% identified as Asian, and 5.5% as Black. The majority of participants held a graduate degree (56.6%) and were employed full time (52.8%). The age range for the majority of participants was between 21-33 years (80%).

3.4 Procedures and measures

Each participant was provided a study packet that contained a job description for a sales manager position for a fictional company identified as a leader in the hospitality industry on the job description, a fictional resume for one of the following groups (female no sport, female gender neutral sport, female gender specific sport, male no sport, male gender neutral sport, male gender specific sport). The sport selected as gender neutral was soccer and the gender specific sports were baseball for males and softball for females. These sports were selected based on data gathered regarding the gender stereotypicality of various sports established in a previous study by the authors. All information on the resumes was consistent with the exception of the applicant's name, which was varied to reflect a male (Robert), female (Jennifer), or unspecified-sex (J.) candidate; and whether or not the applicant participated in a collegiate sport (indicated in the activity section of the resume).

The dependent measure used to evaluate leadership potential was adapted from a previous measure of leadership potential (Mueller, Goncalo, & Kamdar, 2011). This four-item scale included the following items: this applicant has the "potential to become an effective leader", "potential to learn leadership skills", and the "potential to advance to a leadership position" ($\alpha = .92$). To measure level of sexism held by the evaluator, Swim and colleagues' (1995) eight-item Modern Sexism scale was used. Example items included "women often miss out on good jobs due to sex discrimination", "It is easy to understand why women's groups are still concerned about societal limitations of women's opportunities", and "discrimination against women is no longer a problem in the US" (reverse scored) ($\alpha = .81$). To control for similarity to the applicant, items were adapted from Byrne (1971) and included "attitudes toward work appear similar to mine", "how similar are you to applicant", and "beliefs about the way people should be treated appear similar to mine" ($\alpha = .71$). All items were measured on seven-point scales (strongly agree – strongly disagree).

3.5 Results

Study means, standard deviations, and correlations are included in Table 1. Hypotheses were tested using additive moderation in the PROCESS utility in SPSS (version 21) as described by Hayes (2013). For hypothesis 1, perception of leadership potential (Y) served as the outcome variable, sex of the applicant as the independent variable (X), participation in sport (M) as one moderator, and level of sexism held by evaluator (W) as the second moderator. Perceived similarity between participant and applicant evaluated served as a covariate. Variables were centered prior to analysis of the data. The overall model was significant $R^2 = .5588$; $F(6, 218) = 16.49$ ($p < .001$). There was no significant interaction between sex of the applicant and sports participation ($\Delta R^2 = .002$; $F(1, 218) = .6427$ (ns)). Thus, H1 was unsupported.

Our second hypothesis predicted that there would be a three-way interaction of applicant sex x sports participation x evaluator sexism. There was a significant interaction between sex of applicant and level of sexism held by evaluator ($\Delta R^2 = .0139$; $F(1, 218) = 4.412$ ($p < .05$)). This interaction accounted for an increase in 1.4% of the variance in perceptions of leadership potential. The graph of the moderation (Figure 1) indicated that those evaluators holding lower scores on the Modern Sexism scale (sexism) rated female athletes and female non-athletes as having higher levels of leadership potential when compared evaluations of female athletes and female non-athletes by those holding highest scores on the Modern Sexism scale.

For hypothesis 3, perception of leadership potential (Y) served as the outcome variable, sex of the applicant as the independent variable (X), type of sport (gender specific, gender neutral) (M) as one moderator, and level of sexism held by evaluator (W) as the second moderator. Perceived similarity between participant and athlete evaluated served as a covariate. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .5814$, $F(6, 140) = 11.9$, $p < .001$), however, there was no support for either interaction.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, correlations

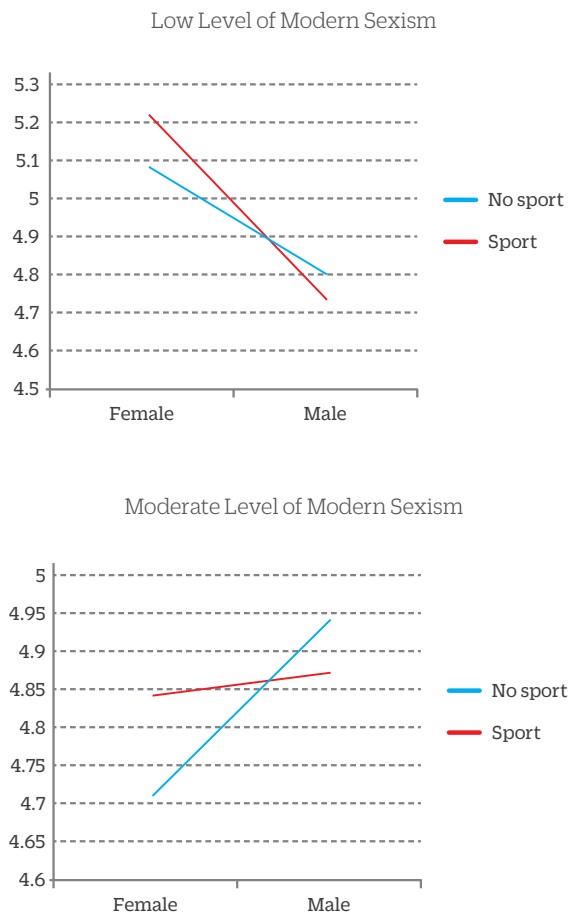
		Mean(SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1	Sex of applicant	2.09(.82)	1				
2	Sport	2.01(.81)	.096*	1			
3	Lead	4.84(1.06)	-.018	-.011	1		
4	Modern Sexism	3.61(.98)	-.058	.005	-.161**	1	
5	Similarity to Applicant	3.74(1.1)	-.025	-.024	.510**	-.170**	1

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

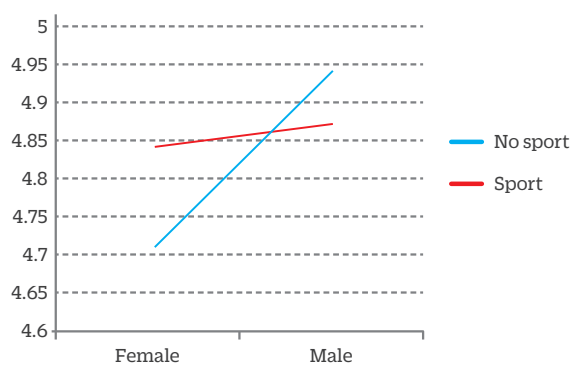
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Figure 1

Interactions Level of Modern Sexism by Sex and Sport Participation



High Level of Modern Sexism



4. DISCUSSION

The findings from this research demonstrate support for the detrimental influence of modern sexist beliefs on evaluation of women (e.g., Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). When compared to previous work that has sought to understand the influence of athletic participation on perceptions of men and women (Burton et al., 2008; Grappendorf & Burton, 2014), our findings do not support an advantage for male athletes in evaluation of leadership potential. However, our findings do extend support for an advantage for female athletes in regard to leadership potential, as female athletes were provided the highest ratings of leadership potential overall. Yet, this benefit was negatively impacted by modern sexist beliefs on the part of those evaluating leadership potential.

As leadership is construed as a masculine domain, women who are able to highlight their agency or agentic characteristics (e.g., by indicating participation in sport on a resume) may be recognized as more congruent with a leadership role when compared to women unable to call attention to such agentic characteristics. This may provide one explanatory mechanism for why women in positions of leadership (e.g., women in the EY study cited previously) are noting the importance of sport participation on their development as leaders. A concerning finding, but one that supports the negative impacts of modern sexism on women's evaluations (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), was how evaluations of leadership potential were suppressed by those with more sexist views. Any potential benefit the female athlete obtained by demonstrating agency through participation in sports was lost when being evaluated by those holding more sexist beliefs. The impact of sexism was even greater for the female non-athlete, as she received the lowest rating for leadership potential overall. Our findings both support and challenge role congruity theory as a potential mechanism regarding why women have difficulty in advancing into leadership roles. Our findings support the notion that leadership is congruent with masculine characteristics as ratings of leadership potential were consistently high (above 4.7) for both the male athlete and the male non-athlete. In addition, our findings challenge the second aspect of role congruity theory, as women may have an opportunity to demonstrate agency (i.e., female athlete) while not being negatively evaluated for demonstrating behavior outside of prescribed social roles (i.e., communality for women). However, the benefit of agency demonstrated by female athletes was only supported by those with lower sexist beliefs.

The current study did have limitations. Evaluation of a resume is only one measure that would be used to evaluate a candidate for leadership potential and many not contain enough information to provide an in-depth understanding of the capacity for leadership for that individual. Including an interview or other salient information regarding the applicant could have provided evaluators with more information from which to draw.

REFERENCES

- Burton, L. J., Grappendorf, H., Henderson, A. C., Field, G. B., & Dennis, J. A. (2008). The relevance of intercollegiate athletic participation for men and women: Examination of hiring preferences to entry level management positions based on role congruity theory. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 9, 175–192.
- Byrne, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. New York: Academic Press.
- Cortina, L. M., Kabat-Farr, D., Leskinen, E. A., Huerta, M., & Magley, V. J. (2013). Selective incivility as modern discrimination in organizations: evidence and impact. *Journal of Management*, 39(6), 1579–1605. doi:10.1177/0149206311418835
- Davidson, M. J. & Burke, R. J. (2000). Sex discrimination in simulated employment contexts: A meta-analytic investigation. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 56, 225–248.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eagly, A. H. (2007). Female leadership advantage and disadvantage: resolving the contradictions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31(1), 1–12.

- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. doi:10.1037//0033-295X.109.3.573
- Grappendorf, H., & Burton, L. J. (2014). Examining the influence of athletic participation in evaluation of entry-level positions in financial services: An application of role congruity theory. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 8 (2014), 19–32.
- Harrison, L. A., & Lynch, A. B. (2005). Social role theory and the perceived gender role orientation of athletes. *Sex Roles*, 52(3-4), 227–236. doi:10.1007/s11199-005-1297-1.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Koenig, A. M., Eagly, A. H., Mitchell, A. A., & Ristikari, T. (2011). Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(4), 616–642. doi:10.1037/a0023557
- Moss-Racusin, C. A., Dovidio, J. F., Brescoll, V. L., Graham, M. J., & Handelsman, J. (2012). Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(41), 16474–16479. doi:10.1073/pnas.1211286109
- MassMutual Financial Group Oppenhiemer Fund (2013). *From the Locker Room to the Boardroom: A Survey on Sports in the Lives of Women Business Executives*. Retrieved from <http://www.prnewswire.com/newsreleases/new-nationwide-research-finds-successfulwomen-business-executives-dont-just-talk-a-good-gamethey-played-one-75898622.html>
- Mueller, J. S., Goncalo, J. A., & Kamdar, D. (2011). Recognizing creative leadership: Can creative idea expression negatively relate to perceptions of leadership potential? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(2), 494–498. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2010.11.010
- Rosette, A. S., & Tost, L. P. (2010). Agentic women and communal leadership: How role prescriptions confer advantage to top women leaders. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(2), 221–235. doi:10.1037/a0018204
- Ross, S. R., & Shinew, K. J. (2008). Perspectives of women college athletes on sport and gender. *Sex Roles*, 58(1-2), 40–57. doi:10.1007/s11199-007-9275-4
- Swim, J. K., Aikin, K. J., Hall, W. S., & Hunter, B. A. (1995). Sexism and racism: Old-fashioned and modern prejudices. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(2), 199.