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Negative Effects of the Exposure to Benevolent Sexism on Women's Task Performance

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The purpose of the present study was to examine female participants' perception of benevolent treatments and differential effects on their task performance. An experimenter gave Japanese female students a verbal task as a benevolent treatment accompanied by either positive, negative, or no messages of women's abilities. Whatever reason is given, benevolent treatment of women may imply their poor abilities. Nevertheless, in the present study, it was found that female participants in the positive message condition perceived the treatment more favorably than those in the other conditions. Further, participants who had low self-esteem showed lower performance when exposed to the positive messages than those in the other conditions, suggesting a moderation of self-esteem in the effects of benevolent sexism.

Key words: sexism, expectation, helping behavior, self-esteem, performance

Introduction

Sexism has been conceptualized as the malicious attitude towards women. However, a stereotype of women has positive attributes. In fact, researchers have demonstrated that people tend to attribute positive traits (warmth, nurturing) to women (Eagly, Mladinic & Otto, 1991). Eagly and Mladinic (1994) found that women are viewed negatively on some dimensions such as competence, but positively on others dimensions such as warmth. The multi-faceted stereotype of women does not fit the antipathy model of sexism. Considering the apparent paradox, Glick and Fiske (1996) proposed the ambivalent sexism, assuming that there are two different types of sexism, that is, hostile and benevolent sexism.

Hostile sexism is a prototypical sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001) involving hostility and antipathy against women, which tends to induce men to exclude women who seek to control men and defy the social ascendancy of men. Overall, hostile sexism involves negative attitudes toward women. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is apparently positive. Unlike hostile sexism, benevolent sexism does not involve blatant hostility or antipathy against women. Rather, it is based on positive stereotype of women (warmth, nurturing), characterizing women as pure creatures who ought to be protected and supported (Glick & Fiske, 2001). It drives men's paternalistic behaviors which provide women with preferential treatments, admiring feminine characteristics (Glick & Fiske, 1996). For example, benevolent sexism leads men to carry a woman's luggage, pay for her meal (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007),

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and give an immunity from military service (Good & Woodzicka, 2010). Viki, Abrams and Hutchison (2003) argue that men believe that their behaviors based on benevolent sexism are kind to women.

Hostile sexism is distinct from benevolent one (Glick & Fiske, 2001), but these two types of sexism are positively correlated with each other (Glick, Fiske, Mladinic et al., 2000). Although seemingly counterintuitive, those who hold benevolent sexist attitudes are also likely to hold hostile sexist attitudes, and these attitudes manifest themselves in different ways depending on the type of target woman (Good & Woodzicka, 2010). Hostile sexism is directed at women who violate traditional gender norms, such as career oriented women, while benevolent sexism is directed at women who obey traditional gender norms, such as homemakers.

Harmful effects of benevolent sexism

It is clear that hostile sexism hurts women by its direct discrimination. On the other hand, it is not so clear how harmful benevolent sexism is to women, given that benevolent sexism is seemingly positive and gentle to women. However, some believe that it is as harmful as hostile sexism. Benevolent sexists often praise women, but their attitudes are still sexist because they are underlain by a view that women are weak or incompetent, in consistence with traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Benevolent sexists believe that nurturance and warmth of women are best consistent with traditional domestic roles such as wives or mothers, so benevolent sexism implicitly recommends or demands women to engage in traditional gender roles, leading to the maintenance of gender disparities. Jost and Kay (2005) founded long-term harmful effects of benevolent sexism on women; women exposed to benevolent sexism are more likely to accept and justify gender inequality. Further, other researchers have argued that benevolent sexism is harmful to women's personal welfare (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Moya, Glick, Exposito, de Lemus, & Hart, 2007). Moya et al. (2007) found that women who received a preferential treatment based on benevolent sexism had a lower level of career aspiration. In an experimental study, Dardenne et al (2007) demonstrated that female participants showed low levels of task performance when they were exposed to benevolent sexism. These research findings suggest that it hampers academic and vocational attainments of women. It has not empirically examined the negative effects of benevolent sexism in Japan, so the first purpose of the present study is to do it focusing on Japanese women's task performance.

In a cross-cultural study, Glick et al. (2000) found that the significant correlations of the levels of benevolent and hostile sexism of societies with their GEM (Gender Empowerment Measures) and GDI (Gender Development Index) as the indices of gender inequality. We conjecture that Japanese women are more likely to be exposed to benevolent sexism than in western societies because Global Gender Gap Report (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2009) describes the Japanese society as high in the level of gender inequality. It suggests that Japanese women are vulnerable to harmful influences of benevolent sexism.

The mechanism impairing women's performance

The negative effects of benevolent sexism on task performance are often not explicit because it is based on ambivalent gender stereotype. Dardenne et al. (2007) suggests that the exposure to discriminative implications of the stereotype generates a self-doubt on their ability in women, which disturbs their cognitive processes as an intrusive thinking and hinders their performance. Further, it has been observed that women generally favor benevolent sexism and accept preferential treatments based on it (Viki et al, 2003). The tolerant attitudes toward it may make women vulnerable to disturbance in performance. Hostile sexism also has discriminative implications for women's abilities, but its behavioral manifestations are usually accompanied by clear hostility against women. Women can attribute the negative implications to the sexists' personal factors, but not to their own abilities. In this case, they may not seriously suffer from the intrusive thinking by rejecting the discriminative messages involved in the sexism.

Benevolent sexism tends to be manifested in the form of paternalistic protection. Thus it is more difficult to identify its discriminative implications. Women often do not attribute the implications to external factors so that they may be susceptible more intrusive message. It is found in a study of Dardenne et al. (2007) that the negative effect of the exposure to benevolent sexism on task performance was mediated by women's perception of the sexism; that is, they perceived benevolent sexism more positively than hostile sexism.

Men sometimes provide women with preferential treatment for reasons other than paternalism, such as an admiration of feminine abilities and characteristics of women. Even though this kind of benevolent sexism does not arouse intrusive thinking in women, it also has a discriminative implication that women are poor in not-feminine type of performance. For this reason, we predicted in the present study that the exposure to the kind of benevolent sexism that involves positive message of women's ability would lower the level of task performance in women. Women may not always positively perceive and accept benevolent sexism. Moya et al. (2007) found that women negatively perceived some kind of benevolent sexism that implies poor abilities of women as a group, negatively felt of it, and rejected it. Further, Vescio, Gervais, Snyder and Hoover (2005) found that female participants' self-esteem was not affected by benevolent sexism when they rejected it, suggesting that they did not have a self-doubt. For these reasons, we assumed that women's task performance is not impaired by benevolent sexism if they reject it. That is, the negative effects of benevolent sexism on women's task performance may depend on how they perceive the preferential treatment.

In this study, we exposed women to one of two kinds of benevolent sexism: one implies women's poor ability, while the other implies women's excellent ability. We attempted to examine which would affect women's task performance in a harmful way.

Present study

Benevolent sexism sometimes conveys explicit messages of women's poor abilities (Moya et al., 2007). While in other cases it only implicitly conveys the messages through preferential

treatment (Vescio et al., 2005). How it conveys the messages, therefore, may determine both women's perception of benevolent sexism and its effects on their level of task performance. In the present study, therefore, we attempted to manipulate the message of women's abilities included in benevolent sexism. Specifically, we constructed two experimental conditions. In the negative message condition, female participants were given a message of their poor abilities as a reason for preferential treatment. Specifically, they were assigned into a verbal task for the reason that women are generally poor in mathematical abilities. In the positive message condition, in contrast, the participants were given a message of women's excellent verbal abilities. In the control condition, they were not given any reason for the assignment.

As mentioned above, we manipulated the kind of benevolent sexism based the stereotype of women's academic abilities in order to make participants feel that the experimental assignment is reasonable. This type of stereotype seems widely spread and accepted by most women. In fact, a study using implicit association technique showed that even female students in science majors did not associate themselves with mathematics (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).

Women generally perceive benevolent sexism in a positive way, but they tend to reject it when it explicitly indicates poor abilities of women as a social category (Moya et al., 2007). In contrast, women welcome preferential treatment accompanied by positive messages of women's abilities. Therefore, we predicted that female participants in the positive message condition would more positively perceive the preferential treatment than those either in the negative message or control conditions (Hypothesis 1).

Whatever reason is given, benevolent treatments of women may imply their poor abilities. We assumed that not only women exposed to explicit negative message but those exposed to positive message receive the same discriminative message. It may evoke self-doubt in them and thus impair their task performance. If women reject explicit negative message, however, they may suffer from it less. Based on this line of discussion, we predicted that the task performance of female participants in the positive message condition would be lower than that either in the negative message or control conditions (Hypothesis 2).

Individual differences have been not extensively attended, but some women may be more sensitive to the negative effects of benevolent sexism. In the present study, we focused on women's self-esteem of abilities. High self-esteem of abilities correlates with high levels of task performance, and it has been regarded that it encourages the use of appropriate self-regulatory strategies and functional coping with tasks (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). We assumed that it moderates the negative effects of benevolent sexism. Since women having high self-esteem of abilities may be confident in their performance, they may not be susceptible to discriminative messages involved in benevolent sexism. Rather they may be able to keep being functional in task performance. In contrast, those with a low level of self-esteem are unstable in self-regulation and their performance may be susceptible to both internal and external interferences. Based on the reasoning, we predicted that the negative effects of benevolent sexism on task performance would be observed among female participants who are low in self-esteem (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants. After obtaining a permission of the research ethical committee, we recruited female participants in a psychology class at a university in the Tohoku Region, Japan. Eighty students voluntarily participated in this study (mean age = 19.05 years old). We randomly assigned them into one of the positive message, negative message and control conditions.

Procedure. In the measurement of ability-related self-esteem, the participants rated 2 items (“I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance” and “I worried about my ability”) on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree.” Since these items were correlated to each other, $r(78) = .62, p < .01$, we made scores of self-esteem by averaging them.

Then, the participants were given a verbal task in which they were asked to check vowels in sentences as quickly as possible. Before the task, the participants were explained a reason why they were assigned the task. The explanations were the following. In the negative message condition, “There are gender differences in cognitive abilities and women are generally poor in mathematical abilities compared with men. So, we have decided to ask you to work with a verbal task in the experiment”; in the positive message condition, “There are gender differences in cognitive abilities and women are generally better in verbal abilities as compared with men. So, we have decided to ask you to work with a verbal task in the experiment”; and in the control condition, no explanation was given. Following a 30 sec warming-up session, all participants took the task in which they were asked to find and circle vowels in a series of sentences consisting of 400 characters as many as possible within 120 sec. Performance was measured by the number of correct responses (a maximum of 60). After the task, they answered a question to measure their perception of the reason for the preferential treatment (“Was the assignment into a verbal task a kind treatment for women?) by rating on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree.”

Results

We eliminated two participants from the following analysis because one did not follow the instructions for the task and the other did not finish the task within the time limit. We divided participants into high and low ($N = 41$ and 37) groups by a median (4.00) of self-esteem.

In order to test Hypothesis 1, we conducted ANOVA on the ratings of perceived reason with two independent variables, messages (positive, negative, or control) and self-esteem (high or low). Only the main effect of messages was significant, $F(2, 72) = 3.15, p < .05$, indicating that the participants in the positive message condition ($M = 4.00, SD = 1.56$) rated the assignment as more kind than those in the negative condition ($M = 2.75, SD = 1.42$), with no significant difference from the control condition ($M = 3.53, SD = 1.64$).

In order to test Hypotheses 2 and 3, we conducted ANOVA on task performance with the

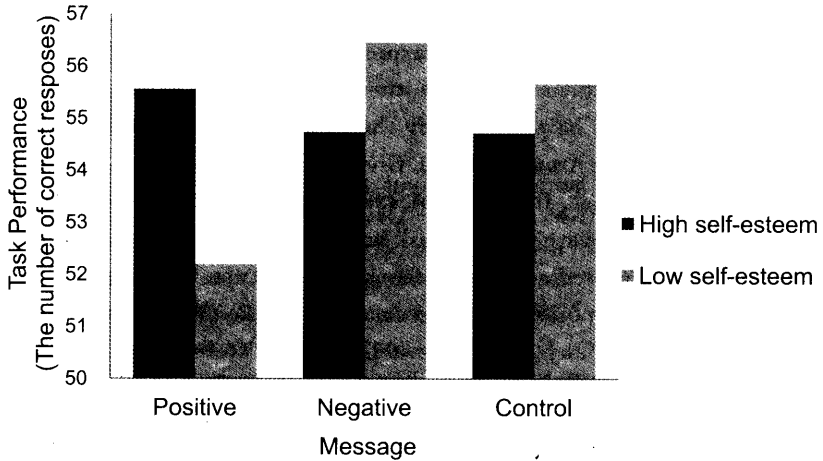


Figure 1. Task performance as a function of message and self-esteem in present study.

same two independent variables. The main effect of message was not significant ($F(2, 72) = 1.63$, n.s.): $M = 53.48$ and $SD = 3.43$ in the positive message condition, $M = 55.46$, $SD = 3.40$ in the negative message condition, and $M = 54.93$, $SD = 2.89$ in the control condition. Although the main effect of self-esteem was not significant, $F(1, 72) = 0.17$, n.s. the interaction was significant, $F(2, 72) = 6.57$, $p < .01$. As Figure 1 shows, performance of the participants low in self-esteem was significantly lower when exposed to positive messages than when exposed to positive messages or no messages ($p < .01$). There was no difference between the message conditions among the participants having high self-esteem.

Discussion

Although women positively perceive and accept preferential treatment based on benevolent sexism, it often evokes an intrusive thinking caused by its implication of women's poor abilities. We assumed that the intrusion is larger when the treatment is accompanied by positive messages admiring women's abilities than negative messages derogating women's abilities. The purpose of the present study was to examine female participants' perception of treatment and differential effects of messages on their task performance.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the female participants exposed to positive messages more positively perceived the preferential treatment than those exposed to negative messages or no messages. This also suggests that they did not consciously perceive the implicit discriminative messages involved in the preferential treatment.

On task performance, the main effect of message was not significant, but it was significant only among participants low in self-esteem, suggesting that they were more susceptible to intrusion because they were not confident in their abilities. These results support Hypothesis 3

and partially Hypothesis 2.

There seems to be an alternative interpretation of the present finding that benevolent sexism made negative influences on cognitive functions of female participants exposed to positive messages. It may be presented by the stereotype threat theory (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Giving female participants a negative feedback on their mathematical abilities, Beilock et al. (2007) found that the participants showed lower performance not only on mathematical task but on verbal task. The authors interpreted that the negative feedback caused a threat to females' stereotype, which interfered with cognitive functions in them. In the positive message condition of the present study female participants were not explicitly given any negative evaluation, but stereotype threat might have been caused by gender differences, which implied that women are poorer than men in some abilities. If so, however, the negative effects on performance would be observed among participants in the negative message condition, too. That it was not the case suggests that the reduced performance in the positive message condition was not caused by stereotype threat.

In order to examine the relationships between the perception of benevolent sexism and task performance in positive and negative message conditions, we computed correlations between them separately for high self-esteem and low self-esteem participants. The correlation was only significant for low self-esteem participants, $r(22) = -.43, p < .05$, but not for high self-esteem participants, $r(29) = -.02$, meaning that the more positively low self-esteem participants perceived the preferential treatment, the less they performed the verbal task. Dardenne et al. (2007) found that women's self-doubt evoked by benevolent sexism, which was more positively perceived by them than hostile sexism, impaired their task performance. The results of our analysis suggest that such a negative effect of benevolent sexism does not always occur, but it does only when women are not explicitly aware of the discriminative messages involved in benevolent sexism. However, it is only speculative since we did not measure the changes in self-esteem of the participants after the exposure to benevolent sexism. Further, there is a possibility that variables other than self-doubt mediate benevolent sexism and a declining performance. Future studies should incorporate these theoretical and methodological issues.

Women tend to perceive benevolent sexism as kind treatment, but it is just one side of sexism. The other side is the implication that women are weak and incompetent. Research based on western samples has found negative impacts on women (e.g. Dardenne et al., 2007; Moya et al., 2007). The present study established the impacts using Japanese women as research participants. Further, the negativity was salient when benevolent sexism was accompanied by an expressed admiration of women's abilities. The findings may give a warning to current social circumstances in which preferential treatments of women are desirable in terms of welfare for them.

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