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What the voice reveals

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Summary

Given that the voice is our main form of communication, we know surprisingly little about how it impacts judgment and behavior. Furthermore, the modern advancement in telecommunication systems, such as cellular phones, has meant that a large proportion of our everyday interactions are conducted vocally and these interactions can have important consequences. For example, imagine two people, who met through an internet-dating service, having their first phone conversation or potential employees on phone interviews—what kind of stereotypic associations are elicited by the voices? And, consequently, how might these associations influence the dating relationship and whether the interviews are successful? These are some of the questions that motivate my research.

In Chapter 2, I report research that attempts to shift the traditional focus of visual cues to auditory cues as a basis for stereotyping. Moreover, our approach examines whether gender-signaling vocal cues lead not only to between-category, but also to within-category gender stereotyping. Study 2.1 showed that both males and females vary, within category, in how feminine their voices sound and that perceptions of vocal femininity are highly consensual. Furthermore, the measured acoustic characteristics that differed between gender were also related to perceptions of within-gender femininity. Subsequent studies demonstrated that variability in vocal femininity affects gender stereotyping when the targets are all of the same gender (Study 2.2) and when the targets are of different genders (Study 2.3). In the latter case, evidence of both category-based and feature-based stereotyping was found. Mediation analyses showed that the relationship between acoustics and stereotyping was in part due to femininity.

In Chapter 3, we examined the impact of applicants' voices in job interview situations. Specifically, in Study 3.1, using male and female speakers posing as job applicants, we investigated how applicants' vocal femininity cues and résumé information

impacted judgments on the dimensions of competence and warmth. Results showed that competence was solely affected by vocal femininity such that applicants with masculine sounding voices were rated as more competent than applicants with feminine sounding voices, regardless of the applicants' gender or résumé information. Warmth, on the other hand, was predominantly affected by résumés in expected ways—applicants with feminine résumés were rated as warmer than those with masculine résumés. The potent effect of vocal femininity on competence was replicated in a second study (Study 3.2) under more stringent and controlled conditions.

Given the dramatic shifts in societal norms to curb overt stereotyping and prejudice, these biases may leak out in more subtle ways than were apparent in the past. Accordingly, in Chapter 4 we present research showing how the suppression of stereotypes might affect post-suppression category-based stereotyping and the more subtle feature-based stereotyping. In support of our proposition, participants in the suppression condition used more feature-based, but less category-based stereotypes in their post-suppression task than participants in the control condition. Furthermore, a relation between post-suppression category-based and feature-based stereotyping existed in the suppression condition such that increases in feature-based stereotyping were associated with decreases in category-based stereotyping. Findings as a whole suggests that norms placed to reduce stereotypic biases may ironically lead people to be more vulnerable to biases as a function of within-category features.