FlashReport

Consider the situation: Reducing automatic stereotyping through Situational Attribution Training

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigated the effectiveness of a new technique for reducing automatic biases rooted in attribution theory – the Situational Attribution Training Technique. The goal of this strategy extends previous work by targeting the fundamental attributional pillars underlying automatic stereotyping. We aimed to circumvent the well-documented tendency for individuals to be overly reliant on dispositional attributions when perceiving negative stereotype-consistent behaviors performed by outgroup members. By teaching participants to consider situational attributions for such behaviors, we expected a reduction in outgroup stereotyping. Specifically, White participants were trained extensively to choose situational over dispositional explanations for negative stereotype-consistent behaviors performed by Black men. Across two experiments, participants who completed Situational Attribution Training demonstrated reduced automatic racial stereotyping on a person categorization task, relative to control participants who exhibited substantial automatic stereotyping. The implications of these findings for the nature and reduction of intergroup biases are discussed.

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Introduction

"We have this insatiable hunger for explanations. [...] This basic need has an important bearing upon group relations. For one thing, we tend to regard causation as something people are responsible for. [...] This quirk, unless it is strenuously disciplined, predisposes us to prejudice." (Allport, 1954; p. 170).

In 2005, Harvard President Lawrence Summers publicly suggested that innate gender differences were probably the primary reason for women's underrepresentation in math and science domains. His remarks caused a stir in academic and non-academic communities and are at odds with considerable research suggesting that women's underperformance in math and science is linked to situational factors (Krendl, Richeson, Kelley, & Heatherton, 2008; Steele, 1997). Summers' comment reminds us that people tend to underestimate situational constraints on many outgroup member behaviors. A primary concern for intergroup relations is the well-documented tendency for individuals to attribute, in particular, the *negative* behaviors of outgroup members to dispositional factors, especially if the behaviors are stereotype-consistent – a phenomenon coined the *ultimate attribution error*

(UAE; Pettigrew, 1979). In contrast, according to the UAE, positive behaviors performed by outgroup members are generally attributed to situational factors (Allport, 1954; Fiske, 2005).

We contend that the UAE is one of the pillars on which stereotyping stands. When perceivers attribute negative stereotype-consistent behaviors of outgroup members to internal, stable factors ("He could not get a job because he is incompetent"), while underestimating situational constraints ("Jobs are scarce these days"), they are likely to perpetuate outgroup stereotypes. For example, White Americans' stereotype of Blacks as "aggressive" may be perpetuated by attributing the same aggressive shove to dispositional factors for Black actors and to situational factors for White actors, an attributional pattern demonstrated in previous research (Duncan, 1976). Likewise, attributing expressions of anger to dispositional factors for women and to situational factors for men may maintain the "emotional" stereotype of women (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008).

Despite the potentially fundamental role of the UAE in processes related to stereotyping, researchers have not systematically targeted dispositional attributions as a means of reducing intergroup bias. In the present research, we introduced a new technique directed at decreasing UAE tendencies. We predicted that extensively training people to make situational, rather than dispositional, explanations for outgroup members' negative stereotype-consistent behaviors would reduce automatic stereotyping. This situational attribution training represents the first bias reduction

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