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Self-Protective Attributions in Stigmatized Individuals
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Abstract
Research has shown that stigmatized subjects, defined as members of groups about which others hold negative attitudes, receiving negative feedback from a prejudiced evaluator attribute the nature of the feedback to the source rather than to their own performance. The purpose of this experiment was to determine whether this self-protective mechanism also occurs in nonstigmatized individuals. Sixty-seven subjects, male and female undergraduate students enrolled at a small midwestern liberal arts college, participated in a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design in which the independent variable of evaluator prejudice or nonprejudice was crossed with stigmatized or nonstigmatized subject status. Results of an ANOVA measuring the difference between subjects' pre- and postmanipulation esteem scores showed a significant interaction between evaluator prejudice and subject status (p = .009). Nonstigmatized subjects' self-esteem was elevated by receiving feedback from a prejudiced evaluator and decreased by receiving feedback from a nonprejudiced evaluator. No esteem effects were found in the stigmatized subjects. The results showed that stigmatized subjects did not feel the need to protect their self-esteem by elevating their esteem score in the prejudiced evaluator condition because they were able to attribute the feedback to evaluator prejudice.

According to Crocker and Major (1989), stigmatized groups are "social categories about which others hold negative attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs..." (p. 609). There are several conflicting interaction theories regarding the effects that interactions with members of nonstigmatized groups have on the self-esteem of stigmatized group members. These theories have been used to support one of two opposing ideas. The insulation hypothesis is based on the idea that when members of stigmatized groups interact with members of nonstigmatized groups, self-esteem of the stigmatized group members declines. The second theory, the contact hypothesis, states that the self-esteem of stigmatized group members will not suffer, and may in some cases benefit, from interactions with members of nonstigmatized groups (Krause, 1983).

The insulation hypothesis is supported by the self-fulfilling prophecy theory (Merton, 1948), the symbolic interactionist perspective (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934), the contextual dissonance effects theory (Rosenberg, 1977), and the efficacy-based self-esteem theory (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Each of these positions predicts stigmatized group members will have lower self-esteem. The contact hypothesis is supported by Weiner's attributional analysis of emotion theory (Weiner, 1985, 1986) and the reformulated learned helplessness theory (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). These theories predict that members of stigmatized groups will attribute failure and rejection in mainstream society to prejudice against their group. This external attribution will protect their self-esteem by placing the blame for personal failure on others.

The theories and empirical evidence that support both the insulation and contact hypotheses will be discussed and critiqued. Unless otherwise specified, when self-esteem is mentioned it refers to global self-esteem.

The theory of efficacy-based self-esteem states that members of stigmatized groups suffer from decreased self-esteem when they interact with members of nonstigmatized groups (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). According to this view, self-esteem develops through successful and unsuccessful manipulations of the environment. When someone is successful in controlling and manipulating their environment, they may see themselves as competent, able, and powerful, resulting in increased self-esteem. On the other hand, when the individual's attempt to manipulate the environment is blocked or inhibited in
some way, as is often the case for members of stigmatized groups, the resulting frustration may cause feelings of failure and lowered self-esteem. According to Gecas and Schwalbe (1983), societal conditions such as segregation and discrimination against members of stigmatized groups "can limit the possibilities for the formation of efficacy-based self-esteem by limiting access to resources that are necessary for producing intended effects" (p. 82).

In addition to this theory, ideas such as equity theory (Adams, 1963), social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the self-fulfilling prophecy theory (Merton, 1948), the symbolic interactionist perspective (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934), and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) are also in line with the view that social stigma has a negative effect on self-esteem. In fact, this idea has been so widely accepted that, according to Crocker and Major (1989), it has been accepted as true. Allport (1954/1979) wrote that "group oppression may destroy the integrity of the ego entirely, and reverse its normal pride, and create a groveling self-image" (p. 152). Similarly, Erikson (1956) stated, "There is ample evidence of 'inferiority' feelings and of morbid self-hate in all minority groups" (p. 155).

Despite the diverse theoretical perspectives which predict that membership in a stigmatized group will result in diminished self-esteem, the empirical evidence that supports these theories is scarce, inadequate, or both. In fact, recent research has come to the opposite conclusion. Some data indicate that members of some stigmatized groups have levels of self-esteem equal to or higher than that of members of nonstigmatized groups. For example, a large number of studies have come to the conclusion that Blacks have levels of self-esteem equal to or higher than that of Whites (Hoelter, 1982; Porter & Washington, 1979; Rosenberg, 1979; Wylie, 1979). Also, two extensive reviews have concluded that women do not have lower self-esteem than men (Macoby & Jacklin, 1974; Wylie, 1979). Research has also shown that members of many other stigmatized groups do not suffer from diminished self-esteem relative to members of nonstigmatized groups (Crocker & Major, 1989). In fact, according to Crocker and Major, "this research, conducted over a time span of more than 20 years, leads to the surprising conclusion that prejudice against members of stigmatized or oppressed groups generally does not result in lowered self-esteem for members of those groups" (p. 611). They further state that "these findings generalize across a variety of stigmatizing conditions, a variety of measures of global self-esteem, and a wide range of subject populations" (p. 611).

In some cases, gaps in empirical evidence of the theories of the insulationists can explain discrepancies. For example, Rosenberg (1977) states that members of stigmatized groups are often subject to either racial, ethnic, or sexual slurs, or all three. He fails to provide any evidence, however, that these slurs are internalized and incorporated into the self-concept. If, on the other hand, members of stigmatized groups are able to resist integration of the dominant groups' perceptions into their self-concept, they may be able to simply dismiss these dissonant communications. According to Krause's (1983) research, this seems to be the process that occurs. In his attempt to replicate Rosenberg and Simmon's (1972) study of Black students' self-esteem, Krause was unable to find any significant effect of racial teasing on the self-esteem of Black students at any grade level.

Rosenberg (1977) also states that people compare themselves to those around them in order to develop their self-concept, an idea in line with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison. He states that empirical research shows that people do not compare themselves with any other, but rather with a comparable other. Festinger posits that when members of stigmatized groups are immersed within the majority culture, they will compare themselves with those of the majority, and hence, feel inferior or powerless. However, he did not provide any evidence of this, nor was he able to show that Blacks have lower self-esteem than
Whites. It may be that members of stigmatized groups compare themselves with members of their own groups rather than with out-group members. This point is supported by the research of Verkuyten (1988). In a study of Black and White Dutch youths, Verkuyten found that the White youths (members of that society's nonstigmatized group) felt that friends and teachers were relevant comparison people, while Black youths felt that only their family members were significant for comparisons.

In addition to modifying the above mentioned ideas to fit the empirical evidence, researchers have used other psychological theories to explain why members of stigmatized groups do not have lower self-esteem than members of nonstigmatized groups. For example, Weiner's (1985, 1986) attributional analysis of emotion theory and the reformulated learned helplessness theory (Abramson et al., 1978) give plausible explanations for the undiminished self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups. According to these theories, internal attributions for positive outcomes and external attributions for negative outcomes lead to increased self-esteem. Empirical evidence generally supports this point (e.g. Crocker, Alloy, & Kayne, 1988; Weiner & Lerman, 1978, 1979). Because prejudice against one's group is an external attribution for a negative outcome this attribution should protect, and in fact enhance, the self-esteem of a stigmatized person.

Crocker and Major (1989), in an extensive review of the literature, proposed the above point of an attributional defense mechanism, and two others, as "mechanisms that buffer the self-esteem of members of stigmatized or oppressed groups from the prejudice of others" (p. 612). The second mechanism cited by Crocker and Major states members of stigmatized groups may protect their self-esteem through selective comparisons between their own outcomes and those of members of their own group. Festinger (1954) states that "the tendency to compare oneself with some other specific person decreases as the difference between his opinion or ability and one's own increases" (p. 120).

Crocker and Major (1989) suggest that members of stigmatized groups are more likely to make in-group comparisons for three reasons: (a) a proximity effect, (b) a similarity effect, and (c) a self-protective effect. With respect to the proximity effect, in-group social comparisons are due to the fact that members of the ingroup will often be more prevalent in one's immediate environment. With regard to the similarity effect, it has been found that people compare their living standards and social status with those whose situations are similar to their own (Singer, 1981). In fact, preference for comparing oneself with similar others is so strong that it has been shown to dominate proximal comparisons when people are surrounded by their outgroups (Crosby, 1982; Rosow, 1974; Strauss, 1968). The third way in which members of stigmatized groups may protect their self-esteem is by selectively devaluing the dimensions on which their group performs poorly and selectively valuing those dimensions on which their group fares well (Crocker & Major, 1989). This idea is based on the premise that if a certain dimension is not centrally important to an individual, then failure on that dimension will not lower the person's self-esteem (Harter, 1986; Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972).

It was hypothesized that the four groups in this study should differ in how they reacted to negative feedback and the extent to which they internalized it. Specifically, participants in the stigmatized/prejudiced evaluator condition would show the least change between pretest and posttest self-esteem scores because they would attribute the negative feedback to external factors, rather than to their own performances. It was also predicted that participants in the nonstigmatized/prejudiced evaluator condition would show a slight decrease in self-esteem because, although they had reason to attribute the negative feedback externally, they would not have had as much practice doing it as the members of the stigmatized groups, and therefore they would not be as efficient in externalizing feedback. Participants in
the other two conditions were predicted to show equivalent decreases in self-esteem, greater than those of participants in the nonstigmatized/prejudiced evaluator condition, because they had no external sources for which to attribute their failures.

**Method**

**Participants**

Sixty-seven undergraduate male and female students currently enrolled at a midwestern liberal arts college who were registered in psychology classes during the Spring term of 1994 participated in this experiment. Participants received extra credit towards their final grade for participating.

**Design**

This experiment utilized a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design. The ex post facto variables were gender, and the two levels were male and female. The other independent variable, with two levels, was a prejudiced or nonprejudiced evaluator, as conveyed by an attitude survey. The dependent variable was changes in global self-esteem levels as measured by the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale.

**Materials**

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale was used to measure subjects' global self-esteem levels. The attitude survey used expressed the fictitious evaluators' opinions on several different topics, including male and female gender role issues. This survey contained five questions pertaining to attitudes towards women and five questions pertaining to attitudes towards men. Responses to all questions were given on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Subjects received one of three different attitude surveys from their fictitious evaluators which showed the evaluator as being prejudiced against women, prejudiced against men, or neutral on issues of gender. All subjects received the same negative evaluation from the fictitious evaluator stating that the participant knew little about affirmative action, and that the essay the participant wrote was poorly written and missed many arguments.

**Procedure**

Participants were asked by either their instructor or the experimenter to participate in a two-part experiment which was being conducted as part of a Senior Honors Project. Subjects completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the first part of the experiment, at least five days prior to participation in the second part of the experiment. At this time, they also scheduled a half-hour appointment to complete the second part of the experiment. They were told that they would receive extra credit in exchange for participation in both parts of the study.

During the second part of the experiment, subjects were put into a small room with only a desk, a computer, and a printer, and asked to complete a short attitude survey. They were then told that their attitude surveys would be shown to their partners in the experiment, and that they too would be allowed to see their partner's attitude survey. After completing the attitude survey, subjects were given instructions to type their gender and an essay on the computer describing their opinions on affirmative action. The instructions stated that their essays were to be evaluated by their partner (who was actually fictitious) based on the strength, clarity, and number of their arguments. Subjects were told they had 10 min to complete their essays and not to worry about spelling or punctuation because it was not a factor in the experiment. They were instructed to express as many arguments, both for and against their position, rather than focus on one or two arguments in great detail. Subjects were also told that they would evaluate the essay of the (fictitious) person who was evaluating them.

After the 10-min time limit elapsed, the experimenter returned and printed out the essay. The experimenter explained that the subject's essay would be evaluated first and that as soon as the subject's partner had evaluated his or her essay, the
experimenter would return with the evaluation and give the subject a chance to read it. Subjects were told that the experimenter would then return and give them the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Subjects were told that this would help them to focus more on themselves and less on the essay or evaluation, so that they could evaluate their partner's essay with an open mind. The experimenter then sealed each subject's attitude survey and essay in an envelope and asked the subject to write a number across the seal so that they would be identified only by number and not by name. The experimenter then gave each subject the attitude survey of their fictitious partner to look at while they waited for their essay to be evaluated.

In the prejudiced evaluator condition, this attitude survey expressed negative attitudes towards each subject's gender, while it expressed positive attitudes regarding the opposite gender, thus giving the subjects the impression that their evaluator was prejudiced against the subject's gender. In the nonprejudiced evaluator condition, the attitude survey showed neutral attitudes on all issues of gender. Subjects were then left alone for 7 min to give them ample time to read the fictitious subject's attitude survey. After 7 min had elapsed, the experimenter returned with a computer printout of the evaluator's critique of the subjects' essay. All evaluations were negative, citing poor clarity with few arguments. All essays were judged as generally nonpersuasive.

The experimenter then left for 3 min while the subjects read the evaluations. The experimenter then returned with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for the subject to complete, explaining again that this would help control for the effects that their present mood, positive or negative, would have on the evaluation of the fictitious subject's essay. After completion of this item, subjects were asked if they had any suspicions about the experiment. Those whose suspicions were such that they did not believe they had a partner in the experiment, or that the evaluation of their essay was not from their partner were noted for possible exclusion from the data set. Subjects were then fully debriefed and given back their unopened essays and attitude surveys.

Results

Eighteen of the subjects' data were eliminated from the analysis because it was determined during debriefing that they were aware of the hypothesis of the experiment, or were suspicious that they had not been paired with a real partner. This was done to avoid the possibility that their behavior was influenced by demand characteristics, which would contaminate the results. The following is a breakdown of how many subjects' data were eliminated from each group: female/prejudiced = 4, female/nonprejudiced = 3, male/prejudiced = 6, male/nonprejudiced = 5. The final number of subjects used for data analysis was 49.

A two-way ANOVA was used to analyze the difference scores of subjects' self-esteem before and after the manipulation. No significant main effects for subject stigmatization status or evaluator prejudice were detected. However, a significant interaction between the two variables of subject gender and stigmatization status was obtained, $F(1, 48) = 7.42, p = .009$. The mean difference scores in the four experimental conditions showed that nonstigmatized subjects who received feedback from a prejudiced evaluator displayed the highest increase in self-esteem scores ($M = 3.33$), whereas receiving feedback from a nonprejudiced evaluator resulted in decreased self-esteem for the nonstigmatized subjects ($M = -1.36$). Follow-up comparisons using the Tukey HSD test revealed that the only significant difference existed between the mean scores for nonstigmatized subjects ($q = 4.25$). No significant difference existed for stigmatized subjects receiving feedback from a prejudiced evaluator ($M = .36$) or a nonprejudiced evaluator ($M = 1.27$).

Four separate $t$-tests were computed to ascertain whether the changes in self-esteem in the four different conditions differed significantly from zero (i.e. if a mean of -1.36 actually indicated a drop in self-esteem). None of the $t$-tests showed significance in any of the cell.
means. However, in the nonstigmatized-prejudiced evaluator condition a value of $t(8) = 1.92, p = .09$ was obtained.

Discussion

The analysis revealed a significant difference between the change scores of nonstigmatized subjects. This could be due to the possibility that when nonstigmatized individuals received negative feedback which they determined to be unfair due to the prejudiced nature of the evaluator, they saw the second administration of the self-esteem test as a legitimate opportunity to reaffirm their self-concepts, and thus inflated their self-esteem scores. However, having no external source to attribute the negative feedback too, those subjects in the nonprejudiced evaluator condition seemed to have internalized the feedback into their self-concepts, as evidenced by the significant difference between their change scores and those of their counterparts.

The post hoc comparisons of means did not reveal a significant difference between the change scores of the stigmatized subjects. Although only one group could attribute the negative feedback to evaluator prejudice, it appears as though both groups were able to discount it. One possibility for this is that stigmatized individuals may be so accustomed to attributing negative feedback to external sources and then discounting it, that they do so even when these external attributions are unwarranted.

Women in the prejudiced evaluator condition showed the smallest change self-esteem scores (.36) between the first test and the second test. Also, men in the prejudiced evaluator condition showed the largest increase in self-esteem scores (3.33). However, neither of these score changes were found to be significant. Surprisingly, the men and women in the nonprejudiced evaluator condition showed almost exactly opposite responses to the negative feedback they received. The men showed an average decrease in self-esteem scores of 1.36, while the women showed an average increase of 1.27. Neither of these scores were significant.

Since none of the means of the difference scores differed significantly from zero, it appears that no group of subjects was significantly impacted by the negative feedback that they received on their essay-writing task. The failure to obtain significant results in these cells appears to be partly due to flaws in the study. Significant values might have been achieved if two conditions had been present. First, if more subjects had participated in the study, the degrees of freedom in each cell would have been higher thus increasing the statistical power to detect an effect. If this were the case, the trends in subject responses may have continued, and significant changes in self-esteem may have been seen in all of the cells except for the stigmatized/prejudiced evaluator condition.

Also, if directional rather than non-directional hypotheses were posed, a one-tailed test rather than two-tailed $t$-test could have been computed, cutting the probability in half. In the two nonstigmatized conditions, this change would have yielded a probability of .06 for the nonprejudiced evaluator condition and a probability of .045 for the prejudiced evaluator condition. Coupled together, it appears that these two problems were partly responsible for the failure to achieve significant results in three of the $t$-tests, which would have been in line with this hypothesis, as well as the contact hypothesis. Support was shown for the contact hypothesis because interactions between stigmatized individuals (females) and nonstigmatized individuals (prejudiced evaluators) did not cause the self-esteem of the stigmatized persons to decrease.

Despite strong theoretical support, the idea that stigmatization causes lowered self-esteem is not supported empirically. The counter-intuitive notion that stigmatization may, in fact, lead to equal or higher levels of self-esteem seems to be well supported both theoretically and empirically. Although stigmatization certainly has negative effects on many life areas, self-esteem does not appear to be one of them. It may be that when stigmatized people expect to fail and do, they are able to cope well with their failure. When they expect to succeed and do, the
results also may not greatly affect their self-esteem. However, when stigmatized group members expect to fail and yet they succeed, they may benefit from a large boost in self-esteem. This extra boost may, in turn, help them be more resilient against the forces of prejudice and discrimination, and thus help them to be more satisfied with themselves.

Future studies should attempt to determine whether the failure to achieve significant results was due to the above mentioned design flaws or because the hypothesized effect does not exist. This could be done by increasing the number of participants in the study, and thus increasing the degrees of freedom, and by using a one-tailed rather than two-tailed t-test. Another interesting study would involve determining exactly what the subjects attributed the negative evaluations to. A study of this sort would help to clarify the differences, similarities, or both that exist between stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals in whether they attribute failure to either external or internal factors. Finally, an additional methodological consideration is to maintain concealment of the hypothesis from the subjects so as to avoid biased data that will have to be eliminated.

References


