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.

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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technique rooted in attribution theory. Unlike other successful training techniques that target the stereotyping process (e.g., Gawronski, Deutsch, Mbirkou, Seibt, & Strack, 2008; Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000; Stewart & Payne, 2008), our paradigm targets a more fundamental attributional process underlying outgroup stereotypes. As such, this research provides some of the first evidence for the causal relationship between dispositional attributions and stereotyping as well as providing a new and possibly broader method to reduce intergroup biases.

Undoing the ultimate attribution error

Given that attributions may have important consequences for intergroup biases, what happens if we strengthen situational attributions for negative behaviors performed by outgroup members? Findings from "perspective taking" studies indirectly support the hypothesis that situational attributions precipitate lower bias. Compared to controls, participants who took the perspective of a stigmatized person, by imagining what that person felt, showed reduced explicit negative attitudes towards the entire stigmatized group (Batson et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 2004), as well as reduced stereotype activation (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci (2003) found that the efficacy of a perspective taking strategy to reduce explicit prejudice was mediated by increased situational attributions about the target – an attribution type more often used to explain ingroup than outgroup behaviors.

Thus, existing research indirectly suggests that situational attributions for outgroup members' negative behaviors may impact intergroup biases. However, no studies have directly investigated the causal relationship between situational attributions and automatic stereotype activation. Our research goal was therefore to explore the possibility that training participants to make situational attributions for negative stereotypic behaviors, thereby targeting the UAE, would decrease automatic stereotyping.

The present research

Pretesting confirmed that situational attribution training increased spontaneous activation of situational explanations for stereotype-consistent behaviors.[1] We therefore conducted two experiments to test our prediction that training would also decrease automatic activation of negative stereotypes. Consistent with connectionist models of activation (e.g., Monroe & Read, 2008; van Overwalle & Labiouse, 2004), we predicted that effects of training would extend beyond the traits targeted in training to other unrelated negative stereotypic traits. According to these models, negative stereotypic traits are units connected in a network; once one unit is activated (e.g., a particular negative stereotypic trait), activation can spread to other relevant units (other negative stereotypic traits). Consequently, if training reduces the activation of specific negative stereotypic traits, activation of other negative stereotypic traits would also be expected to decrease. We expected positive stereo-

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[1] Eighteen (White) Situational Attribution Training and Grammar Training Control participants completed a Probe Recognition Task (Ham & Vonk, 2003). On each trial, they briefly (3000 ms) viewed a photo of a Black man paired with one of 20 pretested behavioral sentences indicative of negative Black-stereotypic traits unseen in training. Each display was then replaced with a word probe. Participants' task was to quickly and accurately indicate whether the probe had appeared in the sentence by pressing one of two keys labeled "yes" and "no". Sentences randomly appeared six times, followed by a different probe each time (half seen/half not seen). Of interest were words absent in the behavioral sentence but associated (situational probe) or unassociated (control probe) with a situational explanation for that behavior, according to prior pretesting. Following training, participants were slower to correctly reject situational, versus control, probes, $F(1, 8) = 6.92$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = 46$, suggesting response interference caused by heightened activation of situational inferences. Control participants showed no such difference, $F(1, 8) = 1.07$, $p = .33$, $\eta^2 = .12$.

typic trait activation to be less impacted by training given that the UAE, which our paradigm targets, specifically elicits attributions for outgroup behaviors that maintain negative stereotypes.

The two experiments differed only in comparison group. In Experiment 1, findings for the Situational Attribution Training Condition were compared to a No Training condition. Experiment 2 employed a control condition more comparable to the experimental condition. We expected to obtain the same findings across control conditions. For conciseness, and because of the similarity in the experiments' methodology and findings, we present their methods and results together.

Method

Participants and design

Seventy-two White undergraduates (50 women) participated in one of two experiments (32 participants in Experiment 1) as a means to fulfill an introductory psychology course requirement. Participants in both experiments were randomly assigned to the Situational Attribution Training Condition or a control condition.

Procedure

Phase 1: training

Participants assigned to the Situational Attribution Training Condition were told the study investigated how people explain others' behaviors. The experimenter exemplified the difference between dispositional and situational explanations. Participants were also informed that they were randomly assigned to a condition in which they would make situational attributions for negative behaviors performed by Black men.

After six practice trials with feedback, participants began the training, which was composed of 480 trials divided into six blocks of 80 trials. Each trial began with presentation of a photograph of a Black man, paired with the label "African American" and a sentence describing a Black-stereotypic behavior. Forty behaviors were presented twice per block – four behaviors related to each negative stereotypic trait. The pretested traits were loud, criminal, unintelligent, unreliable, irresponsible, violent, dishonest, dangerous, lazy, and promiscuous. Following a 3000 ms delay, the words "I Choose:" appeared mid-screen, below the behavior description. Two possible explanations of the behavior, one situational and one dispositional, appeared, respectively, on the bottom left- and right-hand side of the screen. The location of the explanations was counterbalanced such that the situational explanation appeared on the right for half of the trials and the left for the remaining half. Participants' task was to choose the situational explanation of the two by pressing the keyboard key associated with the left- or right-hand side of the screen (see Fig. 1a).

Experiment 1 control participants did not complete any training and proceeded directly to Phase 2 of the study (No Training Control). Experiment 2 control participants were presented with the same photographs and behavioral sentences presented to Situational Attribution Training participants. However, instead of making situational attributions for behaviors, participants counted the number of nouns (240 trials) or verbs in the behavioral sentences (Grammatical Training Control). They made dichotomous decisions using keys associated with the left- or right-hand side of the screen (e.g., choosing "2 or under 2 nouns" or "over 2 nouns;" see Fig. 1b).

Phase 2: the person categorization task

Next, all participants completed the person categorization task (Banaji & Hardin, 1996) as a measure of automatic stereotype activation. This task was described as a separate experiment conducted by a different researcher. The experimenter explained