



From women to objects: Appearance focus, target gender, and perceptions of warmth, morality and competence

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 September 2010

Revised 21 December 2010

Available online 29 December 2010

Keywords:

Objectification
Dehumanization
Human nature
Stereotype content model
Infrahumanization
Appearance focus

ABSTRACT

Most literally, objectification refers to perceiving a person as an object, and consequently, less than fully human. Research on perceptions of humanness and the stereotype content model suggests that humanness is linked to perceptions of warmth, morality and competence. Merging these insights with objectification theory, we hypothesized that focusing on a woman's, but not a man's, appearance should induce objectification, and thus reduce perceptions of these characteristics. In three studies, females, but not males, were perceived as less competent (Studies 2 and 3) and less warm and moral (Studies 1, 2 and 3) when participants were instructed to focus on their appearance. These findings support our position and help rule out stereotype activation as an alternative explanation to dehumanization. Further, they generalized to targets of different races, familiarity, physical attractiveness and occupational status. Implications for gender inequity and the perpetuation of objectification of women are discussed.

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“Objectification entails making into a thing...something that is really not a thing.”—Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 1999, p. 218.

Standing on the shoulders of over fifty years of feminist scholarship (e.g., Bartky, 1990; de Beauvoir, 1952), objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) posits that in Western cultures, women's, but not men's, physical appearance is a primary basis of their worth. This paves the way for the objectification of women. To date, over 60 published studies (see Moradi & Huang, 2008) have examined the negative effects of self-objectification (e.g., reduced cognitive performance, Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; depression, Tiggeman & Kuring, 2004). In contrast, less than a handful of published studies have examined the objectification of others (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Loughnan et al., 2010).

In this paper, we examined the role of appearance focus and target gender on perceptions of a target's competence, warmth, and morality. Research on the traits that are perceived to be “essential” to humans (e.g., Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima, & Bain, 2008), the characteristics attributed to the human “mind” (i.e., agency and experience; Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007) and the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) suggests that warmth, morality and competence are essential to perceptions of humanness (Harris & Fiske, 2006, 2009). Further, when observers focus on a woman's appearance, they tend to perceive her as less characteristic

of what it means to be human (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Thus, we hypothesized that women should be perceived as less warm, moral and competent when focus is on their appearance. Drawing on objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), however, we posited that focusing on a man's appearance should not similarly induce objectification and therefore not influence these perceptions.

What is human? Warmth, competence, and morality

The stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Fiske et al., 2002) assesses people's behavioral and emotional reactions to others based on perceptions of two dimensions: warmth and competence. From the perspective of the model, perceptions of another's warmth signal their intentions, whereas perceptions of their competence signal their ability to carry out those intentions.

SCM researchers have argued that perceptions of warmth and competence are essential to perceiving others as fully human (Harris & Fiske, 2006, 2009). Supporting this, they draw on fMRI research examining the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), which is highly responsible for social cognition (Ochsner, 2007). For instance, the mPFC is activated by (a) images of people, but not objects (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Macrae, Heatherton, & Kelley, 2004; Mitchell, Banaji, & Macrae, 2005), (b) making individuating inferences about people (Harris, Todorov, & Fiske, 2005), and (c) inferring others' thoughts (Frith & Frith, 1999; Tamir & Mitchell, 2010). Interestingly, the mPFC is not activated when people view images of groups perceived as low in warmth and competence (e.g., the homeless; Harris & Fiske, 2006). These groups elicit mPFC activity similar to objects, suggesting that

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low warmth/competence groups are dehumanized at a basic neural level. Further, Harris (2007) analyzed the verbs people use to describe the typical day of others. When describing low (perceived) warmth and competence targets, less verbs were used that describe internal mental states (e.g., knows, believes; Semin & Fiedler, 1988), but not overt behavioral verbs (e.g., run, skip). This too suggests low warmth/low competence groups are dehumanized.

The SCM view of warmth and competence as humanizing is consistent with research on the characteristics people use to describe the human mind (Gray et al., 2007) and human nature (Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Research suggests that people assign two primary characteristics to the human mind: experience and agency. Experience is the capacity for sensations and feelings (e.g., joy, pleasure) and agency is the ability to do things (e.g., plan, self-control; Gray & Wegner, 2010). Denial of these capacities is dehumanizing; adult men and women are rated very high on both, and much higher than, for instance, robots and dead people (Gray et al., 2007). The SCM view of humanization is also consistent with another line of research identifying human nature traits, or that which people perceive as separating humans from objects and automata (Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Like objects, people denied human nature traits are perceived as lacking emotional responsiveness and warmth, and cognitive openness and self-determined agency (see Haslam, 2006). Taken together, this body of work supports SCM's position that humanity is linked to perceptions of warmth and competence.

Recently, Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto (2007) found that the SCM dimension of warmth consists of two components: warmth and morality (see also, Wojciszke, 2005). Traits such as sincerity, trustworthiness and honesty are related to morality, whereas traits such as likability and kindness characterize warmth. These traits are essential to social perception. Wojciszke and Klusek (1996), for instance, found that the three dimensions of competence, warmth and morality predicted as much as 95% of people's overall evaluations of others (see also, Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998).

Research supports the notion that, just like warmth and competence, morality is essential to perceptions of humanity. Harris and Fiske (2006) found (while using a measure of warmth that included morality traits) that low warmth/low competence groups elicited brain activation similar to objects. Also, from a human nature perspective (e.g., Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008), people who are denied human nature traits are viewed as lacking self-control and personal morality. Groups perceived as lacking warmth (measured including morality traits) and competence also elicit disgust (e.g., Harris & Fiske, 2006). When experiencing disgust (but not sadness or anger), people judge moral violations, such as theft and bribery, more harshly (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). In turn, dehumanizing a person should result in perceiving them as less moral. From several perspectives then, to the extent that dehumanization occurs, people should be perceived as lower in warmth, competence and morality.

Objectified persons, dehumanization, and perceptions of warmth, competent, and morality

Most literally, objectification refers to making a person into an object, and consequently, less than fully human (Nussbaum, 1999). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum posited seven ways in which people "treat a person as thing" (p. 218). Some concern emotion and morality; people are less concerned when objectified individuals are harmed or injured, their experiences and feelings are discounted, and their personal boundaries are less respected. Others, such as the denial of talent uniqueness (i.e., replaceable), autonomy and agency, revolve around ability and competence. From Nussbaum's perspective then, objectified targets are dehumanized, which results in the denial of emotions and agency/competence.

Several lines of empirical research also support the notion that objectified targets are, at least to some extent, dehumanized. Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) found that focusing on a female target's appearance reduced the degree that she was perceived as having characteristics typifying human nature (i.e., that which separates humans from objects; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Similarly, sexualized images of women have been found to activate regions of the brain responsible for object usage (Cikara, Eberhardt, & Fiske, 2010; for male participants only). Loughnan et al. (2010) even provided evidence that sexualized models are perceived as lacking "mind" (e.g., thoughts and emotions, Gray et al., 2007; Haslam et al., 2005). Together, this body of work suggests that objectified women are perceived as less than fully human. Since warmth, competence and morality are associated with perceptions of humanness (Gray et al., 2007; Harris & Fiske, 2009; Haslam, 2006), dehumanized targets should be perceived as lacking these characteristics. To date, research has found that women are perceived as less competent when focus is on their appearance (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009) and when they are dressed provocatively (Loughnan et al., 2010; Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2010). The effect of appearance focus on perceptions of warmth and morality remains to be tested.

Appearance focus as an induction of objectification of women (but not men)

In Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) – and in the current work – objectification was induced by varying the amount of focus on the target's appearance. This is in contrast to other research where objectification is induced by explicitly sexualizing targets through dress (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010). From the perspective of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), however, merely focusing on a woman's appearance should be sufficient to induce objectification. Objectification theory (1997) argues that the socio-cultural climate surrounding women's bodies is one in which they are "looked at, evaluated, and always potentially objectified" (p. 175). The same is not (typically) true of men's bodies. As a consequence, men and women learn that women's bodies are capable of representing them, whereas men's bodies are not. It is this association between women's worth and their physical appearance that paves the way for the objectification of women.

Heflick and Goldenberg's (2009) findings suggest that appearance focus does induce objectification of female targets. In this study, male and female perceivers were instructed to focus on the appearance of a woman (i.e., Sarah Palin or Angelina Jolie) compared to focusing on the person herself. Results indicated that appearance focus led participants to perceive the female target as lower in the characteristics that they associated with human nature (cf. Haslam, 2006) and to perceive her to be less competent. When that woman was Sarah Palin, appearance focus also reduced intentions to vote for the McCain–Palin ticket in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, and this effect was mediated by perceptions of her competence and human nature.

But will men be similarly objectified – and thus, viewed as diminished in competence (and warmth and morality) – when focus is on their appearance? From the perspective of objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the answer is probably no. Although objectification theory focuses on the consequences of objectifying women (most notably self-objectification), Fredrickson and Roberts speculate about possible causes. In particular, they offer that the objectification of women may be rooted in the evolutionary differences between the sexes (women's appearance is a proxy for their reproductive value, whereas in men, cues for resource acquisition are relatively more important, e.g., Buss, 1989; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). In addition, Fredrickson and Roberts put forth patriarchy, the control of women by men, as another likely cause of female objectification. From the perspective of both explanations, the root of

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