

Failure and Shifting Standards: How Failure Can Positively Affect Subjective Evaluations of Stereotyped Group Members



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Introduction

Research demonstrates that because stereotypes produce different standards for evaluating group members, subjective judgments (e.g., rating a student “good” vs. “poor”) may mask stereotypical beliefs, but objective judgments (e.g., estimated GPA) do not. For example, regarding gender stereotypes about math ability, the same math performance may be judged subjectively “better” for a woman than a man, yet the woman is judged to have a lower math GPA (see Biernat, 2003; Biernat, 2012).

The current research focused on gender stereotypes about parenting. These stereotypes could lead a man, because of lower standards, to be rated subjectively similar to a woman as a good parent. However, after a hypothetical divorce scenario, the woman may still objectively receive primary custody. These effects plausibly could occur after a father makes a gender-consistent blunder that reminds evaluators that men are deficient in parenting.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty three participants (132 females) from California State University, San Bernardino participated for extra course credit. Participants’ age ranged from 19 to 61 ($M_{age} = 26$, $SD_{age} = 8.85$).

Manipulated Variable

Participants read a story involving a father (Kenneth) or a mother (Katherine) preparing lunch. The stories were further split to describe that the lunch preparation consisted of no cooking error, the lunch was undercooked due to a technical error, or the lunch was undercooked due to a cooking error.

Measured Variables

Subjective evaluations. Parenting competence was assessed using 18 items answered on 7-point scales (e.g., “Kenneth is a good parent,” “Katherine is a capable parent”), $\alpha = .93$.

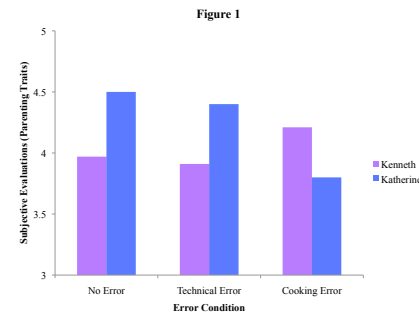
Objective evaluations. Participants read a hypothetical divorce scenario and gave estimates regarding how much Kenneth/Katherine should have custody of their children.

Results

Subjective Evaluations

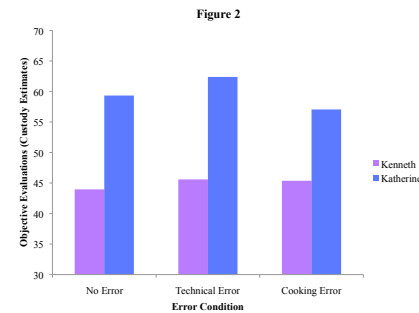
• Results yielded a significant Parent Sex X Cooking Error interaction, $F(2, 138) = 5.07$, $p = .008$ (see Figure 1).

• Simple effects tests indicated that the mother was judged subjectively better than the father in the no error and technical error condition, but that the father was judged better than the mother in the cooking error condition.



Objective Evaluations

- Only the main effect of parent sex was significant, $F(1, 134) = 50.20$, $p < .001$.
- Across conditions, the mother was awarded more custody in the hypothetical divorce scenario than the father.



Discussion

The current research used the shifting standards model to examine how a gender-consistent blunder impacts evaluations of negatively stereotyped group members. Results indicated that because men are held to lower standards of being a “good” parent relative to women, failure to successfully cook lunch lead evaluators to rate the father a subjectively better parent than the mother. But despite this increased subjective positivity, objective judgments of custody in the divorce scenario favored women across the board. Evidence for shifting standards – greater assimilation to stereotypes on objective than subjective rating scales – held only in the scenario where targets were responsible for a parenting blunder. This suggests that shifting standards effects may be most likely to occur under conditions of failure, when the target stereotyped as competent behaves counterstereotypically.

This research suggests that negatively stereotyped group members may subjectively benefit from a stereotype-consistent blunder but nonetheless experience stereotype-consistent harm in terms of objective outcomes.

References

- Biernat, M. (2003). Toward a broader view of social stereotyping. *American Psychologist*, 58(12), 1019-1027.
- Biernat, M. (2012). Stereotypes and shifting standards: Forming, communicating, and translating person impressions. In P. Devine & A. Plant (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 45, (1-59). San Diego, CA, US: Academic Press.