

Sex Differences in Influenceability: Toward Specifying the Underlying Processes

John T. Cacioppo
University of Iowa

Richard E. Petty
University of Missouri-Columbia

Sex differences in influenceability have emerged in the past when discrepant advocacies were accompanied by greater expertise in the subject matter by men or women. Similarly, we found that when men and women were asked if they agreed with another person's inaccurate (attitude-discrepant) evaluation, resistance was greater when prior knowledge was high. However, men agreed less than women, regardless of prior knowledge, when the other person's evaluation was accurate (attitude-congruent). These results suggest that, for attitude-congruent advocacies, gender role influences socially acceptable levels of agreeableness. Agreement with attitude-discrepant advocacies, however, appears to be more content-based.

As Eagly (1978) noted recently, analyses of sex differences in influenceability were often secondary to the major purpose of investigations. As a result, persuasive materials were selected without regard for sex differences in prior knowledge or interest. The contents of these materials may commonly have been masculine, thereby according men greater motivation and/or ability to pro- or counterargue attitude-discrepant advocacies than women (see Janis & Field, 1959). When prior knowledge about the experimental materials was apparently greater for women than men, however, the opposite effect was obtained (Feldman, 1974). Further, when the type of materials was varied so that men were most knowledgeable about some while women were most knowledgeable about others, prior knowledge rather than the subject's sex accounted for resistance to influence (Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971). It is notable that in this research, the advocacy was discrepant from the subjects' initial attitude. Agreement, therefore indicated a compromise, at least publically, of attitudes and possibly signaled cognitive reorganization.

We may conclude from this research that when the influence-attempt is attitude-discrepant (e.g., subjectively inaccurate), both women *and* men are

AUTHORS' NOTE: Requests for reprints should be addressed to John T. Cacioppo, Department of Psychology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242, or to Richard E. Petty, Department of Psychology, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri 65211.

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motivated to counterargue the advocacy. *Resistance* to influence, however, is a function of the *motivation* and *ability* to counterargue. Prior knowledge about the topic facilitates the ability to counterargue and produces resistance to discrepant advocacies (Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971). On the other hand, when endorsing the advocated position does not require one to compromise a prior belief (e.g., when it is perceived as basically accurate), motivation and ability to elaborate cognitively upon the message content are unlikely mediators of acceptance, but rather acceptance may be determined by cues less central to the attitude stimulus or issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, Note 1). From Eagly's suggestions regarding the possible attitudinal effects of the female role of peace-keeper (Eagly, 1978) and the male role of dominant leader (Eagly, Wood, & Fishbaugh, Note 2), we reasoned that gender roles may influence the level of agreement with attitude-congruent evaluations.

In sum, the following hypotheses were tested in this study. If an obviously inaccurate evaluation is attributed to an unknown source, resistance should be greatest by women for feminine items and by men for masculine items since these situational characteristics should maximize motivation and ability to counterargue. If the evaluation is accurate, however, agreement with the source does not involve compromising one's personal beliefs or substantial cognitive reorganization; but it does require agreeing with another's evaluation. Following Eagly's formulations concerning the attitudinal effects of gender roles, we expected a sex difference in agreeableness to obtain when a source's evaluation is generally congruent with their prior attitude (i.e., for accurate evaluations and factual descriptions).

METHOD

Overview

Men and women rated photographs of football tackles and women's fashions on various dimensions. All photographs were accompanied by another person's comments—some of which were factual and descriptive, some of which were evaluative and accurate, and some of which were evaluative and inaccurate. The major dependent measure was the extent to which the subjects agreed with these comments.

Subjects, Materials, and Design

Sixteen men and sixteen women from an introductory psychology course participated to earn extra credit toward their course grade. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21.

Two types of stimuli, one about which men relative to women had high prior knowledge and one about which women compared to men had high prior knowledge, were selected during pilot tests. A subset of a larger pool of photographs of football tackles and women's fashions were found to satisfy the first and second criterion respectively. In a final pilot study, 11 men and 11

women, rating their own knowledgeability about football tackles and women's fashions on 7-point scales, rated tackles 5.45 and fashions 2.33 (men), and fashions 4.82 and tackles 2.18 (women). This interaction was significant ($F[1, 20] = 71.28, p < .01$), whereas neither main effect was significant. Furthermore, the stimuli were equally extreme with respect to their masculinity/femininity. The same 22 subjects completed a 7-point scale rating the "masculinity/femininity" of the two stimulus types, and this revealed a significant difference, with tackles rated 5.9 and fashions 2.7 ($F[1, 20] = 78.03, p < .01$). The distance of each from the neutral point on the scale (1.9 vs. 1.3) did not differ significantly from one another. Thus, the types of stimuli chosen were balanced with respect to their extremity on the masculinity/femininity dimension and differed as intended with respect to cognitive sophistication.¹

Statements about each fashion or tackle were prepared and attributed to an unidentified subject from a "previous study." In all cases, three statements of fact about the stimulus were listed on the back of the photograph (e.g., the dress is blue, the runner's feet are off the ground). These comments were constructed to be as factual and descriptive as possible regarding the quality of the stimulus, and the veracity of the statements could be confirmed easily by perusing the stimulus. In addition, a fourth statement was listed for each stimulus. For one third of the stimuli, the fourth statement provided an *inaccurate* evaluation of the tackle or fashion (e.g., "that's a great tackle," when pictured was a missed tackle). For another third of the stimuli, the statement provided an *accurate* evaluation of the stimulus (e.g., "that's a chic fashion," when a new and popular fashion was depicted). For the remaining stimuli, the fourth comment was simply another factual descriptor of the stimulus.

All of the subjects viewed all 36 photographs, but half viewed the 18 photographs of women's fashions first, whereas half viewed the 18 photographs of football tackles first. Other than this constraint, the order of the photographs was determined randomly for each subject. The experimental design thus constituted a 2 (Order) \times 2 (Sex of Subject) \times 2 (Type of Stimulus) \times 3 (Type of Comment) mixed-model factorial with the first two factors serving as between-subjects manipulations and the remaining factors serving as within-subjects manipulations.

Procedure

Subjects were tested individually and believed their task was to assist in the development of stimulus materials for a subsequent study. Subjects were told that their honest personal ratings of the stimuli were all that was sought in this "preliminary work." Each subject was given a stack of 36 photographs and 36 one-page questionnaires. The subject was told that he or she was to inspect each photograph and to read the (four) comments regarding the picture. The subject was informed that previous subjects had written the comments, and that people had reported that the task of rating the photographs was made more interesting by allowing them to read the comments of others. Finally, subjects were

instructed to rate the quality of each photograph on two 9-point scales (good-bad; favorable-unfavorable) (these measures were included to lend credence to the cover story) and to rate on a 9-point scale (disagree completely-agree completely) the extent to which they agreed with the comments about the picture made by "the other subject" (this served as the measure of social influence).

RESULTS

Means for the measure of agreement are summarized in Table 1. The Type of Stimulus M (fashion) = 6.28, M (tackle) = 5.92, $F(1, 28) = 5.34$, $p < .03$, and the Type of Comment M (inaccurate) = 4.19, M (accurate) = 6.91, M (factual) = 7.19, $F(2, 56) = 153.12$, $p < .001$, affected agreement. Notably, the main effect for Sex of Subject did *not* approach significance, $F(1, 28) = 1.07$, $p > .30$. Interactions were obtained for the following: Sex \times Type of Stimulus, $F(1, 28) = 5.44$, $p < .03$; and Sex \times Type of Comment, $F(2, 56) = 2.85$, $p < .07$. An a priori comparison was conducted for the specific hypothesis of this study. This contrast held that men would appear more influenceable than women for inaccurate evaluations of feminine items, whereas men would appear less influenceable than women in the remaining instances. This contrast was highly significant, $F(1, 56) = 22.35$, $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, both men and women resisted influence when they received an *inaccurate* (i.e., attitude-discrepant) evaluation regarding the stimulus. Moreover, this resistance was related to the ability and motivation of men and women to develop and buttress criticisms concerning the accuracy of the source's evaluation: Men were most obdurate when viewing masculine items whereas women were most resistant when viewing feminine items. Also as expected, men compared to women were less willing to agree with an *accurate* (i.e., attitude-congruent) evaluation regarding a stimulus. Whether this sex difference in willingness to agree is attributable to the male and/or female role is unclear from the present research. Nevertheless, these results illustrate that women are not always more influenceable than men. Both men and women's willingness to endorse an attitudinal position that contradicts their initial position is governed more by the pertinent facts they can obtain given their cognitive sophistication on the topic than by gender role per se. Finally, we should note that our formulation addresses situations in which the salience of gender roles are uniformly low across conditions (cf. Eagly et al., Note 1). It is unlikely that subjects' sex was any more salient as they read inaccurate than accurate evaluations of photographs. More likely from our viewpoint is that men and women possess partially nonoverlapping habitual modes of responding (scripts) that are developed through socialization and are evoked automatically (though not necessarily consciously) when there are few intrinsic consequences involved in agreeing with the advocated position (see Cacioppo & Petty, 1979b). Thus, when agreeing with an advocacy requires compromising one's prior beliefs, both men and women's agreeableness is largely content based. But when

TABLE 1 Mean Agreement as a Function of Sex of Subject, Type of Stimulus, and Type of Comment

Type of Stimulus	Sex of Subject	
	Men	Women
Inaccurate evaluation		
Tackle	3.54 ¹	4.30 ²³
Fashion	4.90 ³	4.02 ¹²
Accurate evaluation		
Tackle	6.38 ⁴	7.26 ⁵
Fashion	6.74 ⁴⁵	7.26 ⁵
Factual description		
Tackle	6.81 ⁴⁵	7.21 ⁵
Fashion	7.26 ⁵	7.49 ⁵

Note: Responses were made on scales where "1" indicated "disagree completely" and "9" indicated "agree completely." Entries with dissimilar superscripts differ at the .05 level (by the Duncan Multiple Range Test).

compromising one's beliefs is not at stake, the willingness to agree of men and women are affected more by socially prescribed gender roles and less by the central attributes and implicates of the attitude stimulus.

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NOTES

¹It is possible that by using only one broad category of stimuli for each level of the sex-typing variable (i.e., tackles as "male" stimuli and fashions as "female" stimuli) we may obtain effects due to some irrelevant and unintended differences between these types of stimuli. However, we know of no way that these possible differences could account for the predicted results. Moreover, by our use of 18 different photographs within each broad category of stimuli, we should minimize the idiosyncratic responses any single pair of photographs might obtain (see also, Tesser & Leone, 1977).