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The Role of Temporal Comparisons in Judgments of Gender Equality

MEGHAN SULLIVAN AND ZEELY SYLVIA



Meghan Sullivan (left) is a graduating senior with a major in Psychology and minor in Mathematics, and Zeely Sylvia is a recent graduate with a major in Psychology. This research was conducted under the direction of Dr. Laura Ramsey, which originated in her Psychology Research Methods class and developed into an ongoing project. Meghan and Zeely presented this study at the BSU Undergraduate Research Symposium and will present at the Association for Psychological Science Convention in Washington, D.C in May, 2013. Meghan will begin the pursuit of a Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology in the Fall of 2013, and Zeely is currently working as a research assistant in Providence, Rhode Island. She plans to apply to graduate schools for Fall 2014.

While women have achieved great advancements in social status in the past century, sexism remains a widespread issue. Perceptions of sexism today could be affected by comparisons to the past, when sexism was much worse. The current study investigated the effect of using different temporal reference points to make judgments about the state of gender equality today. Based on temporal comparison theory, a process of making judgments of the present based on an individual's view of the past, it was expected that those considering the past would see gender inequality as less of an issue currently than those considering the present. Participants included 29 males and 66 females recruited online through Facebook and primed into a past or a present mindset by reading an incidence of sexism framed in either 1963 or 2008. The conditions were compared on a variety of measures to detect any differences in their perceptions of modern gender equality. Participants in the present condition perceived significantly more progress needed to achieve gender equality and perceived society as favoring men significantly more than those in the past condition. Understanding how temporal comparisons can affect ongoing efforts to promote women's progress can inform efforts toward social change.

The Role of Temporal Comparisons in Judgments of Gender Equality

Sexism in society today is a pervasive issue, and women are still a long way from achieving gender equality. Women continue to earn less income, are underrepresented in positions of power, and face more discrimination as compared to men. In 2009, the median earnings of all working Americans, aged 15 and older and regardless of work experience, was \$36,331 for men and \$26,030 for their female counterparts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 2011, only 16.1 percent of board seats at *Fortune* 500 companies were held by women (Catalyst, 2011). In a recent study, researchers found that women experience sexist events on a regular basis, severe enough to impact their psychological well-being (Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006; Lim & Cortina, 2005).

Although sexism is clearly still entrenched in our society, the ways in which it has changed over time may ultimately make it harder to eradicate. Prejudice is no longer as blatant as it once was due to the nature of the current social and political climate (Swim, Aiken, Hall & Hunter, 1995). Sexism was previously characterized by the outspoken endorsement of stereotypical views of women and promotion of conventional gender roles, but contemporary forms of sexism

reflect a subtle and covert belief in prejudicial attitudes toward women (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). This new form of sexism, called “modern sexism,” is described by Swim and colleagues (1995) as a denial of continued discrimination based on sex and a feeling that women’s demands of equality are unwarranted, resulting in resentment of women. Similarly, “neo-sexism” reflects a difficulty in reconciling modern-day egalitarian values and persistent sexist attitudes toward women (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). These forms of sexism implicitly convey that any current inequality between men and women is justified, and consequently that further change is unnecessary.

The current climate of covert sexism makes it more difficult to detect how much sexism is prevalent, which then makes progress achieved harder to gauge. Sexist attitudes, while covert, may also have an effect on perceptions of progress made and change necessary to achieve gender equality. This gradual change allows for a wide diversity in terms of how an individual may perceive sexism in modern society. Since individual perceptions of progress towards equality are often subjective, there is no specific standard against which it can be judged.

One way someone could evaluate the degree of sexism in today’s society is to compare it to a previous era. Much social psychological research has shown that comparison processes are very important when making judgments. Research on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) has consistently shown that individuals perceive themselves in comparison with others. In particular, people tend to experience increased self-esteem when comparing themselves to less fortunate others (Tesser, 1988; Wood, 1989). Temporal comparison theory then extended social comparison theory by showing that these comparisons could be made between two different points in time (Albert, 1977), an idea that has often been applied to personal and intergroup assessments (Wilson & Ross, 2000; Zell & Alicke, 2009; de la Sablonnière, Tougas & Perenlei, 2010). When considering the struggle towards gender equality, more progress today may be perceived when compared with the past. However, in considering the present with the end goal of total equality, progress made is insufficient.

Previous research has shown that these comparison processes affect perceptions of sexism. In a recent study, Eibach and Ehrlinger (2010) found that temporal comparisons influence men’s and women’s perceptions of current progress toward gender equality, such that men perceived a greater amount of progress than women. They found that this discrepancy seems to be because men and women are employing different temporal comparisons. Men tend to gauge progress by

comparing present day conditions to those of the past. In other words, they are measuring how far society has come since a particular time, which makes the progress seem significant. Women, in contrast, make their judgments of modern equality by comparing it with a future ideal of complete equality (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2010), making the current progress seem less impressive.

The implications for adopting one common reference point over the other may be significant. According to Spoor and Schmitt (2011), comparing past inequalities with present conditions may actually decrease the amount of group identification and solidarity that women experience towards their gender. This idea originates from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which states that group identities are created via comparisons with other groups, and that the value of an individual’s social identity is based on his or her judgments of a positive social identity based on these comparisons. Any comparison which undermines the individual’s in-group by way of higher social status or advantage is conceptualized as a threat to one’s social identity. In a study by Spoor and Schmitt (2011), it was found that when women drew upon intergroup comparisons with men they were confronted by a social identity threat, as the low status gender group. This led to a greater expression of solidarity and activism in women. In contrast, women who made temporal comparisons with women in the past were not confronted with a threat; in fact, compared to past generations of women, they were the higher status social group. This led the women in this study to identify less with their gender group and express less solidarity. Considering that women are still subjected to sexism and discrimination in the United States, this lack of group identification could work against the progression towards gender equality. Considering also that collective action towards inequality is more likely when one perceives discrimination against their in-group (Foster, 1999), it is likely that temporal comparisons would be damaging to feminist causes.

The aim of the current research is to understand how the perception of sexism framed in the past leads people to think about sexism in modern society today. Based on previous studies, we would expect to find a difference in perceptions of sexism today between conditions primed with an instance of sexism dated in the past or present. As it is difficult to obtain objective evidence for progress towards gender equality, we would expect participants to use temporal comparisons influenced by the prime in their evaluations of progress today. We predicted that, compared to the past condition, the present condition would perceive that less progress has been made and more change is necessary to achieve gender equality. Furthermore, thinking about sexism in a past context would facilitate the endorsement

of modern sexist beliefs that imply that sexism no longer exists in modern society.

METHOD

Participants

Ninety-seven participants completed the study after being recruited through a social networking website, *Facebook* (2012). Twenty-nine were males and 66 were females (3 did not specify their gender). Ages ranged from 18 to 58 years ($M = 27.90$, $SD = 10.17$), although 50.5% of the sample were between the ages of 22 and 24. The sample was 85.6% Caucasian, 2.1% African American, 2.1% Latin American, and 7.1% specified other ethnic backgrounds (an additional 3.1% did not specify their racial identity). Participants were predominantly single (75.3%), but some were married (13.4%) or divorced (7.2%), and 4.1% did not indicate their marital status.

Materials and procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study titled "Gender Equality." An event was posted on the *Facebook* website from the researchers' personal profile pages, asking people to participate and share the survey link with their own friends. Upon clicking the link attached to this event, a new window opened an external website, hosted by *Google Docs* (Google, 2012), which included the questionnaire. An informed consent prompt explained their rights as a participant, and participants gave their consent to participate by continuing to the survey.

In order to approximate random assignment to conditions, participants next indicated their birth month. A response of January-June placed participants into the past condition ($n = 43$), while July-December placed participants into the present condition ($n = 55$). On the next page, they read a brief vignette describing an incident of workplace sexism to prime a specific reference point as a standard for comparison:

It is (YEAR). Mary and Andrew are both 25 years old, college-educated Junior Executives at Company X. They are both dedicated to their jobs and have similar goals within the company. One day, a fellow co-worker lets it slip to Mary that Andrew receives a considerably larger salary than her. Mary is shocked and outraged; she and Andrew have the same exact job description.

The paragraphs were identical for both conditions with the exception of the time period: in the past scenario, participants were told the incident happened in 1963, while those in the present scenario were told that it occurred in 2008. The "past" was operationalized as 1963, a year well before the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s but not so far as to seem

irrelevant or unfamiliar. They then rated the anecdote according to how just they perceived the situation on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all just*, 7 = *very just*) to ensure that the scenarios were perceived exactly the same, with the exception of the date.

Following this, all participants continued to the next page to complete questions measuring perceptions of sexism in modern society. Participants were first asked to indicate how much progress had been made toward gender equality in the United States since the 1970s by responding on a scale ranging from 0 (*very little progress*) to 7 (*a great deal of progress*). This single-item measure of perceived progress toward equality was based upon a similar measure used in past research that successfully measured assessments of progress towards racial equality (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Eibach & Keegan, 2006). Participants also indicated their perceptions of whether society in the United States generally favors men or women on a scale from 0 (*men are heavily favored*) to 7 (*women are heavily favored*). Lastly, participants indicated how much change in American society would be necessary to achieve gender equality on a scale from 0 (*very little change*) to 7 (*a great deal of change*).

Participants also completed two validated measures of sexism. First, participants completed 8 items from the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim et al., 1995) to assess beliefs that discrimination against women no longer exists. Components of the scale include denial of continuing discrimination (e.g., "Women often miss out on good jobs due to sexual discrimination" [reverse scored]), antagonism toward women's demands (e.g., "It is easy to understand why women's groups are still concerned about societal limitations of women's opportunities" [reverse scored]), and resentment about special favors for women (e.g., "Over the past few years, the government and news media have been showing more concern about the treatment of women than is warranted by women's actual experiences"). The items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scores were averaged (after reverse coding when appropriate), with higher scores indicating more sexism in modern society ($\alpha = .82$).

Participants then completed the Neo-sexism scale (Tougas et al., 1995), a 10-item measure focusing on how respondents express sexist attitudes without necessarily specifying whether they believe women to be inferior to men. Sample items include "In a fair employment system, men and women should be considered equal" (reverse coded) and "It is difficult to work for a female boss." Participants rated the items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Scores were reverse coded and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater approval of sexist attitudes ($\alpha = .82$).

Activism in gender equality was also assessed. Participants indicated their level of interest in 11 items of various activities, such as participating in political campaigns, supporting women's causes (breast cancer telethons, rape victim's vigils, pro-choice rally), or joining internet discussions in support of women's rights. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 5 (*very interested*) and averaged to produce a final score ($\alpha = .91$).

Finally, a brief demographic questionnaire concluded the survey to obtain basic information about the participants. After submission, participants received a confirmation and debriefing which thanked them for their participation.

RESULTS

To test the hypothesis that participants in the past ($n = 43$) condition would perceive sexism differently than participants in the present ($n = 55$) condition, a series of independent-sample t -tests were conducted (see Table 1). There was no difference regarding degree of injustice, indicating that the manipulation worked as intended and only affected temporal perceptions. Of note, participants in the present condition perceived significantly more progress needed to achieve gender equality and perceived society as favoring men significantly more than those in the past condition. Also, participants in the past condition had marginally significant higher scores on modern sexism than those in the present condition. No other differences between the two conditions were statistically significant, although the means were in the hypothesized direction for all of the dependent measures.

There were also notable gender differences within our sample. Men ($M = 2.61, SD = .93$) scored significantly higher than

women ($M = 2.19, SD = .81$) on the neosexism scale, $t(92) = 2.25, p = .03$. Men ($M = 3.12, SD = .78$) also scored significantly higher than women ($M = 2.83, SD = .61$) on the modern sexism scale, $t(92) = 1.97, p = .05$. Women ($M = 1.65, SD = 1.12$) perceived society as favoring men ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.54$) significantly more than men did, $t(92) = 1.98, p = .05$. Men and women were not significantly different in their perceptions of how much progress has been made toward gender equality since the 1970s, the amount of change necessary to achieve gender equality in American society today, or their interest to engage in activism activities. However, when including gender as a covariate in an ANCOVA testing the effect of condition on the dependent measures, the pattern of results remained the same.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to investigate the effect of reference points on perceptions of gender equality in modern society. Consistent with predictions, using the past as a standard for comparison led participants to perceive that more progress has been made toward gender equality, whereas thinking about a sexist event in the present led participants to perceive that society favors men more than women. Also, there were no significant differences between males and females in their ratings of progress, indicating that gender differences may have converged when adopting a similar reference point for comparison.

Although not significant, a trend was found in the perceptions of society's favoring of men over women, with women having a slight tendency to rate men as more favored. This may reflect women's experiences with sexism and discrimination in the past. As men are frequently seen in positions of power and

Table 1. Differences in Past and Present Conditions for Perceptions of Gender Equality

Perception Measure	Past Condition (n = 42)		Present Condition (n = 55)		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Change Necessary	5.14	1.20	5.51	1.30	95	-1.42	0.16
Progress Achieved	4.67	1.24	4.11	1.36	95	2.08	0.04
Favored Gender	2.12	1.29	1.62	1.23	95	1.95	0.05
Degree of Injustice	2.07	1.89	2.07	1.92	95	0.00	1.00
Neo-sexism Scale	2.38	.75	2.29	.94	95	0.50	0.62
Modern Sexism Scale	3.05	.69	2.83	.63	95	1.64	0.10
Activism Scale	3.22	.94	3.43	1.04	93	-1.01	0.32

government statistics reveal a gap in salaries (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), it is understandable that women perceived men as the preferred gender. More surprisingly, many of the men also perceived themselves as having higher social status. Despite male acknowledgement of their higher social status, men had higher ratings of sexism. Since the sexism scales focused on feelings of resentment toward women and denial of the existence of sexism, this difference may indicate a need for targeted recruitment strategies to promote activist activities for both genders. The higher rates of modern sexism among men may also be explained by social identity theory, which claims that social groups form mental representations of their status by comparing their group with other “out-groups,” which may also enhance group identity cohesion. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For men, a threat to their perception of higher status by the continuing progress of women and gender equality may explain their sexist attitudes and low rates of activism. Future research should address the influence of common reference points for the past and present conditions and the impact between males and females in either condition; the number of participants in the current study was insufficient to fully address this issue.

While the sample had a large variety of age groups, future research may wish to more fully investigate the influence of age on temporal comparisons and perceptions of sexism. The age range was between 18 and 58 years, which indicates a wide variance in life experiences for our overall sample. However, as most participants were not alive prior to the 1980s and 1970s, they did not experience conditions when gender inequality was greater in magnitude. This lack of direct familiarity of past conditions to gauge progress may have biased our sample.

The nature of data collection may have influenced the external validity of the study. The sample was recruited through a social networking site, which may have limited the potential to reflect population level characteristics. In addition, because participants were free to take the survey online without any regulation over the environment or time limits, there may have been a negative impact on the internal validity of the study.

The results of this study indicate that temporal comparisons may influence perceptions of gender inequality. Future research should continue to examine the consequences of temporal comparisons, as well as the effect of other types of comparison that could be used to gauge progress. For example, in comparing different cultures around the world, progress may be perceived differently. Future research should also address the complex influence of cultural differences on perceptions of gender equality.

The current research examined the effects of temporal comparisons between a past and present mindset and found some support for the effects of temporal comparisons in influencing opinions. Understanding how the use of past comparisons can affect ongoing efforts to promote women’s progress might be relevant for efforts toward social change. For example, while it is important to celebrate progress toward gender equality through events such as women’s history month, our results suggest that emphasizing sexism in the past may actually undermine future progress for women. A focus on inequality today may be more effective for encouraging further progress to equality, and so discussion of sexism in the past should be accompanied by an emphasis that sexism still persists today. Gender equality might best be achieved by referencing the end goal of total equality rather than advancements made in the past. With further research to examine the effects of temporal comparisons on perceptions of sexism, this possibility may be further supported and contribute significantly to the goal of gender equality.

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