

The Malleability of Men's Gender Self-concept

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The present study tested the influence of social status and gender salience on the malleability of men's gender self-concepts at an automatic versus controlled level. Male participants were placed in a superior or subordinate role relative to a male or female confederate for a joint task; subsequently their automatic and controlled beliefs about themselves were measured. We predicted first, that men placed in a subordinate role would protect against the threat to their self-concept by automatically self-stereotyping more than men placed in a superior role. As a secondary hypothesis, we predicted that the presence of a female interaction partner would increase the situational salience of gender, which in turn would evoke gender stereotypic self-descriptions. Results confirmed these hypotheses. These data suggest that men's gender self-concepts are malleable and that situational cues differentially affect self-conceptions at an automatic and controlled level.

Over the past fifty years gender norms in American society have changed dramatically. As noted by psychologists and feminist theorists alike, more of these changes have occurred with respect to women's gender roles (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Steinem, 2000). Men's roles, however, have stayed far more consistent. For example, while women's participation in the work force has nearly doubled since 1950 (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; US Department of Labor, 2002), men's participation in domestic work has increased only marginally (Biernat & Wortman, 1991). Perhaps as a result, stereotypes about women tend to be various and dynamic while stereotypes about men tend to be more limited and stable (Deaux, Winton, Crowley, & Lewis, 1985; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). Along the same lines, men's attitudes about gender tend to be more traditional than women's attitudes (Jackson, Hodge, & Ingram, 1994) and some evidence suggests that men comply more closely with gender stereotypes than do women (Burris, Branscombe, & Klar, 1997; Hogg & Turner, 1987).

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Despite these data, other evidence suggests that men's gender-related self-conceptions show some degree of malleability across contexts (Deaux & Major, 1987). Depending on the social situation and the degree to which their gender is distinctive, men are differentially likely to endorse stereotypically masculine traits in describing themselves (Cota & Dion, 1986; Dailey & Rosenzweig, 1988; Hogg & Turner, 1987). For example, when men are the minority sex in mixed-sex groups, they are more likely to mention gender-related qualities in self-descriptions (Cota & Dion, 1986). Moreover, men's self-perceptions of their roles vary across different settings, with contexts such as the workplace prompting more stereotypically masculine self-descriptions and sexual situations prompting less masculine self-descriptions (Dailey & Rosenzweig, 1988). When are men's self-conceptions malleable and when are they stable? What is the best way to capture this flexibility? The overarching goal of the present study was to specify and test two conditions under which men's gender self-conceptions ought to show flexibility. Our primary focus was on men's automatic (implicit) self-conceptions, but for comparison purposes, we also examined their controlled (explicit) self-perceptions.

Compensatory Cognition and the Working Self-concept

For many years, research on the self-concept followed two separate lines: one wherein the self was conceptualized as a stable and enduring mental representation and one wherein the self was conceptualized as a fluid and malleable mental representation (Markus & Kunda, 1986). On the one hand, research on the consistency of the self-concept has demonstrated that people actively seek out information and situations that confirm their existing self-concept and misinterpret or ignore information that contradicts their dominant beliefs about themselves (Shrauger & Lund, 1975; Swann, 1997). On the other hand, research on the malleability of the self-concept has also provided considerable evidence that beliefs about the self expressed at any given time or situation depend on their relevance in that particular situation (Cota & Dion, 1986; Daily & Rosenzweig, 1988; Devos & Banaji, 2003; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; McGuire, McGuire, Child, Fujioka, 1978; McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979; Moskowitz, 2002; Steele, 1988; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994).

In an attempt to integrate these lines of research, Markus and colleagues proposed a model of the working self-concept, which consists of individuals' self-relevant attributes that are activated or elicited by a particular event or a situation (Markus & Kunda, 1986). The working self-concept is also shaped by challenges to the self. Threat to self-esteem, threat to one's social status, and threat to one's membership in important groups are all countered by malleable self-conceptions (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moskowitz, 2001).

Compensatory cognition is one way in which the working self-concept changes when confronted by threats (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moskowitz, 2001; Steele, 1988; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). This psychological response is of particular interest to us in the present study. Compensatory cognition appears to protect valued beliefs about the self when those beliefs are threatened by contradicting information (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moskowitz, 2002; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981).

Some researchers contend that people may not be aware when various self-enhancing mechanisms and behaviors are at work (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moskowitz, 2001, 2002; Rudman, Dohn, & Fairchild, 2006;

Tesser, 2000). In one study that supports this point (Markus & Kunda, 1986), participants were made to feel either extremely unique or extremely similar to others. Subsequently, they were asked to select self-descriptive adjectives from a given list and the speed at which they responded was measured. While participants did not differ in the words they chose, they did differ in their speed of response. Participants made to feel extremely similar to others were faster at endorsing “unique” traits while participants made to feel dissimilar from others were faster at endorsing “similar” traits. Markus and Kunda (1986) argued that this compensatory effect was automatic based on the evidence that participants’ explicit self-descriptions were the same across conditions, but what varied was the speed with which those traits were attributed to the self.

More recent work by Moskowitz (2001, 2002) provides similar evidence. In one study, Moskowitz (2002, Experiment 1) asked athletes to describe either an experience of success or failure in their athletic careers (a self-affirming or self-threatening experience). Subsequently, they completed a Stroop task in which words relevant to the goal of athleticism (e.g., “athletic”, “strong”) and words irrelevant to that goal (e.g., “studious”, “smart”) were presented in various colors. When asked to identify the color of athleticism-relevant words, participants who had been threatened were significantly slower than others who had been affirmed suggesting that threat to their athletic prowess automatically drew participants’ attention to the semantic meaning of goal-relevant words and interfered with their ability to name the colors of those words. When the words were irrelevant to athleticism, however, response latencies for self-threatened and self-affirmed participants were not significantly different. A second study provided a conceptual replication using participants whose egalitarian goals had been threatened (Moskowitz, 2002, Experiment 2). These data suggest that participants automatically attended to words relevant to threatened goals. Importantly, as in Markus and Kunda’s (1986) study, participants were unaware that their compensatory responses were influenced by the experimental manipulation. Together, this evidence suggests that compensatory cognition occurs automatically and without people’s awareness, a point that has been made by other self-concept theories as well (Tesser, 2000).

Past research suggests that affect-laden situations and experiences have a particularly potent effect on the malleability of automatic attitudes and beliefs about others and the self. For example, studies have found that White participants show increased automatic race bias when placed in a situation where they receive negative feedback from a Black supervisor rather than positive feedback from the same individual (Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). Similarly, men show greater automatic bias against women when they anticipate playing a subordinate role rather than a superior role in an interaction with a woman (Richeson & Ambady, 2001). Moreover, White participants show greater automatic bias against African Americans on a reaction time task when their egalitarian self-conceptions are threatened because the task is framed as a measure of their personal attitudes rather than a measure of cultural stereotypes (Frantz, Cuddy, Burnett, Ray, & Hart, 2004). Finally, when automatic evaluations of the self are the focus of investigation, automatic self-esteem has been found to increase in response to self-relevant threats (Rudman et al., 2006). All of these instances show that negative affective experiences are particularly effective in modulating automatic attitudes and beliefs expressed in those situations.

Based on the evidence described above, we predict that threat to self-relevant beliefs will shift men’s automatic beliefs about themselves in a compensatory fashion.

We do not, however, expect these shifts to be reflected in controlled self-descriptions. On the contrary, if compensatory cognition quickly and successfully protects the self from threatening information, then subsequent explicit accounts of the self may survive unscathed. In other words, compensatory cognition may be captured more easily using indirect measures that assess automatic self-related beliefs whereas direct measures that assess controlled beliefs may fail to do so (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Moskowitz, 2001).

Threat to One's Social Status and Its Effect on the Self-concept

Different events or situational variables may threaten people's self-conceptions and trigger compensatory cognition as a way of countering the threat. In our research we focused on threats to men's gender-related beliefs about themselves as agentic, authoritative, and masterful. We chose agency as the masculine trait dimension given the abundance of research demonstrating that men describe themselves as, and are stereotyped as, more agentic than women (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Hosoda & Stone, 2000). Similarly on implicit measures of gender self-concept, men and women show even stronger gender differences, sometimes as much as three times the difference they show on explicit measures (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Thus, we believed that placing men in a low status (non-agentic) position would challenge their masculine self-beliefs.

Men are particularly likely to be invested in masculine self-conceptions given the fact that they belong to a high-status group. Typically, members of high-status groups identify more strongly with their in-group than members of low-status groups (Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, de Vries, & Wilke, 1988), and they tend to think and act in ways that maintain their group membership (Depret & Fiske, 1999; Ellemers, Doosje, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1992; Fiske, 2001; Operario, Goodwin, & Fiske, 1998). Threatening masculine self-conceptions may be particularly important to men because deviation from agentic norms is likely to challenge the justification for their in-group's high status and the privilege associated with it (Burris et al., 1997; Hogg & Turner, 1987). As a result it seems reasonable to predict that when agentic self-beliefs are threatened, men will compensate by expressing even more masculine self-beliefs to preserve their privilege.

Thus, the first goal of the present research was to test whether men, when unexpectedly placed in a counterstereotypic low-status role involving little authority and agency, will compensate for their loss of agency by bolstering masculine attributes associated with the self and distancing themselves from feminine attributes associated with the self, compared to other men placed in a stereotypic high-status role. Given the evidence that compensatory cognition functions outside of awareness, we predicted that shifts in men's gender self-conceptions as a function of their status would emerge more clearly in terms of automatic self-related beliefs rather than controlled beliefs.

Situational Salience of Gender and Its Effect on the Self-concept

In addition to social status, other situational cues may also affect people's self-conceptions. Cues that draw attention to gender, such as the sex of one's interaction partners, may make people think about themselves in a more gender schematic manner (James, 1993). In the presence of out-group members one's own group membership may become salient, leading people to mention in-group traits and

behaviors more frequently in self-descriptions (Cota & Dion, 1986; Hogg & Turner, 1987; McGuire, McGuire, & Cheever, 1986).

In line with this evidence, some researchers contend that people's in-group identities are most likely to affect their judgment and behavior under two conditions—when situational cues (a) render in-group identity distinctive, and (b) make people consciously reflect on themselves (Abrams, 1994). By integrating self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) and self-attention theory (Wicklund, 1975), Abrams (1994) argues that self-focus or self-awareness enhances the influence of salient group membership on judgment and behavior. This claim is supported by evidence that when placed into minimal groups, people who are self-aware base their behavior on in-group standards and act to preserve their in-group's distinctiveness more than others who are less self-aware (Abrams & Brown, 1989). Likewise, when group membership is made salient, highly self-aware individuals express a stronger sense of belonging to the in-group as well as greater pride in their in-group than less self-aware individuals (Abrams, 1985).

It is not clear, however, whether group-related distinctiveness will have equivalent effects in the absence of self-focus or self-reflection. In other words, while the effect of gender salience on controlled self-beliefs is robust (Cota & Dion, 1986; Hogg & Turner, 1987), the same may not be true for automatic self-beliefs. To the extent that automatic attitudes and beliefs are particularly sensitive to threat or other affect-laden contexts (e.g., Rudman et al., 2006), comparatively neutral contexts created by varying gender salience may not be sufficient to alter automatic beliefs about the self. Based on these arguments, we do not expect gender salience by itself to play a strong role when participants' self-related beliefs are measured indirectly using a reaction-time measure. However, we predict that gender salience will play a role in participants' self-reported descriptions of themselves. That is, male participants who interact with a female partner will be more likely to describe themselves in terms of stereotypically masculine traits than male participants who interact with a male partner.

Method

Overview

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the role of social status and gender salience on the malleability of men's gender self-conceptions. To that end, male participants were placed in a superior or subordinate role relative to a male or female confederate for a joint task on public speaking. Subsequently we assessed participants' automatic and controlled beliefs about themselves. We predicted first that participants placed in a low-status role would automatically emphasize their stereotypically masculine agentic qualities significantly more than those placed in a high-status role. As a secondary hypothesis, we predicted that participants who had to interact with a female partner would subsequently describe themselves using more masculine agentic qualities than those who had to interact with a male partner.

Participants

A community sample of 58 men participated in exchange for \$10 each. Participant's age ranged from 17 to 68 years old with a mean age of 32. In terms of ethnicity,

51% of participants identified as White, 20% identified as Hispanic, 13% identified as Black, 7% identified as multiracial, 3% identified as Asian, 1% as Native American, and 5% did not specify their race. Participants were recruited with flyers posted in Manhattan, as well as postings on the Internet (www.craigslist.org, www.loot.com, and www.nypress.com).

Independent and Dependent Variables

Manipulation of social status. Participants were told that they would engage in a public speaking task for fifteen minutes. In reality, this task was designed to manipulate the social status of the participant in relation to the confederate. The high-status role was designed to be the control condition, requiring more agentic and authoritative behaviors (stereotypically masculine qualities). The low-status role was designed to require more compliant and accepting behaviors (that are stereotypically feminine qualities; see Eagly & Karau, 2002). Specifically, in the “subordinate participant” condition, participants were led to believe that the confederate was a professor of public speaking and as such possessed the expertise and authority to evaluate the public speaking performance of the participant.¹ To enhance the effect of the confederate’s superior status, the confederate was dressed in a business suit and sat at the front of a lecture-style classroom at the teacher’s desk whereas the participant was asked to sit at a student desk. The confederate told the participant that he or she was currently conducting research on public speaking with a particular focus on people’s ability to read aloud fluently from teleprompters. The confederate then asked participants to read aloud a short script (taken from “The Testimony of Sculpture” by Harold Haydon) so that he or she could collect some new data on ordinary people’s public speaking abilities. As the participant read, the superior confederate observed closely and took notes. When the participant was done, the confederate gave him some general feedback including a number of suggestions the participant could use to improve his public speaking.

In the “superior participant” condition, participants were given the authority to evaluate the performance of the confederate and to determine the resources that should be allocated to him or her (i.e., the confederate was ostensibly “outcome dependent” on the participant; see Fiske, 2001; Operario et al., 1998; Raven, 1993). Specifically, participants were told that the confederate was a graduate student training to become a teaching assistant (TA). To underscore the confederate’s subordinate status, he or she was dressed casually like a graduate student, and sat at one of the student desks in a lecture-style classroom while the participant sat at the teacher’s desk in front of the classroom. Additionally, participants were told that as part of the TA selection process, the selection committee required that each graduate student read aloud a given passage in front of an unfamiliar audience and have his or her performance evaluated by a member of the audience. The ostensible goal of this exercise was to get “objective feedback” from the audience (i.e., the participant) about the confederate’s speaking style, confidence, and his/her potential to be an effective lecturer. This feedback would determine whether the confederate would get a teaching assistantship the following semester. Accordingly, the confederate (the “prospective TA”) read aloud, making some common mistakes along the way including some speech errors and mispronunciations, occasional fidgeting, failing to make frequent eye contact, and standing with poor posture. Afterward, participants completed a written evaluation for the “TA Training Committee.”

Manipulation of gender salience in the situation. The salience of participant gender was manipulated by alternating the sex of the confederate. In the high gender salience condition, male participants interacted with a female confederate while in the low gender salience condition male participants interacted with a male confederate.

Measurement of automatic beliefs about the self. Participants' automatic beliefs about the self were assessed with the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The IAT is a computerized task that measures the relative strength with which two target concepts (e.g., self vs. not self) are associated with two types of attributes using response latency to operationalize belief strength. The stronger the mental association between a target and attribute, the more quickly people should be able to categorize them together in a speeded reaction-time task. In the present experiment, the two target concepts in the IAT were the self and non-self, which were represented by pronouns such as "I" and "me," versus "they" and "them," respectively. The two attribute dimensions of interest were "leader" and "learner" represented by words such as "influential" and "knowledgeable," versus "apprentice" and "novice," respectively (see Appendix for all stimuli used in the IAT). These two attribute dimensions were chosen because they capture qualities typically associated with people in superior versus subordinate social roles and because these qualities clearly map onto masculine stereotypes about authority and leadership versus feminine stereotypes about compliance and deference (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). All attributes chosen for this study were positive and thus were not confounded by variance in valence.

During the IAT, after some practice, participants were exposed to four types of stimuli presented one at a time on a computer screen (leader, learner, self and non-self words). Their task was to categorize each word using one of two designated response keys as quickly and accurately as possible. In two critical blocks of the IAT, participants were instructed to categorize leader words and self-related pronouns using the same key but learner words and non-self pronouns using a different key (abbreviated as me + leader and not-me + learner, respectively). In two other blocks of the IAT, response key assignment was reversed such that now participants were instructed to categorize learner words and self-related pronouns using the same key but leader words and non-self pronouns using a different key (abbreviated as me + learner and not-me + leader, respectively). The order in which the IAT blocks were presented was counterbalanced between participants.

Typically, when a target concept and an attribute sharing the same response key are strongly associated in participants' mind, they classify them quickly and easily whereas when they are weakly associated, participants classify them more slowly and with greater difficulty. If a participant associates himself more strongly with leader than learner attributes, he ought to be faster at categorizing me + leader and not-me + learner and slower at categorizing me + learner and not-me + leader. The difference in response latency (in milliseconds) for the two types of blocks, is referred to as the IAT effect and is a measure of participants' automatic self-conceptions. Given our prediction that men in a low-status position would automatically bolster stereotypically masculine attributes and distance themselves from stereotypically feminine attributes, we expected their responses to be significantly faster during the me + leader/not-me + learner block than the me + learner/not-me + leader block.

By comparison, we expected participants in the high-status position to express less self-stereotypic beliefs by responding equally fast to both blocks.

Measurement of controlled beliefs about the self. Participants also completed a questionnaire concerning their beliefs about the self. Specifically, they rated the extent to which the 12 leader- and learner-related attributes (e.g., knowledgeable, beginner) described themselves using 7-point scales (1 = *Does not describe me at all* to 7 = *Describes me very well*). These attributes were the same ones used in the IAT (see Appendix for the complete list). We expected men in the high gender salience condition (who interacted with a female confederate) to endorse more leader traits and fewer learner traits compared to men in the low gender salience condition (who interacted with a male confederate).

Demographic measure. Participants also completed a general demographic questionnaire that included questions about their age, ethnicity, and occupation.

Procedure

Male volunteers were scheduled to participate in the study one at a time. A female experimenter greeted participants and led them to believe that they were participating in two separate and unrelated activities. The “first activity” was, in fact, the status manipulation and the “second activity” involved the administration of the automatic and explicit belief measures. The experimenter told participants that since her experiment would only take half an hour, she was “loaning” some of her experimental time to another ostensibly unrelated project, which would be administered first. After participants were done participating in that project, they would begin her experiment.

At this point, the experimenter took the participant to a classroom, introduced him to the confederate and left the room. Depending upon the experimental condition, participants were either introduced to a female or male confederate who was either in a subordinate or superior role relative to participants. The confederate identified himself or herself as either a professor of public speaking or a graduate student and introduced the public speaking task (see materials section for details). This task took about twenty minutes. Afterwards, the confederate told the participant that the first activity was over and led him to a different room where the original experimenter was waiting.

At this time, the experimenter administered the IAT and the self-report questionnaire. Finally, participants completed the demographic questionnaire, after which they were probed for suspicion, debriefed, thanked and paid for their participation.

Results

Effect of Status and Confederate Sex on Automatic Self-concept

IAT data were prepared using the revised algorithm recommended by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003). In keeping with this new procedure, the two blocks of the IAT that required simultaneous categorization of me/not-me pronouns and leader/learner attributes were retained and the practice blocks were eliminated. The four data collection blocks were used to calculate an automatic self-belief score (or IAT effect) for each participant. This score represented the differential speed with

which participants completed the me + leader block compared to the me + learner block in terms of effect size or modified Cohen's d (IAT D ; see Greenwald et al., 2003, for details). Large effect sizes indicate more stereotypic automatic self-beliefs for male participants whereas effect sizes close to zero indicate less stereotypic automatic self-beliefs for male participants.

In order to test whether participants' status or the sex of their interaction partner influenced their automatic self-related beliefs, we conducted a Participant Status (low vs. high) \times Confederate Sex (male vs. female) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) using IAT effect size (D) as the dependent variable. As predicted, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of participants' status, $F(1, 58) = 4.26, p = .04$.² Specifically, as shown in Figure 1, male participants in the subordinate condition were significantly faster at associating themselves with leader-like traits than learner-like traits (IAT effect = 142 ms; IAT $D = .26$) whereas male participants in the superior condition were equally fast at associating themselves with leader and learner traits (IAT effect = -25 ms; IAT $D = -.07$). Mean response latencies for the me + leader versus me + learner blocks showed that participants in the subordinate condition were substantially slower at associating themselves with learner attributes ($M = 1122$ ms) than leader attributes ($M = 980$ ms), whereas participants in the superior condition were equally fast at associating themselves with both learner and leader attributes ($M_s = 971$ and 996 ms, respectively). In other words, the data suggest that men in the subordinate role automatically compensated by distancing themselves from stereotypically feminine qualities compared to stereotypically masculine qualities whereas men in the superior role were equally likely to associate themselves with both types of qualities.

Effect of Status and Confederate Sex on Controlled Self-concept

Controlled self-related beliefs were derived from the self-description questionnaire in the following manner. Each participant's self-ratings on the six "leader" words were

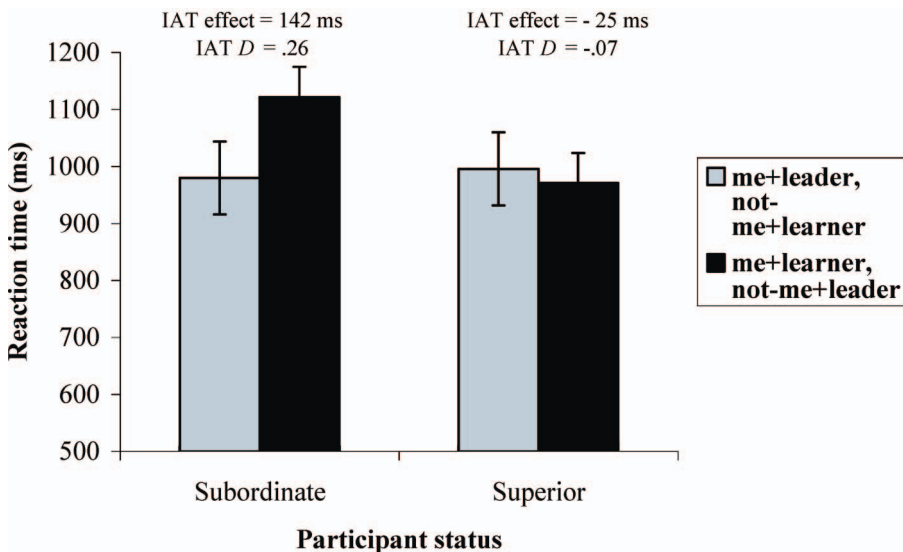


FIGURE 1 The influence of social status on men's automatic beliefs about the self.

averaged together to produce a self-concept score for leadership traits ($\alpha = .83$). The six “learner” words were also averaged together to produce a self-concept score for learner-like traits ($\alpha = .67$). A Confederate Sex \times Participant Status \times Trait Type ANOVA with self-ratings as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of trait type indicating that, overall, male participants identified themselves more strongly with leadership qualities ($M_{\text{leader}} = 5.18$) than with learner-like qualities ($M_{\text{learner}} = 3.99$); $F(1, 58) = 47.68$, $p < .0009$. More importantly, as predicted, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between Confederate Sex \times Trait Type, $F(1, 59) = 4.09$, $p = .05$; see Figure 2. *T*-tests showed that participants who had encountered a female confederate were more likely to self-stereotype than those who had encountered a male confederate. In the female confederate condition, the difference between men’s endorsement of leadership qualities ($M_{\text{leader}} = 5.37$) versus learner-like qualities ($M_{\text{learner}} = 3.82$, $t(31) = 6.03$, $p = 10^{-6}$) was larger than the difference in the male confederate condition, $M_{\text{leader}} = 4.99$, $M_{\text{learner}} = 4.15$, $t(30) = 3.79$, $p = .001$. The ANOVA did not reveal any other effects (all $ps > .20$).

Relation between Automatic and Controlled Self-beliefs

To examine the relationship between automatic and controlled self-beliefs, we first calculated a difference score for self-reported trait ratings to make them comparable to the IAT effect by subtracting ratings for learner-like traits from ratings for leadership traits. Thus, larger positive difference scores indicate that participants described themselves as possessing more leadership qualities than learner-like qualities. To test if the relationship between automatic and controlled self-beliefs was moderated by manipulated status or confederate gender, we conducted a regression analysis using IAT scores as the outcome variable. In the first step of this regression, confederate gender, participants’ status and self-related beliefs (difference score) were entered as predictor variables. In the second step, we added the first-order

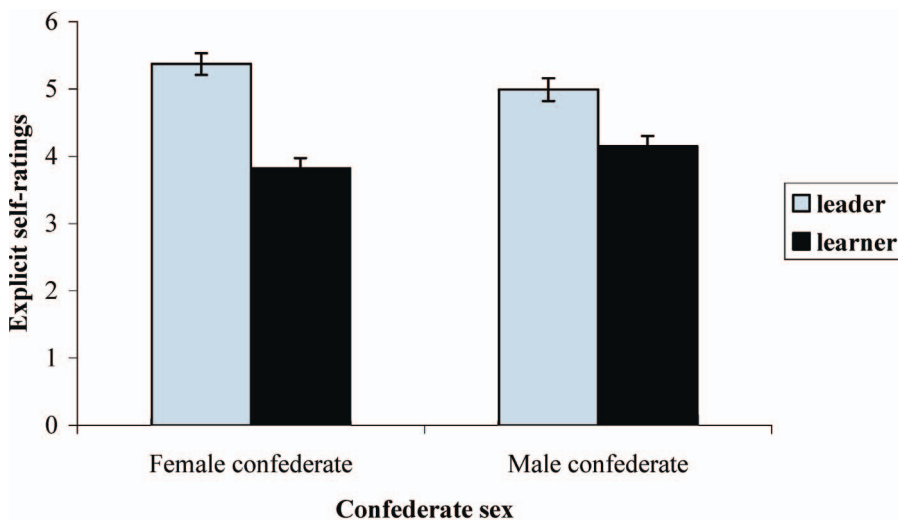


FIGURE 2 The influence of confederate sex on men’s controlled beliefs about the self.

interaction terms between our predictor variables. In the third step, we added the second-order interaction term (confederate gender \times participant status \times self-related beliefs).

Results revealed that automatic self-beliefs (IAT effect) were significantly related to participant status and to self-reported beliefs, $F(3, 54) = 2.90, p = .04$. As expected, participants placed in a low-status role automatically compensated by exhibiting more leader-like self-beliefs than others placed in a high-status role ($\beta = .27, p = .04$). Additionally, participants who described themselves using more leadership traits were also more likely to exhibit automatic leader-like self-conceptions ($\beta = .26, p = .05$). All other effects were nonsignificant.

General Discussion

The present study offers new evidence suggesting that men's gender self-conceptions are malleable in response to situational cues. Different situational factors, however, evoke shifts in automatic self-conceptions compared to controlled self-conceptions.

Threat to One's Social Status and its Effect on the Self-concept

The experimental manipulation of social status yielded evidence that, in general, men automatically compensate for an experience of subordination. Participants in the low-status condition expressed a more stereotypically masculine pattern of automatic self-beliefs than participants in the high-status position. This pattern appears to be driven by one or both of the following when men were placed in a low-status role: (a) a weakening of the association between the self-concept and stereotypically feminine attributes, or (b) a weakening of the association between other people and masculine attributes. We interpret these data to suggest that when placed in a counterstereotypically subordinate role, male participants' agentic and authoritative masculine self-concepts were threatened. They responded to this threat by automatically rejecting feminine attributes in themselves and/or automatically rejecting the notion that masculine attributes may be present in other people. The result of both types of compensatory cognitions is to protect one's own masculine self-conception in a relative sense. These data fall in line with other research suggesting that threats to the self may be particularly potent in altering implicit cognition (e.g., Rudman et al., 2006) and that threat to their masculinity may make men particularly motivated to distance themselves from femininity (Kilianski, 2003; McCreary, 1994).

Interestingly, the effects of compensatory cognition did not appear in participants' conscious and reflective descriptions of themselves. The evidence that self-regulation emerged more clearly at an automatic level fits nicely with other researchers' argument that people are often not conscious of compensatory cognition as it occurs (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moskowitz, 2002; Tesser, 2000). We interpret these findings to suggest that the automatic compensatory response functions as a regulatory process that might preempt the need for changes in one's conscious self-conceptions. If the compensation is effective, one would not expect any changes in descriptions of the self.

While our data support these claims, future research should clarify a few ambiguities in our findings. First, the IAT results for the men in the lower status position suggest that the differences in the IAT effect were driven by slower response

latencies for the counterstereotypic associations, which includes both the “me + learner” pairing and the “not me + leader” pairing. As such, we cannot determine from these data which of these pairings drove the effect when men were placed in the lower status role. It is possible that the compensatory reaction is as much about rejecting the association of others with masculine traits as it is about rejecting the association of the self with feminine traits. Future research might use a different reaction-time task that allows for the disaggregation of these associations to clarify this point.

A second ambiguity in the study stems from the manipulation of status. The nature of our manipulation is such that participants in the low-status condition were in a position to be criticized while the participants in the high-status position were not (and were, in fact, given the opportunity to criticize others). As such, participants’ compensatory reaction may have been driven by the threat of criticism and not the threat to social status *per se*. Future research should create a social status manipulation that is able to decouple these interpretations. However such a decoupling may be difficult given that low status and being subject to critical evaluation often go hand in hand.

More generally, questions remain about the psychological mechanism that causes threat-induced compensatory cognition. Some researchers argue that a discrepancy between individuals’ self-defining goals and their actual performance arouses negative affect, which in turn, triggers self-regulation (Moskowitz, 2001; cf. Tesser, 2000). Applying this theory to our study, the low-status position is likely to have contradicted participants’ self-definition as agentic, assertive, and authoritative. This contradiction may have aroused negative affect, which in turn triggered compensatory protection of the threatened beliefs. While evidence supports the claim that counterstereotypic behavior evokes negative affect (e.g., Rudman & Fairchild, 2004) and that negative affect can be countered with implicit bolstering of self-esteem (Rudman et al., 2006), the attribution of a similar mechanism to our findings is speculative and requires direct exploration.

Questions also remain as to whether women would react similarly to counterstereotypic experiences. Whereas low-status roles are counterstereotypic for men, high-status roles are counterstereotypic for women. We expect women to be less threatened by counterstereotypic experiences of high status than men are to counterstereotypic experiences of low status based on the evidence that women’s gender roles tend to be more dynamic than men’s gender roles (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000), and that more than a few women aspire to agentic roles (Rudman & Glick, 1999). As such, we do not expect women in high-status roles to compensate by bolstering stereotypically feminine attributes or by distancing themselves from masculine attributes in the self. In fact, some evidence suggests that women placed in high-status roles find it easier to associate masculine attributes with the self compared to other women placed in low-status roles (Haines & Kray, 2005). However, if stereotypically feminine yet strongly positive self-beliefs are challenged, we predict that this might be particularly threatening to women and might, in turn, elicit automatic compensatory reactions to protect one’s femininity.

Given individual variations in the strength of in-group identification and the effects that such variations have on self-stereotyping and intergroup behavior (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001; Verkuyten & Nekuee, 1999), we believe that compensatory reactions observed in the present study are likely to be moderated by individual differences. Specifically, we anticipate that the degree to which men identify as

masculine is likely to moderate their compensatory cognitions in response to threat. Along the same lines, we predict that women with more masculine or agentic self-conceptions might compensate in a fashion similar to that observed in the present study.

Finally, we found no significant effect of confederate sex on participants' automatic beliefs about themselves. Participants in the subordinate condition automatically distanced themselves from feminine self-conceptions regardless of whether the individual in the superior role was male or female. As such, it appears that automatic self-stereotyping was dependent on the experience of subordination alone and not on the stereotypicality of the superior individual's sex and role combined. To the extent that compensatory reactions are primarily focused on maintaining self-related beliefs in an automatic fashion, the sex of the superior may be less important in this context. Future research should investigate the degree to which this pattern holds true in other social contexts.

Situational Salience of Gender and Its Effect on the Self-concept

In terms of the situational manipulation of gender salience, the present study found that participants who interacted with a female confederate described themselves using more stereotypically masculine traits compared to participants who interacted with a male confederate. As in earlier research (Cota & Dion, 1986; Hogg & Turner, 1987), self-related beliefs became more gendered when attention was directed to the self via the solicitation of explicit self-descriptions. In line with earlier research, we interpret our data to suggest that male participants' gender identity became more salient when their attention was focused on the self in the presence of the female confederate. As suggested by Abrams (1994), distinctiveness influenced people's self-related beliefs only when self-descriptions were solicited directly. While the data only allow for conjecture, we suggest that the manipulation of gender distinctiveness, in contrast to the manipulation of social status, was not sufficiently affect-laden to alter the implicit beliefs about the self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research demonstrates that people's self-concepts are flexible and sensitive to contextual cues. At the same time, this flexibility works to keep people's beliefs about themselves aligned with prototypical in-group characteristics. In the case of men, when their high-status masculine self-beliefs are threatened, the self-regulatory system automatically and subtly works to validate their masculine self-conceptions. Furthermore, when gender is relevant in a given situation, men describe themselves using more in-group stereotypes. Together these findings demonstrate how the malleability of the working self-concept works differentially at the automatic versus controlled level to preserve one's in-group identity and related beliefs about the self.

Notes

1. The confederates were about 30 years old; thus both status manipulations (professor and student) were believable.
2. The ANOVA did not reveal any other significant effects ($F_s < 1$).

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Appendix

IAT stimuli

<i>Leader words</i>	<i>Learner words</i>
Influential	Beginner
Knowledgeable	Learning
Authority	Willing
Assertive	Apprentice
Confident	Novice
Leader	Learner
<i>Self-related pronouns</i>	<i>Other related pronouns</i>
I	They
Me	Them
Mine	Their
My	Theirs
Myself	Other

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