

Trait Concepts Vary By Target Because of Assumed Context

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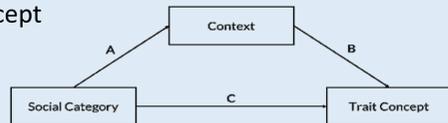


Introduction

If asked to think about a competent older woman, a perceiver would likely think of this person quite differently than if they were asked to think about a competent younger man. It is known that people's concepts of traits such as competence and dominance vary (Stolier et al., 2020), but why does this happen? We propose *assumed context* as a mediator to explain differences in trait concepts across targets. We use occupation as our assumed context, since stereotypes around occupations are plentiful (Gupta et al., 2009; White & White, 2006). We posit that the effect of identity (age, gender, and race) on our concepts of traits, in this case, competence, dominance, and trustworthiness, is mediated by assumed context. Using information about a target's identity, perceivers make assumptions about who that person is, which impacts their concepts of the target's trait concepts. As such, when an explicit context is given, in this case an occupation, the impact of identity on a perceiver's judgements of trait concepts should weaken or disappear, as the perceiver is no longer relying on an assumed context. We aim to demonstrate that peoples' concepts of certain trait concepts will in fact be more similar when they are given an occupation as context.

Hypotheses

- H1:** Social categories influence trait concepts (pathway C)
- H2:** Social categories influence assumed context (pathway A)
- H3:** Adding a concrete context (fixing pathway B and removing pathway A) reduces the effect of social category on trait concept



Methods and Procedure

Step 1: Effect of Social Category on Trait Concepts

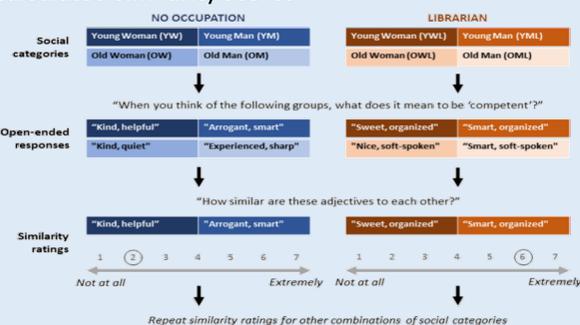
- Asked "What are the first three adjectives that come to mind when you think of a _____ competent woman in her 20s/50s, man in his 20s/50s (part 1), dominant/trustworthy Black woman/man, Asian woman/man, Black woman/man who is a scientist, Asian woman/man who is a scientist, Black woman/man who is an athlete, Asian woman/man who is an athlete (Part 2).
- Selected 10 most frequently given adjectives and conducted proportions tests.

Step 2: Effect of Social Category on Assumed Context

- Asked "What are the first two occupations that come to mind when you think of this kind of person?" with the same phrases listed above presented in randomized order.
- For both parts 1 and 2, we selected the 20 most frequently listed occupations and conducted proportions tests

Step 3: Effect of Concrete Context on Trait Concept Similarity Across Social Categories

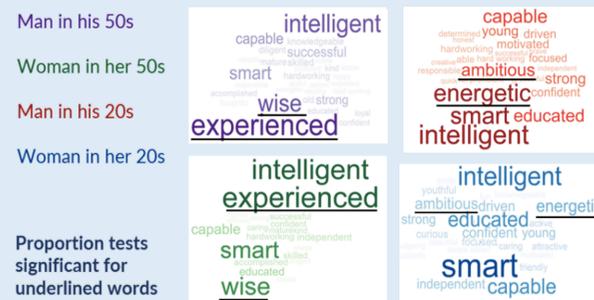
- Participants asked to provide similarity ratings for the groups of words that they had given to describe different groups.
- Compared similarity ratings of groups of adjectives and calculated similarity scores.



Part 1: Age-by-Gender Trait Concepts For Competence

Step 1: 115 participants (59.1% male, 40.0% female, 0.9% prefer not to answer) completed a 2 x 2 x 2 (Context: no occupation or concrete occupation; Age: in their 20s or in their 50s; Gender: women or men) within-subjects study.

What are the first words that come to mind when you think of a competent...



Step 2: 237 participants (56.5% male, 42.2% female, 0.4% non-binary, 0.8% prefer not to answer) completed a 2 x 2 (Age: in their 20s or in their 50s; Gender: women or men) within-subjects study.

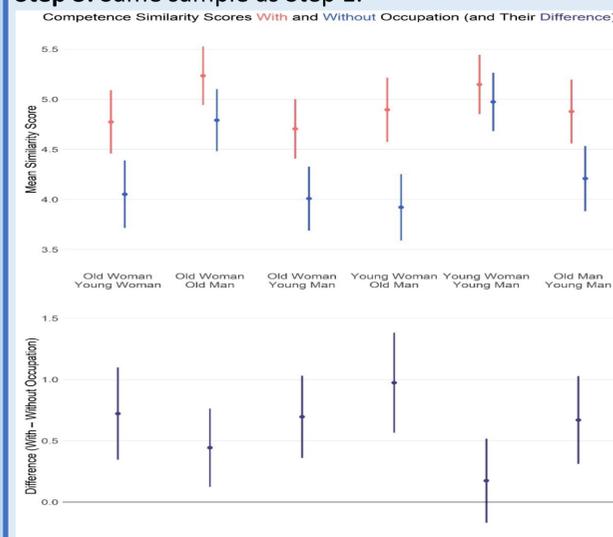
Table 1
Proportion Tests for Assumed Occupations by Age-by-Gender Category

Occupation	Category	Woman, 50s	Woman, 20s	Man, 50s	Man, 20s
Teacher***		.33	.16	.05	.01
Nurse***		.27	.18	.00	.00
Waiter/Waitress***		.01	.24	.00	.11
Accountant***		.08	.02	.17	.01
Secretary***		.16	.08	.00	.00

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Note. Occupations are listed in order of overall frequency. Red denotes the categories for which each occupation constituted the highest proportion of responses.

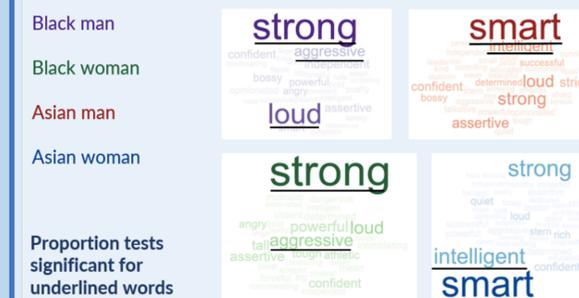
Step 3: Same sample as Step 1.



Part 2: Race-by-Gender Trait Concepts For Dominance and Trustworthiness

Step 1: 297 participants (52.2% male, 47.1% female, 0.7% prefer not to answer) completed a 2 x 2 x 2 (Context: with occupation or without occupation; Gender: women or men; Race: Black or Asian) within-subjects and 2 x 2 (Trait: dominance or trustworthiness; Occupation: scientist or athlete) between-subjects study.

What are the first words that come to mind when you think of a dominant...



Step 2: 232 participants (58.6% male, 41.4% female) completed a 3 x 2 (Race: Black, White or Asian; Gender: women or men) within-subjects study.

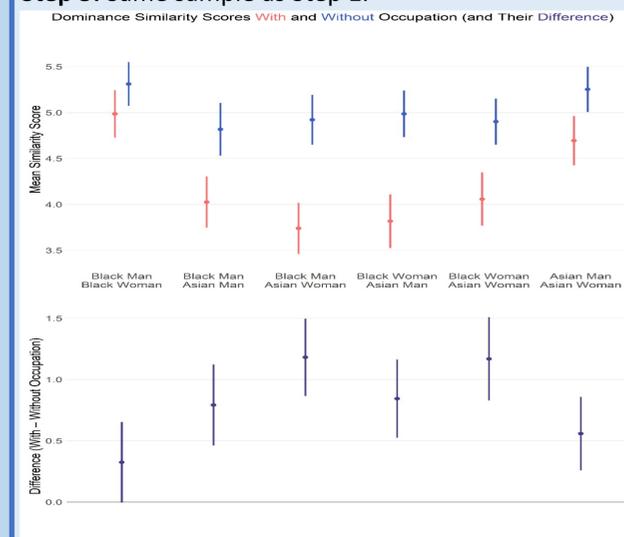
Table 2
Proportion Tests for Assumed Occupations by Race-by-Gender Category

Occupation	Black Woman	Black Man	White Woman	White Man	Asian Woman	Asian Man
Teacher	0.15	0.04	.25	0.02	0.11	0.06
Doctor	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.14	0.16	.19
Nurse	0.19	0.01	.22	0.01	0.08	0.02
Manager	0.04	0.06	0.08	.12	0.04	0.06
Engineer	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.06	0.06	.15

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Note. Adjectives are listed in order of overall frequency. Red denotes the categories for which each adjective constituted the highest proportions of responses.

Step 3: Same sample as Step 1.



Results

Part 1:

- Step 1:** Proportions tests showed that the top 10 most frequently given adjectives were provided more often for some groups than others, suggesting that perceivers do in fact think of certain adjectives as being associated more or less with certain groups.
- Step 2:** Proportions tests showed that people think of different occupations as being associated more or less with various groups (e.g. people do not think of "doctor" as being held equally by members of all of the groups they were presented with).
- Step 3:** When an occupation was introduced, similarity ratings increased.

Part 2:

- Steps 1 and 2:** Same results as in Part 1.
- Step 3:** Same phenomenon in which adding a context (occupation) caused similarity scores to increase, but the effect was smaller for trustworthiness than for dominance.

Discussion

Our findings generally support our hypotheses.

- H1:** Step 1 in both Parts 1 and 2 showed that social categories such as age, gender, and race do in fact influence trait concepts such as competence, dominance, and trustworthiness.
- H2:** In step 2 we observed that social category does in fact impact what occupations perceivers believe targets likely hold.
- H3:** Step 3 showed that when an occupation was introduced, similarity ratings did in fact increase (i.e. adding a concrete context does in fact reduce the effect of social category on trait concepts).

- Note: we found that certain trait concepts remain more stable across targets (similarity ratings do not increase as much when an occupation is provided) than others. Specifically, dominance is less stable than trustworthiness.

References

- Gupta, V. K., Turban, D. B., Wasti, S. A., & Sikdar, A. (2009). E T P The Role of Gender & Stereotypes in Perceptions of Entrepreneurs and Intentions to Become an Entrepreneur. *ENTREPRENEURSHIP THEORY and PRACTICE*, 22.
- Stolier, R. M., Hehman, E., & Freeman, J. B. (2020). Trait knowledge forms a common structure across social cognition. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(4), 361–371. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0800-6>
- White, M. J., & White, G. B. (2006). Implicit and Explicit Occupational Gender Stereotypes. *Sex Roles*, 55(3), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9078-z>