



Influence of Stereotypes on Post-Choice Memories Errors of College Applicants

Zheng Cong

The Hockaday School, TX

ABSTRACT

Previous research has already proven and defined the existence of Choice-Supportive Misremembering. In general, research in this field has found that after making a decision, participants will misremember attributes in a way that favors their chosen option. In this present study, we explore the relationship between stereotypes and post-choice misremembering occurring within the college application setting. Participants were administered two tests: one choice test for them to choose between two applicants, and one memory test where they attributed each item presented to them on the choice test to an applicant. Across the sample, participants were more likely to attribute stereotype-linked activities to the applicant belonging to the population targeted by these stereotypes. These results prove the impact stereotypes have on memory errors, and prompts us to be more wary of making quick decisions.

KEYWORDS: Stereotypes, Post-Choice Memories, Errors, College Applicants, Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Memory is flawed. Many different factors can impact our memory, and errors occur on a daily basis. Memory, however, is also critical to the decision-making process, driving people into making decisions that shape the world today. Awareness of the impact, or lack thereof, of stereotypes can have on our memories is critical in promoting a more inclusive environment for the population. This project will be basing off of the concept of choice-supportive misremembering, and investigating the impact stereotypes might have on memory.

CHOICE-SUPPORTIVE MISREMEMBERING

Choice Supportive Misremembering is a phenomenon where previously chosen options were remembered in a more positive manner compared to that of the foregone option. (Lind et al., 2017) Currently, choice-supportive misremembering could be classified into four main subcategories: misattribution, fact distortion, false memory, and selective forgetting. For this project, we will focus on misattribution, false memory, and fact distortion.

Misattribution refers to when positive attributes are remembered to be belonging to the chosen option when in fact it belongs to the foregone option, or vice versa. For example, a house was more affordable but had noisy surroundings, whereas another house had cracks on the walls but great lighting. Positive attributes "affordable," and "good lighting" might both be attributed to the chosen option, whereas the

negative attributes "noisy surroundings," and "wall cracks" would be remembered as belonging to the foregone option. Multiple studies (Mather and Johnson, 2000; Mather et al., 2000, 2003; Chen and Zhang, 2003; Benney and Henkel, 2006; Henkel and Mather, 2007; Queen and Hess, 2010; Hess and Kotter-Grühn, 2011; Hess et al., 2012) studied choice-supportive misremembering and found evidence of misattribution. Moreover, it's observed in subjects that misattribution happens more in the context of misattributing positive attributes to chosen options than vice versa, although both scenarios are likely to happen (Mather et al., 2000). Several theories have been proposed for misattribution, including biased encoding, errors in source attribution, and reconstructive remembering at the time of memory retrieval. Arguably, the most commonly cited cause is that during recall we utilize the belief or knowledge of previously made choices when the source of certain attributes is not clearly remembered (Mather and Johnson, 2000; Lind et al., 2017).

Fact distortion occurs when objective values of an attribute are remembered as more or less preferential than the actual values, with values of chosen options being more preferential and values of foregone options being less (DeKay et al., 2014; Svenson et al., 2009). For instance, when shopping for a car, the miles per gallon of the chosen option might be misremembered as being higher than it truly was while the miles per gallon of the unchosen option may be misremembered as lower. Some studies on fact distortion have found a potential underlying cause is bias during



encoding (Dekay et al., 2014; Falco, 2020). Attributes could be encoded in a more positive manner if it belongs to the subject's current leading choice, while being downgraded if it belongs to the lagging option. Another theory, however, proposes that fact distortion occurs in the post-decision process. The alternative explanation for fact distortion is that subjects consolidate their decision during the time between when the decision is made and the recall time (Svenson et al., 2009). This consolidation takes the form of fact distortion.

Within the literature on choice supportive misremembering, false memories are observed when attributes that weren't mentioned previously for any option are "remembered" as belonging to either option (Mather et al., 2000). Most commonly, attributes generally considered positive are "remembered" for chosen options and negative attributes are "remembered" for foregone options. An example of choice-supportive false memory would be when a chosen option is remembered to have a higher consumer rating when such a rating wasn't given in the first place. Most evidence supporting false memories were byproducts of studies conducting source recognition tests. The three main possible explanations for false memories include schema-based explanations (Loftus, 1995), the source monitoring framework (Johnson et al., 1993), and the fuzzy trace theory (Reyna and Brainerd, 1995). Schema-based explanations propose that semantic integration changes or produces conflicting memory traces, thus resulting in false memories. The source monitoring framework theory, on the other hand, states that false memories are caused by thoughts being wrongly attributed to other sources.

Across all forms of post-choice memory errors, causes can be grouped into two major categories: post-choice biases and biases during the encoding process. Post-choice biases propose that after a decision is made, attributes will be misremembered in a way that favors the chosen option. The most commonly cited theory behind this is using our memory of the choice as a source of information (Mather et al., 2000; Lind et al., 2017). Additionally, recent research has found support for a pre-choice encoding bias. Ratings taken during the encoding process have been found to predict post-choice memory errors even when controlling for choice. This was first observed in fact distortion studies (Dekay et al., 2014), but has been expanded to misattribution and false memories (Falco et al., 2020). One theoretical reason for pre-choice biases proposed by Falco was fuzzy trace theory (Reyna and Brainerd, 1995). According to the fuzzy trace theory, while making a decision we are engaging in gist based processing. Using this gist based processing might lead to memory errors that align with our gist representations.

DISCRIMINATION WITHIN WORKPLACE AND EDUCATION SETTINGS

Discrimination and biases within the workspace have long been a problem within the United States. According to the statistics released by the U.S. Equal Employment

Opportunities Commission (EEOC), in the peak year of 2010, there'd been a total 99,922 charges filed for workspace discrimination, with 35,890 (35.9%) charges filed for racial discrimination and 29,029 (29.1%) for gender discrimination. More recently, in the year 2021, there'd still been a total of 61,331 charges, with 34.1% filed for racial discrimination, and 30.6% for gender discrimination. It's important to note that these numbers released by the EEOC do not include charges filed with other state or local fair employment agencies. According to the 2020 California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) Report, a total of 18,130 employment-based complaints were filed in California, the largest U.S. state by population, with 13,708 of these complaints requesting immediate right-to-sue. Moreover, negative consequences of discrimination within the workplace affects all three levels of the individual, the group, and the organization. At the individual level, perceived discrimination could have an adverse affect both physically and psychologically on the target. Studies have shown that perceived prejudice might have a negative effect on blood pressure (Broman, 1996; James, Lovato, & Cropanzano, 1994; James, Strogatz, Wing, & Ramsey, 1987; Krieger, 1990; Krieger & Sidney, 1996), heart disease (Broman, 1996), and self-assessed state of health (Jackson, Brown, Williams, Sellers, & Brown, 1996). Commonly, people who assert that they've been discriminated against have been observed to experience problems with interpersonal relationships and socialization (Miller & Major, 2000).

There's been a large number of studies examining employment discrimination, as it has been a priority of the study of sociology. In the beginning of the 21st century, predominant explanations for employment discrimination are based upon the conflict theory. According to this theory, individuals benefiting from a system of discrimination protects their privileged position through excluding subordinate groups using the resources they possess. However, this theory mainly explains discrimination due to intergroup conflict, which isn't the only source of discrimination. An alternative theory behind employment discrimination would be the social cognition theory (Reskin, 2000). This theory states that people unconsciously place other individuals into outgroups and ingroups. Categorization is a rapid and automatic process, designed to help people manage a gigantic volume of incoming stimuli. After categorizing others into groups, people tend to feel and behave towards members of a specific group the same way they feel and behave towards other members of the same group. Naturally, easily distinguishable features such as race and gender, the two most common grounds of charges filed for workplace discrimination, becomes core basis of categorization. With categorization comes the tendency to exaggerate between-group differences while tuning down within-group differences, especially in the outgroups. This tendency to exaggerate and minimize differences plays into the stereotyping behavior that most often comes after categorization (Reskin, 2000).

Among these, discrimination against Asia-American candidates have become more prevalent. According to studies, Asian-Americans have a 67% lower chance of getting accepted into elite colleges compared to other races (Espenshade, Chung, and Walling, 2004). It was also found in a follow up research that Asian-Americans have to score 140 to 450 points higher on the SAT in order to receive equal consideration by colleges compared to other races such as Whites, Hispanics, and African Americans (Espenshade and Radford, 2009). Thanks to mainstream media, which portrays Asian-Americans as gifted in STEM related fields like mathematics and technology, and the overall economic and educational success Asian-Americans have achieved in the United States, this racial minority has been labeled as the “model minority.” Previous studies have shown that Asian-American are typically perceived by teachers as more self-controlled, perfectionistic, cooperative, academically successful, eager to please, and having less behavioral problems compared to peers of other races (Chang, Morrissey, and Koplewicz, 1995; Chang and Sue, 2003; Feng and Cartledge, 1996; Loo and Rappaport, 1998; Spring, Blunden, Greenberg, and Yellin, 1977; Tettegah, 1996). Unsurprisingly, these stereotypes come with a down side. Cuddy et al. (2007) has found that in addition to being gifted academically, Asian-Americans are often stereotyped as cunning, passive, and nerdy. They were even described as ‘all work, no play, nerds, not interested in fun and social activities, and lacking social skills’ in a study designed to examine various stereotypes regarding Asian-Americans (Maddux, Galinsky, Cuddy, and Polifroni, 2008). These stereotypes can become detrimental to Asian-Americans’ path to success, both academically and in the office. According to previous research, colleges may often be looking for students who fit better with their culture or are ‘outgoing team players’ instead of only a competitive record (Golden, 2007; Karabel, 2005; Unz, 2012; Chai and Weseley, 2017). The importance of such qualitative attributes continues on into the workspace. In a study where both employers and college graduates were asked to choose between hypothetical job candidates based on their attributes and salaries, results show that qualities such as ‘a candidate’s character, passion and dedication toward career goals, and internship/experience relevant to the job’ are high in the list of important attributes, while GPA and awards are considered the most unimportant (Norwood and Henneberry, 2006). Naturally, Asian-American candidates with stereotypes such as nerdy and lacking social skills are rendered disadvantageous compared to candidates of other races.

CURRENT STUDY

In the present study we plan to investigate the influence of post-choice memory errors in a novel domain: college applications. Previous research has found evidence of pre-choice encoding biases influencing post-choice memory errors (Dekay et al., 2014; Falco, 2020), more research is needed to investigate the mechanisms behind this bias. We

look to show that while evaluating two college applicants of different races, participants will make memory errors that align with racial stereotypes. This would provide support for a fuzzy trace theory explanation because making errors in favor of a stereotype would be evidence of a gist based processing of information. This research also looks to provide an important insight on what minority applicants might have to go through during the college and job application processes.

METHODS

Participants. We collected responses from a total of 307 participants and eliminated 54 responses that were either incomplete or had blatantly wrong (e.g. SAT verbal scores of 50) answers, leaving us with 253 valid responses. Of the 253 responses, 42% of our participants identified as Female, 73% were White/Caucasian, 8% were African American, 9% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% were either a mix or identified as other. Additionally, 62% of our participants had a college degree (including Associate degrees). Our participants had a mean age of 39.68 years old ($SD = 11.12$).

MEASURE

Decision Task. Participants were asked to choose between two college applicants. One of the applicants had a stereotypically Asian surname, “Zhang,” while the other applicant held a more neutral surname, “Anderson.” Each set contained the same two resumes with 3 stereotypical Asian (e.g., “First Chair, School Orchestra”) and 3 neutral features (e.g., “Volunteer, Flathead County Animal Shelter”), with the only difference being the applicant each resume belonged to. For example, in resume set 1, Applicant “Zhang” has a GPA of 3.75 and plays Violin while Applicant “Anderson” has a GPA of 3.4 and is the Student Council Treasurer. In Resume Set 2, their roles will be reversed. Applicant “Zhang” will then have a 3.4 GPA and be the student council treasurer while applicant “Anderson” plays the violin and gets a GPA of 3.75. 50% of participants received Resume Set 1 whilst the other half received Resume Set 2. The order the participants saw the applications in was randomized along with the name at the top of each resume. Therefore, half the participants viewed the name “Zhang” as “First Chair, School Orchestra” while the other half saw “Anderson” as “First Chair School Orchestra”. Participants viewed each resume as a whole with all attributes on the same page. Qualitative features were shown to participants alongside quantitative (e.g., SAT Scores, GPA, AP Scores) features.

Memory Task. Participants were then asked to complete filler questions for another project before completing the memory test. Separated into two sections, the memory test first asked participants to recall exact values of quantitative features for each applicant then made participants indicate which applicant (Anderson or Zhang) each qualitative feature belonged to. Participants had the option of choosing

“Neither.” 4 qualitative (e.g., “Computer Coding Skills in Python”) lures were included in the memory test, 2 being stereotypically Asian and 2 being neutral. After the memory task, participants were given demographic questions including education background, age, gender, and ethnicity at the end of the study.

RESULTS

We separated the memory test into three sections: lures, qualitative attributes, and quantitative attributes. For the lures and qualitative section, participants had the choice of assigning each attribute to the Asian applicant, the White applicant, or neither. To calculate memory measures of stereotype-influenced choice-supportive attributions, we did the following. First, we calculated how much each participant was affected by stereotypes by subtracting a measure of the attributed features oppositely (e.g., a stereotypical Asian attribute being assigned to the White applicant or a neutral attribute being assigned to the Asian applicant) assigned from a measure of the attributed features assigned according to stereotype (e.g., a stereotypically Asian attribute being assigned to the Asian applicant or a neutral attribute being assigned to White applicant):

(proportion of stereotypically Asian attributes assigned to Asian applicant + proportion of neutral attributes assigned to White applicant) - (proportion of stereotypically Asian attributes assigned to White applicant + proportion of neutral attributes assigned to Asian applicants)

Resulting sums were converted to z scores so that the mean value across participants was zero. The resulting value from the above calculations yielded “asymmetry” scores. A positive score indicates that a participant’s attributions were affected by stereotypes whereas a negative score indicates that a participant’s attributions were not affected by stereotypes.

The expected average of the asymmetry score is zero if participants’ attributions are not affected by stereotypes.

For each section, the overall asymmetry score was significantly greater than zero. Participants’ overall asymmetry scores were as follows: overall, $M = 0.24$, $t(252) = 3.38$, $p < 0.001$; lures, $M = 0.20$, $t(252) = 2.37$, $p = 0.02$; qualitative attributes, $M = 0.40$, $t(252) = 2.52$, $p = 0.01$; and quantitative attributes, $M = 0.11$, $t(252) = 1.62$, $p = 0.11$. These positive scores indicate that participants are more likely to attribute stereotypically Asian attributes to Asian applicants, and more likely to attribute neutral attributes to non-Asians, indicating that participants’ attributions are systematically influenced by stereotypes.

Asymmetry scores for only Asian participants were also calculated and compared with asymmetry scores for non-Asian participants. Asymmetry scores for Asian participants are as follows: overall, $M = 0.51$, $t(16) = 2.15$, $p = 0.05$; lures, $M = 0.24$, $t(16) = 1$, $p = 0.33$; qualitative attributes, $M = 0.94$, $t(16) = 2.02$, $p = 0.06$; and quantitative attributes, $M = 0.35$, $t(16) = 1.24$, $p = 0.23$. For non-Asian participants asymmetry score were: overall, $M = 0.22$, $t(235) = 2.98$, $p = 0.003$; lures, $M = 0.19$, $t(235) = 2.22$, $p = 0.03$; qualitative attributes, $M = 0.36$, $t(235) = 2.16$, $p = 0.03$; and quantitative attributes, $M = 0.09$, $t(235) = 1.33$, $p = 0.19$.

We compared asymmetry scores of Asian and non-Asian participants and found there was no statistically significant effect ($ps > 0.2$). However, this may be the result of there only being 17 Asian participants. If we were able to re-test this with a larger sample size and found significant results, this would indicate that Asian participants, targets of the Asian stereotypes we’re testing for during this project, were more likely to have a bias towards placing Asian attributes with Asian applicants. Their memories were more affected by the stereotypes.

Participant Type	All items	Qualitative Items	Quantitative Items	Lures
All Participants	0.24(0.07)***	0.4(0.16)*	0.11(0.07)	0.2(0.08)*
Asian Participants	0.51(0.24)	0.94(0.47)	0.35(0.28)	0.24(0.24)
Non-Asian Participants	0.22(0.07)***	0.36(0.17)*	0.09(0.07)	0.19(0.09)*

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to better understand whether the act of making a decision would alter the memory of the decision attributes. In this study, we looked to investigate this through the use of stereotypes and were specifically interested in whether or not stereotypes will affect one’s memory over a previously made choice. These stereotypes were found to significantly impact participants’ memory of the decision attributes. Items stereotypically Asian were more likely to be assigned to Asian applicants while neutral items were more likely assigned to the non-Asian applicant. This finding is consistent with our initial hypothesis, which suggests that people’s memories regarding their previous choices may be swayed by stereotypes.

Of the three categories we separated the memory test into, for two of the categories we found significant results. For both the qualitative attributes and the lures, participants were more likely to assign Asian attributes to the Asian named applicant. This showed evidence of misattribution along with false memories of the lure items. However, we did not observe significant results for the quantitative attributes which have been found in previous research (Falco, 2020). This may be the result of the few quantitative attributes used in this study. Whilst separating results of Asian participants from non-Asian participants, we found some non-significant results implying that Asian participants may be more likely to make memory errors in accordance with stereotypes than non-Asian participants. A possible explanation for this

would be because targets of a certain stereotype, whether its gender, race, or orientation, typically are more aware and conscious of stereotypes put upon them compared to onlookers, rendering them more likely to be affected by these stereotypes. This could have serious consequences when put in the context of racism and oppression. Previous studies have shown that sustained exposure to denigration often leads to self-doubt, feelings of inferiority, and identity confusion; instances have occurred where targets of racism eventually were led to believe in the inferiorizing messages (David, 2019). Internalized stereotypes have also been researched in regards to other areas, including ageism, weight and body image, gender, etc. (Ivan, 2021; Latner, 2014).

One limitation of this study that we hope can be addressed in future research is the small sample size of Asian participants. Based on responses from the demographics test, Asian participants took up only six percent of the general sample size. With this sample, we weren't able to make definitive conclusions about the effect of stereotypes on targeted populations' memories. A possible solution to this limitation is to use stereotypes directed towards a larger population; examples include gender, education background, social economic class, etc. After receiving initial responses, we were forced to further reduce the sample due to blank or blatantly wrong (e.g. SAT verbal scores of 50) answers. The resume we provided to participants were replicates of what an actual college application resume would look like, and participants with little to no experience regarding the college application process may encounter challenges understanding certain memory items during the choice test. Had we provided more explanation (e.g. "Minimum of SAT verbal score is 200") to the participant, a lesser number of samples would have been possibly removed. Furthermore, classification of memory items into "Asian-stereotyped" and "neutral" were only based on existing literature exploring Asian stereotypes in the workplace and education environment. We are unsure if these biases are present among the chosen sample. Had time and resources been abundant, preliminary questionnaires will be given to participants on their perception regarding Asian college applicants, and memory items will be designed in accordance to results of the preliminary survey. A possibility for further research is to incorporate a comparison between decision scenarios and non-decision scenarios. In this study, we asked all participants to make a choice between the two hypothetical applicants before completing memory tests. Based on existing literature regarding Choice-Supportive Misremembering, there's a high possibility for participants to perceive certain memory items in a positive/negative light, which could potentially be another factor affecting memory in addition to stereotypes. By creating a non-decision scenario in addition to decision scenarios, we'll be able to isolate stereotypes as the only factor affecting memory.

Memories about decisions are important. They build one's life narrative, strengthen one's personal identity and are

responsible for a variety of feelings. Results in this study now show the impact stereotypes have on memory. It's important for us to now think twice before making any sort of generalized judgment: we could very possibly be under the influence of memory errors. Possible further research could be conducted with non-racial stereotypes such as gender, sexuality, education level etc., to examine the exact scope of this phenomenon.

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