JOIBS: March 2023. ISSN 2992-9253

JOIBS © 2023 Clark

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Base Rates Can Be Both Socially Useful and Socially Undesirable: Review of Grawitch et al. (2022)

Cory Clark, University of Pennsylvania, United States. E-mail: cjclark@sas.upenn.edu

Funding: The author received no specific funding for this work.

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Citation: Clark, C. J. (2023). Base rates can be both socially useful and socially undesirable: Review of Grawitch et al. (2022). *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences.* https:/doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2023.01.01.00000004

Grawitch and colleagues (2022) reported three studies that tested whether people evaluate ambiguous cases of sexism differently depending on the genders of those involved. Participants read about an interaction between a banker and a customer in which the banker commented on the customer's nice appearance, discouraged the customer from making their preferred investment, and placed an arm around the customer's shoulders when thanking the customer for their business. The results consistently showed that people evaluated this ambiguous behavior the least favorably and the most sexist when the banker was a man and the customer was a woman. And there seemed to be a fairly consistent pattern that people evaluated this ambiguous behavior less favorably in mixed-sex pairs (man to woman or woman to man) than same-sex pairs (woman to woman or man to man). Other patterns of results were a bit more mixed or supported only in one study.

The methods seem reasonable to me, and the results are very plausible, so my little review/commentary will only focus on two aspects of the paper. First, I found the theoretical narrative excessively complicated and suspect the simple use of (accurate) base rates is a far more parsimonious explanation for the results. Second, there are a few additional statistics I would like to see that I outline below.

Overly Complicated Theoretical Framework

Grawitch and colleagues (2022) frame their hypotheses as stemming from error management theory and the idea that error management may cause heuristic responding. For example, they state (p. 6), "Through the lens of EMT, the generalized view of female-targeted sexism as more prevalent and costly may create a perceived asymmetry in the costs of false-positive (concluding behavior is sexist when it is not) and falsenegative (believing behavior is not sexist when it is) errors. In other words, the potential costs of making a Type II error are more damaging for women than are the potential costs of making a Type I error, whereas the cost asymmetry may exist to a

lesser extent, if at all, for male-directed sexism." Although I suspect Grawitch and colleagues are correct that people view female-targeted sexism as more prevalent and more costly, the authors did not directly test this explanation, the results were actually somewhat inconsistent with this prediction, and there seems to be a far more parsimonious explanation: the simple use of base rates.

The error management explanation could have been tested by varying the costs of sexism against men vs. women. For example, people might view sexism costlier when it is directed toward whichever group is underrepresented. If error management is influencing judgments of sexism, one might make the prediction that people would evaluate potential sexism against men as worse than potential sexism against women in an organization that is 90% women but striving for equal gender representation. But I am not sure I would make such a prediction.

The results are somewhat inconsistent with the error management prediction because people were not particularly concerned about sexism against the female customer when the banker was also female. I cannot be sure because simple comparisons were not reported and the results of the three studies were not meta-analyzed, but there appeared to be a consistent pattern that people evaluated the behavior as more sexist when the banker was a woman and the customer was a man than when the banker was a woman and the customer was a woman. Would people evaluate female on female sexism as less costly than female on male sexism? I am not so sure.

Last, simple base rates appear to be a more parsimonious explanation for the present findings, particularly because two of the behaviors had potential sexual undertones (i.e., complimenting appearance and arm around the shoulders). Presumably, people (correctly) believe that the base rate of men desiring to sleep with a woman is higher than the base rate of women desiring to sleep with a man, which is probably also higher than the base rate of women desiring to sleep with a woman or men desiring to sleep with a man. So, when a man makes an ambiguous sexual gesture toward a woman, it actually is more likely to be a sexual advance than in the other cases, even if the behavior is identical within other gender combinations. For another example, if one were to observe the ambiguous behavior of two people holding hands, one might have a greater degree of confidence that the two were romantically involved if they were a man and a woman of similar age than if they were two women of similar age, because same-sex relationships are rarer than opposite sex ones, and women likely hold hands platonically more than man/woman pairs. This base rate hypothesis could be tested by asking people how common it is for different genders of people to make sexual advances toward different genders of people.

We might not want people to take gender into consideration when making evaluations of sexism, especially in organizations and in other social settings where it is considered unethical or illegal to base such decisions on gender. But this is different from the question of whether it is reasonable to do so. Grawitch and colleagues seem to confuse these distinctions in the discussion of the results, where they seem to imply that these results may demonstrate a bias, or that rationally, gender ought to be irrelevant to sexism judgments, or that the results might reflect priming of media-fueled stereotypes. Instead, the results might just reflect judgments based on real base rates that are pretty reasonable even if the use of base rates is sometimes socially undesirable (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2000).

Minor Statistical Issues and Desired Details

It would be useful if all simple contrasts were reported for the four primary conditions (male/male, male/female, female/female, female/male) and even more useful if these simple contrasts were metaanalyzed so we could more clearly see whether it is mainly that the male/female combo is rated as more sexist than the other three combos or whether there are consistent differences between the other conditions.

It is unclear whether the same exclusion criteria were used across all three studies. Studies 1 and 3 mentioned some exclusions based on attention checks, but Study 2 did not. Ideally, the exclusion criteria would be identical across all studies, and any deviations from this should be explained and justified.

Conclusion

Overall, I find the methods reasonable and the topic worthwhile of exploration. Future research should test the competing perspectives regarding the underlying reasons for these gender effects.

References

Grawitch, M. J., Lavigne, K. N., & Mudigonda, S. P. (2022). It's not what was said but who said it to whom: Interactant sex affects attributions of sexism in ambiguous situations. *Journal of Open Inquiry in Behavioral Science*.

Tetlock, P. E., Kristel, O. V., Elson, S. B., Green, M. C., & Lerner, J. S. (2000). The psychology of the unthinkable: taboo trade-offs, forbidden base rates, and heretical counterfactuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*(5), 853-870.