What I Think You Think of Me: Women’s Reactions to Being Viewed as Beneficiaries of Preferential Selection

Madeline E. Heilman and Victoria Barocas Alcott
New York University

Undergraduate women (N = 150) participated in 2 experimental studies designed to examine the effects of knowing that another believed they were beneficiaries of preferential selection. Results indicated that participants' awareness that the other viewed them as having been selected on the basis of gender rather than merit (a) prompted inferences that the other held negative expectations of their competence (Studies 1 and 2); (b) produced timid, performance-limiting task decisions as well as negative self-regard when they were uncertain about their task ability level (Studies 1 and 2); and (c) produced ambitious, performance-maximizing task decisions when they knew themselves to be high in task ability and also were motivated to make a good impression (Study 2). In addition, in both studies negative affect resulted from the participants' knowledge that the other viewed them as having been preferentially selected.

Associated with affirmative action and the preferential selection procedures used to implement it is a stigma that gives rise to assumptions of incompetence (Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, & Casmay, 1981; Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Heilman, Block, & Stathatos, 1997; Nacoste, 1990; Summers, 1991). These assumptions of incompetence have been found to result regardless of whether the evaluator is Black or White, male or female, superior or subordinate, or student or employee. Research findings, therefore, give credence to concerns that those people who are targeted to benefit from affirmative action efforts may in fact be tainted by them (Cartier, 1991; S. Steele, 1990; Wilkerson, 1991; Wycliff, 1990). Evidently, the individual who is perceived to have benefited from preferential treatment is also perceived to have been in need of special assistance to succeed.

Investigations concerning the stigmatizing effect of preferential selection have focused primarily on its direct consequences—how it negatively influences expectations of and reactions to women and minority group members presumed to be beneficiaries of affirmative action. However, it is likely that more indirect consequences also occur. If people are presumed to be beneficiaries of affirmative action, they are likely to infer that they are negatively regarded, and there also may be negative effects on their cognitions and behavior. The two studies reported in this article were designed to explore these issues.

The social science literature suggests that when individuals believe another to be cognizant of their stigmatized status, they make the inference that the other devalues them and holds expectations for them that are consistent with the stigmatized conception (e.g., Goffman, 1963). Preferential selection based on gender or minority group membership is widely known to be stigmatizing. Consequently, individuals who are aware that another considers them to have benefited from this process are likely to infer that the other expects them to be incompetent. The fact that preferential selection typically involves members of groups already burdened with negative stereotypes makes these inferences even more likely—cues signaling that another does not hold them in high regard are apt to be particularly salient for these individuals. Interestingly, individuals' inferences about the other's expectations that they will be incompetent are likely regardless of whether they actually have been beneficiaries of preferential selection. It is the perception, not the reality, of another's expectations that gives rise to stigma-consistent inferences.

What people think another expects of them is likely to influence their behavior. There is a great deal of evidence attesting to the power of expectancies to create reality (Jussim, 1986). Beginning with Merton's (1948) discussion of the self-fulfilling prophecy and fueled by the controversy that followed Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) initial study on expectancy confirmation in the classroom, many studies have provided support for the expectancy confirmation process. Evidently, an individual's expectancies about others, even when erroneous, can put into motion a series of events that lead the targets of the expectancies to behave in ways that confirm them (e.g., Darley & Fazio, 1980; Eden, 1990; Snyder & Swann, 1978; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). Research has shown that this process operates in a variety of settings, including organizational ones (Dipboye, 1982; Eden, 1984, 1990). What is being suggested here is that a target's inferences about another's expectancies can set off a self-imposed expectancy confirmation process not unlike that sparked by the other's actual expectations.

There is support for this idea. Individuals have been shown to behave in accordance with what they presume to be another's view of themselves (Snyder, 1984). Furthermore, this tendency has been found to be particularly likely when individuals feel themselves to be tainted by stigma. For example, when research participants were told that another knew of their history of mental illness, they were more likely than those in a control group to find the exper-
imental task difficult and to perform poorly (Farina, Allen, & Saul, 1968; Farina, Gilha, Boudreau, Allen, & Sherman, 1971). Also, in research on stereotype threat, C. M. Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrated that Blacks underperformed as compared with Whites when they were in situations that caused them to feel at risk of fulfilling negative racial stereotypes about their intellectual ability. These findings suggest that women and minority group members who know that another considers them to be beneficiaries of preferential selection may accede to the negative expectations they infer, behaving in ways that are detrimental to maximizing their capabilities and, consequently, their performance.

Why would a person behave in a way that confirms negative performance expectations? One possibility is that these expectations influence self-efficacy judgments, causing the individual to feel that he or she actually is deficient in the relevant task-related skill. This line of thought is supported by the findings of Eden and Ravid (1982). In their study, another’s expectations apparently were internalized by the target because they were found to affect behavior even when the conveyer of the expectations was no longer present or in contact with the target. Furthermore, the idea that expectations can affect self-efficacy judgments is consistent with discussions in which persuasion is included as a potentially important informational cue for the determination of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Gist, 1987; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). We simply are proposing that inferred expectations can also be a form of persuasive communication.

If negative self-efficacy judgments are responsible for the behavioral confirmation of inferred negative expectations, then behavioral confirmation should be particularly evident when individuals lack information concerning their task skill. In fact, behavioral confirmation of negative expectations has repeatedly been found to occur in situations in which there is uncertainty about performance effectiveness (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Swann & Ely, 1984). It is under these conditions that self-efficacy is most susceptible to influence and people are most receptive to external sources of information concerning themselves. This tendency should be no less true if the information is arrived at through inference.

In the following study, we sought to investigate the effects on individuals who were aware that another believed them to be beneficiaries of gender-based preferential selection. Female research participants worked together with a male teammate on an unfamiliar task. The teammate communicated his belief that the participant either had been preferentially selected for the experiment on the basis of her gender or had been selected on a merit basis. The participants were or were not given false feedback regarding their ability to perform the research task, and when they were given false feedback, it was either positive or negative. We hypothesized that, whenever the teammate conveyed the opinion that gender rather than merit had been the basis of the participants’ selection, participants would (a) infer that their teammate had lower expectations of their capability and likely performance and (b) engage in more performance-limiting task behavior when no information about ability was provided but not when ability information had been provided. Self-perceptions of competence were expected to follow the same pattern as task behavior. The task behavior of interest was error avoidance, and we measured it through choice of task difficulty level. We also obtained general affective reactions to the task situation.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Design

Ninety female students enrolled in an introductory psychology course served as participants. The study was a $2 \times 3$ factorial design with implied selection method (merit or preferential selection on the basis of gender) and information about task ability level (high, low, or not provided) as the two independent variables. A total of 15 women were randomly assigned to each of the six experimental conditions.

Procedure

Participants were solicited by phone 1 week prior to the time of their research session. They were asked to take part in a half-hour study entitled “teamwork” in exchange for credit toward their psychology course requirement. Participants were told that the telephone, rather than the usual sign-up sheets, was being used for scheduling because people in the study had been specially selected. They were not informed of the reason for their selection.

The general experimental procedure resembled that used in earlier research (Heilman, Lucas, & Kaplow, 1990; Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987). The participants were run individually and were paired with one of two male confederates posing as a fellow introductory psychology student. The experimenter introduced the study as part of a research program concerned with the process of one-way communication in work teams. The participants were again reminded that they had been specially selected for participation in the research, but the experimenter’s comments made clear to them that their teammates did not have any more information than they did about why each of them had been selected.

The participant and the confederate were told that they would be doing a task common in engineering settings. It involved communication-based drafting in which one teammate would instruct the other in the drawing of three complex geometric figures (geoshares). They were told that the men typically perform this type of task more frequently than do women, although there currently were vigorous efforts being made to integrate more women into the engineering profession. The task was selected not only because it was easy to make the case that it was sex-typed but also because pilot work indicated that participants did not have strong impressions of their skill level.

The participants were then asked to complete the 20-item Spatial Communication Skills Inventory (SCSI). The SCSI was a bogus measure, said to be a valid measure of one-way communication skills. Once the participants completed the SCSI, the experimenter collected the answer sheets and took them outside of the experimental room, supposedly so they could be scored by an assistant.

The experimenter returned to further explain the one-way communication task. Participants were told that one person would assume the role of communicator and the other would take on the role of information recipient. They also were told that during the task the two of them would sit with their backs to each other, with only the communicator allowed to speak. It was explained that the communicator first would select from among several task difficulty levels and then would be given a packet of three geoshares to communicate. The communicator then would have 10 s to decide on an appropriate communication strategy prior to describing each geoshare and 2 min to actually describe it. The experimenter made clear that it was very unlikely that the figures could be described in their entirety in the 2-min period and that the vast majority of research participants complete only 60%–70% of each figure in the time allotted. Scoring of the figures was to take into account not only the accuracy and completeness of the actual figures drawn but also their predesignated level of difficulty.

After explaining the task, the experimenter asked each participant to fill out a personal information form (PIF) to be exchanged with his or her
teammate. The PIF contained questions about background, for example, college major, hometown, participation in other psychology experiments, and nonschool interests, as well as a question about the reason the participant thought his or her teammate had been selected for participation in the study. Confederate responses were always the same except for those constituting the independent variable manipulations. The confederate always indicated that he was "undecided" about major, was from New York City, had an interest in reading, and had participated in several other psychology experiments.

While the participants were filling out the PIF, the experimenter "retrieved" the SCSI scores. In the conditions in which information was provided about task ability, the SCSI scores were distributed just after the participants completed the PIFs but prior to their exchange. In the conditions in which no feedback on task ability was provided, the participants never received their scores on the SCSI, and teammates immediately exchanged their PIFs when they were completed.

To determine the assignment of task roles, participants were asked to draw tickets out of a glass bowl. In reality, both tickets were labeled communicator so that the participant always was selected as the communicator and the confederate always assumed the role of information recipient. At this point, the communicator was asked to choose from among three sets of task materials that varied in level of difficulty. The participant and the confederate then began work on the task. When they were finished, the experimenter distributed a brief questionnaire to them. After the questionnaire was completed, the experimenter explained the experimental manipulations and the purpose of the research and answered participants’ questions about the study.

Experimental Manipulations

Information about task ability. The unfamiliarity of the research task made possible the giving of credible false feedback constituting the task ability manipulation. In conditions in which information about task ability was conveyed, the experimenter retrieved two sealed folders, one clearly designated for the participant and the other for the confederate. The envelopes supposedly contained each teammate’s score on the SCSI. Information was to be provided only about one’s own (not the other’s) score. To provide a rationale for supplying this information, participants were told the following:

As I told you earlier, the purpose of the SCSI was to give you a warm-up for the task, and to get you in the right frame of mind. But, since it is a very reliable measure of the kinds of skills you’ll be using on the task, you probably want to see how you did. So, go ahead and take a look.

The folders were sealed, so it was clear to participants that the experimenter was not aware of their SCSI scores.

In the high-ability conditions, participants received an “above average” score of 17 out of 20 questions correct. In the low-ability conditions, participants received a “below average” score of 9 out of 20 questions correct. In the conditions in which no information about task ability was provided, the experimenter never left the room to retrieve the SCSI scores, and participants did not receive any feedback on their task ability.

Implied selection method. The reportedly male nature of the research task and the information that participants had been specially targeted for participation in the research provided the backdrop for the implied selection method induction. The teammate’s written response to the last question asked on the PIF, "Why do you think your teammate was chosen to participate in this study?" contained the manipulation. Because neither the participant nor the teammate could know the actual basis for selection, the teammate’s response was understood to be opinion, not fact. In the implied gender-based preferential selection condition, the confederate had responded, "Probably because she’s a woman and they just needed women for the study." In the implied merit-based selection condition, the confederate’s response read as follows: "Probably because she’s good at this sort of thing."

Dependent Measures

Inferred competence expectations. To determine the participants’ inferences about their teammate’s view of their competence, an inferred competence expectations scale was created by averaging the responses to three questionnaire items (α = .86). Participants were asked how they believed their teammate perceived them in terms of both their competence to do the task (very much—not at all) and their likelihood of being successful at the task (very much—not at all). In addition, they were asked how they believed their teammates expected them to perform on the task (very well—very poorly). All ratings were made on 9-point response scales.

Task difficulty choices. Participants were asked to choose among three envelopes, labeled A, B, and C, each said to contain figures representing differing levels of task difficulty. Envelope A was said to contain the least complex, Envelope B an average level, and Envelope C the most complex figures to communicate. The three choice alternatives constituted a difficulty choice scale. Participants were led to believe that the level that was chosen would be evident to the teammate but not to the experimenter. In reality, each envelope contained the exact same set of the three geoshapes.

Self-view of competence. Posttask questionnaire ratings on a series of 9-point bipolar adjective scales (e.g., competent—incapable, effective—ineffective, organized—disorganized, productive—unproductive) and an item asking how the participant felt she performed her part of the task (very well—very poorly) were averaged to form a scale to assess each participant’s self-view of task competence (α = .88).

Affective reactions. To obtain a general measure of how participants felt while performing the task, an affect scale was created by averaging self-reports of affect while working on the task (e.g., happy—not happy, annoyed—not annoyed, pleased—irritated), descriptions of the task on affective dimensions (e.g., pleasant—unpleasant, enjoyable—unenjoyable), and feelings about the research session (e.g., very favorable—not at all favorable). All ratings were done on the posttask questionnaire using 9-point response scales (α = .91).

Results

Manipulation Checks

Responses to the question “In your opinion, why does your teammate think you were chosen to be in this research?” (my competence at this task or factors other than my competence at this task) indicated that the implied method of selection manipulation had its intended effect. All but 2 participants indicated the method of selection that had been conveyed in their teammate’s PIF.

Also, ratings indicating how well the participants thought they did on the SCSI (1 = very poorly, 9 = very well) demonstrated that the task ability manipulation was effective. An analysis of variance revealed a significant effect for task ability, F(2, 87) = 61.79, p < .01. Participants in the high-ability conditions (M = 7.40) reported better performance on the SCSI than those who were in the low-ability conditions (M = 2.80). Participants in the no-information conditions fell in between the other two conditions (M = 5.13).

Dependent Measures

Intercorrelations among the dependent variable measures are presented in Table 1. A multivariate analysis of variance was
Table 1
Study 1: Intercorrelations of Dependent Variable Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Task behavior</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>21*</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Inferred competence</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expectations</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-view of competence</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Affective reactions</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01.

Conducted on the four dependent variables (inferred competence expectations, task difficulty choices, self-views of competence, and reported affect). Overall, the multivariate F was significant for implied selection method, F(4, 81) = 12.47, p < .01; for task ability, F(8, 160) = 2.76, p < .01; and for the interaction between implied selection method and task ability, F(8, 160) = 3.19, p < .01. Having established these overall effects, we conducted univariate analyses of variance for each dependent measure. We also conducted a series of planned intercell comparisons to directly compare condition means, using the t statistic with the two-tailed alpha level set at p < .05. The means, standard deviations, and results of the intercell comparisons for each of the dependent measures are presented in Table 2.

Inferred competence expectations. Analysis of variance conducted on self-competence ratings revealed a significant main effect for task ability, F(2, 84) = 8.80, p < .01, η² = .14, in addition to a significant main effect for implied selection method, F(1, 84) = 3.86, p < .05, η² = .03, and for the two-way interaction, F(2, 84) = 9.10, p < .01, η² = .32. As one might expect, participants given information of high ability always saw themselves as more competent than did those given low-ability information. Moreover, intercell comparisons once again supported our ideas. When participants were given specific task ability information, whether positive or negative, there were no differences in self-competence ratings as a function of implied selection method. However, differences were found for participants who had received no information about their task ability, as we had expected, participants in implied preferential selection conditions reported feeling significantly less competent about performing the task than participants in implied merit selection conditions. In fact, when given no information about ability, participants in preferential selection conditions reported no greater sense of competence than those in low-

Table 2
Study 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Measures
in Each Experimental Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Inferred competence expectations</th>
<th>Task behavior</th>
<th>Self-view of competence</th>
<th>Affective reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-task-ability information</td>
<td>6.51, (0.99)</td>
<td>2.00, (0.53)</td>
<td>5.31, (1.26)</td>
<td>6.06, (1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied preferential-based</td>
<td>4.89, (0.74)</td>
<td>1.67, (0.64)</td>
<td>5.27, (1.05)</td>
<td>5.13, (1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-task-ability information</td>
<td>6.09, (1.13)</td>
<td>1.47, (0.64)</td>
<td>3.59, (1.42)</td>
<td>4.93, (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied preferential-based</td>
<td>4.93, (0.74)</td>
<td>1.67, (0.62)</td>
<td>4.21, (1.45)</td>
<td>5.07, (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-task-ability information</td>
<td>6.38, (1.13)</td>
<td>2.00, (0.53)</td>
<td>6.17, (1.53)</td>
<td>6.96, (1.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied preferential-based</td>
<td>5.24, (1.10)</td>
<td>1.47, (0.64)</td>
<td>3.96, (1.60)</td>
<td>5.10, (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The higher the mean, the more favorable the inferred competence expectations, the less timid the task behavior, the more favorable the self-views of competence, and the more favorable the affective reactions ratings. In each condition, n = 15. The range was 1-3 for task behavior and 1-9 for all other measures. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Means within a column with different subscripts differ significantly at p < .05.
ability conditions, whereas participants in merit selection conditions reported as favorable a self-view of competence as those in high-ability information conditions (see Table 2).  

**Affective reactions.** Analysis of variance of participants’ affect ratings revealed a significant effect for implied selection method, \(F(1, 84) = 8.75, p < .01, \eta^2 = .08; \) for task ability, \(F(2, 84) = 3.96, p < .05, \eta^2 = .07; \) and for the interaction between implied selection method and task ability, \(F(2, 84) = 3.76, p < .05, \eta^2 = .22. \) Intercell contrasts indicated that, in the high-ability and no-information conditions, participants experienced more negative affect when the implied selection method was gender-based versus merit-based. However, no significant differences were found in the low-ability conditions; participants who were informed that they were low in ability on the task were uniformly negative in affect reported.

**Additional analyses.** To provide information about whether the effects of the implied selection method had on the task choices were mediated by self-efficacy judgments, we conducted an analysis of covariance on the task choice scale. Results indicated that when self-perceptions of competence were taken as the covariate, neither the main effect for implied selection method nor the two-way interaction effect was any longer significant. Subsequent analyses made clear that when we reversed this process, and task choice was taken as a covariate, the pattern of significant effects in the self-perception of competence ratings was unchanged. These results lend support to our ideas about mediating processes.

**Discussion**

These results indicate that people’s beliefs about how another thinks they have been selected for a work role can have a great impact on their cognitions and behavior. When the female research participants believed that their work partner held the view that they had been selected for participation on the basis of gender rather than merit, they inferred that the partner held more negative expectations about their competence to perform the task. This result occurred regardless of the information conveyed to the participants about their ability. Thus, as we had expected, if women believe that they are viewed as beneficiaries of preferential selection, it strongly influences what they think others think of them. It also appears to negatively influence the quality of their affective experience.

The data also lend support to the idea that individuals’ task behavior can be strongly affected by how another thinks they have been selected for a work role. When not provided with information about task ability, participants whose teammate thought the participants had been beneficiaries of preferential selection rather than merit-based selection exhibited greater performance-limiting timidity in their task choices. Furthermore, this timidity was accompanied by low self-competence ratings. Evidently, when the participants were uncertain of their own ability and were aware of the other’s view that they had been preferentially selected, they not only acted in ways that inhibited their performance but also felt ill-equipped to tackle the task at hand. These results are consistent with the idea that people who believe another views them as having benefited from preferential selection sometimes act in ways that fulfill what they infer to be the other’s negative expectations. The results also seem to indicate that, without information to the contrary, these inferred negative expectations can be incorporated into self-efficacy judgments. Together with the results of the covariance analysis, this finding supports our ideas about the role that self-efficacy judgments play in determining when individuals’ beliefs that another views them as having benefited from preferential selection spark self-defeating performance behavior.

**Study 2**

The data from Study 1 indicate no differences as a function of implied selection method in the task behavior of research participants who received information about their task ability. But this result would not always be expected. Individuals’ inferences that another holds low expectations of their competence also can motivate them to refuse the negative expectations and prove the other wrong. There is indeed evidence of efforts to overcome negative expectations (Jussim, 1990). Hilton and Darley (1985) demonstrated that individuals who were made aware of another’s negative expectations modified their interaction strategy to change these perceptions. In a similar manner, Baumeister, Cooper, and Skib (1979) demonstrated superior performance on an anagrams task when self-protective concerns were activated, and Swann and Snyder (1980) demonstrated that individuals who felt that an instructor had less confidence in their ability outperformed others. These results suggest quite a different behavioral reaction than that evidenced in Study 1. They suggest that women who are aware that another thinks them to have been preferentially selected because of their gender will sometimes seek to disabuse the other of what are inferred to be his or her stigma-based expectations. This result, of course, would be expected only when women actually believe themselves to be capable and, therefore, are convinced that the expectations that they infer the other to hold are erroneous.

But why, then, were attempts to refute inferred negative expectations derived from the preferential selection stigma not apparent in the high-ability condition of Study 1? Unlike the confirming of inferred expectations, the refutation of inferred expectations is driven by the motivation to create a more favorable impression. The experimental situation in Study 1 precluded such motivation. The impression the research participants made on the teammate did not have any potential impact on the participants’ outcomes. Even the desire to save face was irrelevant because research participants knew there was to be no contact with the teammate during the research session. Therefore, we conducted a second study to address the question of whether, if there is incentive to do so, individuals who are confident about their task ability will act in ways to prove their competence when they know another thinks they have benefited from preferential selection. The study also served as a means of replicating our findings from Study 1.

Female participants who were given either no information about their task ability or information that they had high task ability were once again led to believe that their teammate thought them to have been selected for the research either on the basis of merit or

---

1 Additional information consistent with this finding was provided by the data collected for the ability manipulation check. When asked how well they had done on the SCSTI, participants who had not received a score on the SCS differed significantly in their perceptions of their test performance depending on their implied selection condition. Those in the implied preferential selection condition indicated decidedly worse performance \((M = 4.00)\) than those in the implied merit condition \((M = 6.27)\).
preferentially on the basis of gender. However, in this study the research participants were told that they would be in contact with the teammate during the research session, getting and giving evaluative feedback and discussing the task. Because under these circumstances the other's impression of them was likely to be of relevance, we anticipated that research participants who believed themselves to be capable would be motivated to demonstrate their competence to a teammate who thought that they had been preferentially selected.

We therefore hypothesized that when preferential selection as opposed to merit-based selection was implied, (a) there would be inferences of more negative competence expectations regardless of the ability information conveyed, but (b) information about ability conveyed to participants would have a differential impact on their behavioral reactions. Specifically, when participants were informed that the other thought they had been selected on the basis of their gender, we expected participants who were given no information about their ability to be more timid and performance-limiting in their task behavior (as they were in Study 1), and we expected participants who were given information that they were highly capable to be more bold and performance-maximizing in their task behavior. In addition, we expected self-perceptions of competence to be negatively affected by implied preferential selection only when no information about ability was conveyed. Task behavior was again measured by choices made about task difficulty level.

Method

Participants and Design

Sixty undergraduate women participated in this study to fulfill an introductory psychology course requirement at New York University. As in Study 1, participants were solicited by telephone approximately 1 week prior to the study and were told that they had been expressly chosen to participate in the study without being informed of the reason for their selection. The design was a 2 x 2 factorial involving two independent variables: implied selection method (merit or preferential selection on the basis of gender) and information about task ability level (high or not provided). Participants were randomly assigned, and there were 15 women in each experimental condition.

Procedure

The general procedure for Study 2 was the same as that used for Study 1, except that in all cases the participant expected to have contact with the confederate at the end of the research session. The experimenter explained that when the task was completed the two teammates would be brought together to discuss the task and give each other feedback. This contact was to be face-to-face and unstructured.

In this second study, there was no low-task-ability condition; included were only the high-task-ability and the no-information-about-task-ability conditions. All other elements of Study 2 were identical to those of Study 1, including the implied selection method manipulation and the information about task ability manipulation.

Dependent Measures

The four dependent measures used in Study 1 were repeated in Study 2: inferred competence expectations, task difficulty choice, self-view of competence, and affective reactions. The coefficient alpha for the inferred competence expectation scale was .88, for the self-view of competence scale was .90, and for the affective reaction scale was .90.

Results

Manipulation Checks

The implied selection method manipulation again was effective. All but 3 participants responded consistently with condition to the question "In your opinion, why does your teammate think you were chosen to be in this research?" (my competence at this task or factors other than my competence at this task). Responses also indicated that the high-ability manipulation was effective. Analysis of variance indicated that when participants were asked how well they had done on the ability diagnostic SCSI, participants in the high-ability conditions (M = 6.83) reported better performance than those who did not receive information about their ability (M = 5.27), F(1, 58) = 8.99, p < .01.

Dependent Measures

Intercorrelations among the dependent variable measures are presented in Table 3. A multivariate analysis of variance conducted on the four dependent measures indicated a significant main effect for implied selection method, F(4, 53) = 3.69, p < .05; for task ability information, F(4, 53) = 2.88, p < .05; and for the interaction between them, F(4, 53) = 2.92, p < .05. We then conducted univariate analyses of variance for each of the dependent measures and tested specific differences between the conditions with planned intercell comparisons. The t statistic was used to test the intercell comparisons, with the two-tailed alpha level set at p < .05. Table 4 presents the means, standard deviations, and results of the intercell comparisons for each of the dependent measures.

Inferred competence expectations. Analysis of variance of the participants' inferences about how the other viewed them revealed a significant effect for implied selection method, F(1, 56) = 50.56, p < .01, η² = .47. No significant effects were found for task ability, F(1, 56) = 1.01, ns, or for the interaction between the two independent variables, F(1, 56) = 0.09, ns. Whether informed about their ability or not, those participants whose teammate thought they had been selected preferentially assumed their teammate to expect them to be less competent than participants whose teammate thought they had been selected on the basis of merit.

Task decisions. Analysis of variance of the participants' task decisions indicated a significant effect for task ability, F(1, 56) = 5.22, p < .05, η² = .09; a nonsignificant effect for implied selection method, F(1, 56) = 0.00, ns; and a significant two-way interaction, F(1, 56) = 7.52, p < .01, η² = .12. Intercell compar-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Task behavior</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Inferred competence expectations</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-view of competence</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.69*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Affective reactions</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01.
isons supported our predictions. They indicated that participants who believed their teammate thought they had been selected preferentially as opposed to on the basis of merit chose less complex tasks when they were in the no-information conditions but chose more complex tasks when they were in the high-ability conditions.

**Self-view of competence.** Analysis of variance of self-view of competence ratings indicated a significant effect for implied selection method, $F(1, 56) = 8.06, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$, and for task ability, $F(1, 56) = 4.09, p < .05, \eta^2 = .06$, but not for the two-way interaction, $F(1, 56) = 3.06, ns$. Intercell comparisons indicated that implied selection method had no effect on self-view of task competence when ability information had been provided but did have a significant effect when ability information had not been provided. As in Study 1, with no information about task ability, participants who believed their teammate thought they had been selected preferentially rated their competence lower than those who believed their teammate thought they had been selected on the basis of a merit criterion. In fact, as one can see in Table 4, these participants rated their competence lower than did participants in all other conditions.

**Affective reactions.** Analysis of variance of participants’ affective reactions indicated a significant effect only for implied selection method, $F(1, 56) = 14.84, p < .01, \eta^2 = .20$. Effects were nonsignificant for task ability, $F(1, 56) = 3.76, ns$, and for the interaction, $F(1, 56) = 0.52, ns$. Intercell comparisons made clear that whether ability information was provided or not, negativity in reported affect was greater when preferential selection had been implied than when it had not.

**Additional analyses.** Different factors were posited to mediate the task choices of research participants in the high-ability and no-information-about-ability conditions. Although we did have some information about one of these factors (self-perceptions of competence), we did not collect data about motivational forces, the posited mediator of task choices in the high-ability conditions. Consequently, we were limited in doing a full-scale mediational analysis. Nonetheless, it is instructive to note that when self-perceptions of competence ratings were covaried out of the task choice ratings, there no longer was a significant effect of implied selection method in the no-information conditions; intercell comparisons between the adjusted means proved to be statistically insignificant. This finding is consistent with the analysis of covariance results of Study 1.

**Discussion**

The results of this study both replicate and extend those of Study 1. They demonstrate that individuals’ beliefs about how someone else thinks they were selected can produce not only performance-limiting behavior but also performance-maximizing behavior. When led to believe the teammate attributed their selection to gender-based preference rather than merit, the female research participants were more timid when provided with no information about their task ability and were more bold when provided with information that they were high in task ability. These results support our predictions about the dual, and apparently contradictory, effects of implied selection method on task decisions.

These data also verified our idea that the research participants’ beliefs about why the teammate thought they were selected were accompanied by distinct inferences about the teammate’s expectations of their competence. As in Study 1, participants in Study 2 who believed the teammate to attribute their selection to a preferential process were less likely to believe that the teammate expected them to perform well. This finding suggests that the participants’ task behavior in this study was a reaction to their inferences about what the other expected of them, either confirming those inferred expectations or attempting to refute them. Also, the fact that performance-maximizing behavior was evidenced in Study 2, when contact with the other was anticipated, but not in Study 1, when the other’s impression had little consequence for the research participants, provides additional support for the idea that inferences about the other’s expectations were strongly influencing task behavior.

We should note that when research participants were not supplied with information about their ability they appeared to accept what they inferred to be the other’s stigma-based negative view of themselves. Participants who believed their teammate to think they were preferentially selected evaluated their competence lower than those who believed their teammate to think they were selected on the basis of merit. We should also note that, consistent with earlier results, research participants who believed another to think they
were preferentially selected reported feeling worse in terms of affect than those who did not. This result occurred regardless of the ability information provided. These findings and their implications are discussed below.

**General Discussion**

The results of these two studies demonstrate that when women know that another views them as having benefited from preferential selection, they infer that the other has negative expectations of their competence. Moreover, the results indicate that these inferences of negative expectations occur regardless of how capable the women regard themselves to be. Evidently, people viewed as the beneficiaries of preferential selection are aware of the societal stigma attached to preferential selection, and it makes them wary about how they are seen by others. In addition, although in this study the participants were told directly of the other’s views about how they were selected, we would expect this pattern of results to occur whenever women believe this view to be held, whether their belief is or is not accurate.

The results also lend support to the idea that the task behavior of women can be affected by their belief that another thinks they have been preferentially selected on the basis of their gender. When the women in our study were uncertain about their ability on the unfamiliar task, the other’s view that they were beneficiaries of preferential selection provoked them to make task decisions that were timid and risk-averse. This result is of particular concern because in new work situations people frequently are confronted with novel and unfamiliar tasks and are likely to experience uncertainty about their ability to handle them. Moreover, when the situation aroused impression management concerns, the women in our study who were confident about their task ability also were affected by their teammate’s view of them as having benefited from preferential selection. However, in this situation the women were bold in their task decisions, striving for higher performance outcomes than was the case otherwise. It seems that inferences of stigma-based negative expectations were pivotal in giving rise to both of these reactions, inducing the women in one case to confirm the inferred expectations and in the other to try to refute them.

There also were affective consequences resulting from the female participants’ awareness of the other’s view of how they were selected. They consistently reported feeling unhappy and dissatisfied when the other voiced the view that they were beneficiaries of preferential selection rather than selected on the basis of merit. This generalized negativity is consistent with other research regarding reactions to stigmatized status; evidently, it is not pleasant to be associated with a group that is negatively regarded or with those whom we believe regard us in a negative way. Although no specific outcomes of this negative affect were focused on in this research, there are likely consequences for a wide range of work attitudes and behavior.

When not provided with task ability information, the women in our study whose teammate viewed them as benefiting from preferential selection not only were prompted to engage in task behaviors that limited performance excellence but also appeared to accept and internalize the other’s presumably negative view of their competence. This finding, repeated in both studies, suggests that the adoption of what is believed to be the other’s view of oneself with its implications for self-efficacy judgments may be key to the confirmation of inferred expectations. This interpretation is further supported by the results of our covariance analyses and is consistent with the ideas of Eden (1990), who posited that self-expectancies mediate the effects of others’ expectations.

Although the focus of this research was on women, there is reason to believe that the results of the two studies also are applicable to others in organizations. The stigma of incompetence deriving from affirmative action is not confined to women; it has been shown to occur when race or ethnicity is its basis (Nacoste, 1990). Thus, when members of these groups believe themselves to be linked with preferential selection in the eyes of another, they are likely to make the same inferences about the other’s expectations as did the women in our studies. They also are likely to have similar behavioral, cognitive, and affective reactions.

There are several limitations of this research that we should note. In both studies, the teammate was a member of a group not likely to be targeted for preferential selection—men. In addition, the teammate was a coworker, not a subordinate or a superior. Furthermore, we should note that our studies were conducted in the laboratory; therefore, the two participants had no history with one another, and their performance had no enduring consequences. These features of the research may have inhibited or exaggerated responses that would ordinarily occur in actual work situations. For all of these reasons, it is critical to validate the results reported here in natural employment settings.

Despite these limitations, however, the two studies appear to have clear implications for understanding the experience of women regarded as targets of affirmative action initiatives. When aware of another’s view of them as beneficiaries of preferential selection, they might very well feel at a disadvantage, expecting the other to expect the worst from them. Also, unless they are very clear about their task ability, the consequences of knowledge of the other’s view of themselves as having been preferentially selected can be debilitating, promoting low self-efficacy and inhibiting performance. And even when their confidence is high, there may be dangers of becoming overzealous and taking on too much in an effort to prove themselves. This behavior can ultimately lead to the exhaustion or frustration commonly experienced by many women and minority group members who have entered work settings from which they traditionally have been excluded. Because current conditions in organizations often foster the view that others in the workplace have been selected preferentially due to their group membership, these findings indicate yet another way in which women targeted to benefit from affirmative action may in fact be inadvertently harmed rather than helped by these efforts.

**References**


Received April 3, 1998
Revision received July 3, 2000
Accepted July 3, 2000