

Research Article

The Correlates and Consequences of Newspaper Reports of Research on Sex Differences

Victoria Brescoll and Marianne LaFrance

Yale University

ABSTRACT—*Correlates and consequences of newspaper accounts of research on sex differences were examined. In Study 1, articles from high-circulation newspapers were coded for the degree to which biological factors were used to explain sex differences. Results showed that political conservatism and traditional attitudes toward gender roles coded from other newspaper sections predicted greater use of biological explanations than did political liberalism and less traditional attitudes toward gender roles. In Studies 2 and 3, participants read a fictional newspaper article reporting research on a gender difference that cited either biological or sociocultural factors as explaining the difference. Results showed that exposure to biological explanations significantly increased participants' endorsement of gender stereotypes. Moreover, exposure to social explanations significantly increased participants' belief in the mutability of human behavior. Together, these studies show that political ideology influences how the popular press reports research findings and that such reporting in turn affects readers' beliefs and attitudes.*

For several decades, psychologists have been urged to “give psychology away” (Miller, 1969). But psychologists have frequently countered that it is not psychologists but the media who give psychology away (Zimbardo, 2002). Recognizing this, the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Psychological Society (APS) have established programs to effectively communicate psychological research to the mass media. For example, APS sponsors a Media Fellowship Program, and APA maintains a Web site that provides daily updates on “news from the world of psychology” (www.psycport.com). These efforts acknowledge the media's role as key conduit of psychological research to both the general public and

Address correspondence to Victoria Brescoll, Psychology Department, Yale University, 2 Hillhouse, New Haven, CT 06511; e-mail: victoria.brescoll@yale.edu.

policymakers (Fenton, Bryman, Deacon, & Birmingham, 1998; Weiss, Singer, & Endreny, 1988).

At the same time, psychologists are concerned that the media present scientific findings in inaccurate, oversimplified, or sensationalized ways (McCall & Stocking, 1982; Thompson & Nelson, 2001; Weigel & Pappas, 1981). In one survey, only 8% of social scientists thought that the media's reporting of scientific research was “accurate” (Weiss et al., 1988). Moreover, social scientists' concerns about inaccuracy and oversimplification are validated by what empirical data exist on the issue. For example, Tankard and Ryan (1974) found that less than 10% of newspaper articles about scientific research are error free. The social sciences appear to fare even worse than the physical sciences, with articles covering social science research containing one and a half times as many errors per article as articles written about the physical sciences (Tankard & Ryan, 1974).

POLITICAL BIAS IN THE MEDIA

The body of scholarship documenting the “uneasy partnership” (Weiss et al., 1988) between science and the media has focused almost exclusively on the media's inaccurate and sensationalistic treatment of research findings. But other dimensions of media reporting are also worth exploring. In particular, some scholars have suggested that political bias influences the news coverage of research. For example, Herrnstein (1982) accused liberal newspapers of suppressing evidence for the genetic bases of racial differences in IQ. More strikingly, recent reactions to Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman's (1998) meta-analysis of child sexual abuse have brought to light the complex relations among science, the media, and politics (Albee, 2002). In particular, Garrison and Kobor (2002) asserted that the conservative press lambasted the findings of Rind et al., whereas the liberal press generally supported them.

Such anecdotal accusations of political bias raise the question as to whether the influence of politics on science reporting can be empirically demonstrated. The present research tested the hypothesis that a

newspaper's political orientation influences its reports of findings pertaining to sex differences in human behavior. Political orientation may influence newspaper coverage of research on sex differences because explanations for gender differences have been linked to political ideology (Bleier, 1984; Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Russett, 1989). For example, conservatives may favor biological explanations for sex differences because biological causation can supply the ideological underpinning for justifying the status quo, whereas liberals may favor sociocultural explanations because they can be used to challenge existing arrangements.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In the present investigation, we addressed two questions about media representation. First, do liberal newspapers report research findings on sex differences differently than conservative newspapers? Second, does differential reporting of scientific findings affect readers' attitudes and beliefs?

To address the first question, we used content analysis to examine whether newspapers' political stance correlates with the type of explanation they offer for findings on sex differences. Studies 2 and 3 experimentally tested whether a biological explanation for sex differences, compared with a sociocultural explanation, leads readers to more strongly endorse gender stereotypes and to adhere to the belief that people are immutable.

STUDY 1: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPERS

The content analysis entailed several steps: selection of newspapers, selection of specific articles, and coding of the sampled articles. Articles were coded for the type of explanation offered to explain described sex differences and for two predictor variables: the degree to which the newspaper was politically conservative or liberal and the degree to which the newspaper articulated traditional sex role beliefs. We hypothesized that higher scores on political conservatism and more traditional gender role beliefs would be associated with a greater tendency to attribute gender differences to biological factors.

Method

Selection of Newspapers and Articles

Our concern was to secure a set of newspapers that were widely read and geographically representative. Thus, newspapers were drawn from a listing of the 50 newspapers with the largest daily circulation in the United States (Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, 1999). The 50 newspapers were divided into four geographical regions, and three quarters of each region's newspapers were randomly sampled, yielding 29 newspapers.

Using the *Lexis-Nexis* full-text database, we gathered articles covering the period from January 1994 to February 2001 from each newspaper. Each newspaper was searched using a Boolean term designed to capture every article that met the following criteria. First, the article discussed a sex difference in some type of human behavior. Consequently, medical and animal studies were excluded. Second, the article reported a research finding, although the reporting of the finding did not have to be its primary focus. Third, the article stated or alluded to at least one causal explanation for the reported gender

difference. This search yielded 28,717 articles across the 29 newspapers. On average, each newspaper yielded 990 articles, although the range in the number of articles varied because of variation in the newspapers' sizes and whether they included a science section. Finally, 10 articles were randomly selected from each of the 29 newspapers, yielding a total of 290 articles.

To assess whether this strategy generated a representative sample, we randomly selected one newspaper (*Columbus Dispatch*) and searched for every article that fit the search criteria. These articles were coded for the type of explanation offered and compared with a random sample of 10 articles from the same newspaper. There were no statistically significant differences in the key criterion variable, the proportion of biological explanations, $t(43) = 0.59$, n.s.

Coding of Explanations for Sex Differences

Coders first counted in each article the total number of explanations that addressed why the sexes differed. All such explanations were counted regardless of the source or the space afforded to them. Repeated explanations were counted only once.

Next, each explanation was coded as to whether it constituted a "biological" explanation. Biological explanations explained sex differences as due to brain structure, evolution, genetics, hormones, or neurotransmitters. Each article was assigned a score for the proportion of biological explanations, calculated by dividing the number of biological explanations by the total number of explanations. For example, an article with six explanations, three of which were biological, would receive a .5.

One rater coded all of the articles, and a second rater coded 20% of the articles, which were randomly selected from the total pool of articles. Interrater reliability was high (Cohen's $\kappa = .86$). Coders were blind to the particular newspaper that each article came from.

Predictor Variables

Political Ideology. Endorsement of presidential candidates during the 1996 and 2000 elections was used as an index of a newspaper's political ideology. For each election, each newspaper received a code of -1 for endorsing the Republican candidate (politically conservative) or $+1$ for endorsing the Democratic candidate (politically liberal). Only twice did a newspaper not endorse a presidential candidate (*New Orleans Times-Picayune* and the *Baltimore Sun* in 1996); nonendorsement was coded as 0.

Each newspaper received a score that combined both election years. Thus, newspapers could score anywhere from -2 (for always endorsing the Republican candidate) to $+2$ (for always endorsing the Democratic candidate).

Traditionality of Sex Role Beliefs. To measure sex role beliefs, we coded each newspaper's editorial position on the admission of women into military academies, specifically, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and the Citadel. A traditional sex role belief was coded if the editorial position held that only men should attend the military academies; editorials advocating for the admission of women were coded as nontraditional. The 29 newspapers published 326 editorials on this topic.

The traditionality index was a 5-point scale (1 = *women should not be allowed to attend*, 3 = *undecided*, 5 = *women should be allowed to attend*). One of the two endpoints was used when the editorialist expressed unequivocal support for or opposition to women attending the

military academies. For example, the statement “Women should never enter VMI” received a 1, whereas “The sexist admission policy must be relaxed” received a 5. The middle point of the scale was reserved for those editorials that considered both pros and cons but did not choose a side. Editorials received either a 2 or a 4 if they expressed support or opposition but with reservations. Newspapers’ scores on this index covered the range of traditionality, from 1.5 to 5 ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.11$).

One rater coded all of the editorials with the name of the newspaper removed. A second rater coded 20% of the editorials, randomly selected from the total pool of editorials. Interrater reliability was high (Cohen’s $\kappa = .88$).

Results

Candidate endorsements and editorial positions on the admission of women into military academies predicted the extent to which newspapers cited biological explanations for research findings on gender

differences. Together, political ideology and traditionality of sex role beliefs predicted the proportion of biological explanations for sex differences, $F(2, 26) = 5.55$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .29$, in a multiple regression analysis. More politically conservative newspapers and those that held more traditional gender role beliefs attributed gender differences more to biological factors than did more liberal newspapers and newspapers with less traditional gender role beliefs (see Table 1). Neither political ideology nor traditional sex role beliefs was a significant predictor of biological explanations by itself, $\beta_s = -.334$ and $-.247$, n.s., respectively. This result is probably due to the fact that political ideology and traditionality of sex role beliefs were highly intercorrelated, $r = .77$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Political ideology influenced the translation of scientific research findings in newspaper articles. In coverage of research on gender differences in areas such as self-esteem and cognitive abilities,

TABLE 1
Data on the Individual Newspapers

Newspaper	Sex role beliefs ^a	Biological explanations for sex differences (%)	Presidential endorsements		
			1996	2000	Code ^b
Northeast					
Baltimore Sun	3.9	.1833	Neither	Gore	1
Boston Globe	5.0	.15	Clinton	Gore	2
Boston Herald	1.63	.372	Dole	Bush	-2
New York Times	5.0	.28	Clinton	Gore	2
Newsday	4.7	.29	Clinton	Gore	2
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	3.8	.30	Clinton	Gore	2
Washington Post	4.0	.2042	Clinton	Gore	2
Midwest					
Chicago Sun-Times	3.3	.40	Clinton	Bush	0
Chicago Tribune	4.3	.195	Dole	Bush	-2
Cleveland Plain Dealer	5.0	.15	Clinton	Bush	0
Columbus Dispatch	1.67	.36	Dole	Bush	-2
Indianapolis Star	1.5	.246	Dole	Bush	-2
Kansas City Star	3.7	.236	Dole	Gore	0
Louisville Courier-Journal	4.86	.2167	Clinton	Gore	2
Omaha World-Herald	3.0	.55	Dole	Bush	-2
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	4.0	.25	Clinton	Gore	2
Southeast					
Atlanta Constitution	3.61	.44	Dole	Bush	-2
Dallas Morning News	3.1	.45	Dole	Bush	-2
Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel	4.1	.30	Clinton	Gore	2
Houston Chronicle	2.0	.317	Dole	Bush	-2
New Orleans Times	2.0	.377	Neither	Bush	-1
Orlando Sentinel	3.0	.3417	Dole	Bush	-2
St. Petersburg Times	4.4	.15	Clinton	Gore	2
Tampa Tribune	2.86	.217	Dole	Bush	-2
West					
Arizona Republic	3.2	.3834	Dole	Bush	-2
Denver Rocky Mountain News	2.4	.408	Dole	Bush	-2
San Diego Union-Tribune	2.1	.3233	Dole	Bush	-2
San Francisco Chronicle	4.9	.325	Clinton	Gore	2
Seattle Times	4.0	.2167	Clinton	Bush	0

^aHigher scores indicate more support for women being allowed to attend military academies (possible range: 1-5). ^bEach endorsement of a Democratic candidate was coded +1, and each endorsement of a Republican candidate was coded -1.

newspapers higher in conservatism and traditional sex role beliefs were more likely to attribute sex differences to biological factors than were newspapers that were more liberal and held less traditional sex role beliefs.

STUDY 2: WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF “NATURE” VERSUS “NURTURE” EXPLANATIONS?

Do newspaper reports influence readers’ attitudes and beliefs? Specifically, do news articles that explain gender differences in biological (or sociocultural) terms affect readers’ beliefs? Levy, Dweck, and Stroessner (1998) found that exposure to arguments suggesting that personality is fixed caused people to view human behavior as more stable and to show greater social stereotyping than did exposure to the idea that personality changes throughout the life span. We hypothesized that exposure to articles proposing biological attributions for sex differences would cause readers to see human attributes as more immutable than would exposure to articles proposing sociocultural attributions for these differences, and would also lead to greater endorsement of gender stereotypes.

Method

Participants

Participants were 127 undergraduates (52 males and 75 females; mean age = 20.35).

Materials

Each participant read one of four fictional newspaper articles. Each article described sex differences in the ability to identify plants, a topic chosen because of its gender neutrality. The four articles were identical except for two features: the explanation provided for the sex difference and the sex that was described as being better. We used two types of explanations: a biological explanation (i.e., evolutionary programming, brain structure) and a nonbiological explanation (i.e., socialization, expectations).

To ensure that the articles were comparable in style and presentation, nine independent judges rated the four articles on difficulty level, credibility, and clarity. No significant differences were found for difficulty, $F(3, 24) = 1.90$, n.s.; credibility, $F(3, 24) = 2.72$, n.s.; or clarity, $F(3, 24) = 0.08$, n.s.

To ensure that the fictional articles were similar to articles typically found in actual newspapers, another set of 23 judges rated a randomly selected subset of 9 articles used in the original content analysis and 1 of the 4 fictional articles. To select newspaper articles, we divided the original 290 articles into quartiles based on word length. Because the fictional article was 350 words long, we randomly selected 7 articles from the lowest quartile (i.e., those that were less than 528 words). We also randomly selected 2 articles that fell in the third quartile (i.e., those between 761 and 1,089 words), which yielded 9 total articles. The judges also rated 1 of the 2 fictional articles that presented women as being better at plant identification than men (either the article citing a biological explanation for the difference or the article providing a social explanation). The judges used 7-point scales to rate each article for readability, believability, and extremity of its stance. They also rated the probability (0%–100%) that the articles were actually published in a newspaper. The 10 articles were presented in

one of two random orders. Because no order effects were found, we collapsed the data across this factor. Data were also collapsed across the 2 fictional articles because they received nearly identical ratings on the four scales.

Results showed no differences between ratings of the fictional and the real newspaper articles. They were rated as equally readable, believable, and extreme (or moderate) in their stance. A series of within-subjects contrasts in which the fictional articles were compared with each of the nine real articles showed that the fictional article was rated as significantly more believable than three of the nine articles (all $ps < .05$) and no less believable than the remaining six. The fictional article was rated as significantly less extreme (all $ps < .05$) in its stance than four of the nine articles and no more extreme than the remaining five. Finally, the fictional article was rated as no more or less readable than the nine real articles. In addition, it was significantly more likely to be published in a newspaper than four of the nine articles (all $ps < .05$). In fact, the fictional article ranked third in likelihood of being published in a newspaper. These data strongly indicate that the fictional articles used in Study 2 were perceived as comparable to the actual newspaper articles found in Study 1.

Procedure

Participants were led to believe that they would be participating in two separate studies; the first was described as a memory experiment, and the second was presented as a survey study. To bolster the cover story, we had participants sign a consent form before completing each “study.” After completing the first consent form, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four fictional newspaper articles describing a recent study on sex differences in the ability to identify plants. As a manipulation check, participants answered two purported memory questions about the newspaper article (“Who was better at plant recognition?” “Why is there a sex difference in gardening ability?”). Two additional, more difficult questions were asked to boost the cover story.

Next, participants completed a second consent form that bolstered the cover story, and then completed a series of questionnaires presented in counterbalanced order. The three-item Implicit Person Theory Scale (Levy et al., 1998) was used to tap the degree to which participants believed that people are capable of change. Using 6-point scales, participants rated their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*) with items such as “People can change even their most basic qualities.” To assess endorsement of gender stereotypes, we adapted 20 items from Diekman and Eagly’s (2000) measure. The female stereotypes included five positive traits (i.e., nurturant, intuitive, sensitive, artistic, and emotional) and five negative traits (e.g., whiny, nagging, servile, subordinates self to others, and gullible). Likewise, the male stereotypes included five positive traits (i.e., competitive, quantitatively skilled, analytical, dominant, and aggressive) and five negative traits (i.e., arrogant, egotistical, boastful, cynical, and hostile). Using a 9-point scale (1 = *men extremely more*, 9 = *women extremely more*), participants rated how the average man and the average woman compare with each other on the gender-stereotyped characteristics. An eight-item scale assessed attitudes toward policy issues relevant to women, such as affirmative action and women in military academies. Four of the eight items were reverse-scored, and all questions were answered using a 9-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*). Last, participants completed several demographic items pertaining to their sex, race and ethnicity, and age.

Results

The manipulation check indicated that the manipulation was successful, with 98% of participants correctly identifying which sex was better at plant identification and the reason given for the sex difference.

We found support for the idea that exposure to particular explanations affects other core beliefs. Responses to the Implicit Person Theory Scale were highly reliable ($\alpha = .90$). More to the point, scores on this measure were significantly affected by how sex differences in the articles were explained. A 2 (explanation) \times 2 (sex: men better vs. women better) analysis of variance revealed a main effect for explanation, $F(1, 125) = 7.109, p < .01$; the interaction between explanation and sex was not statistically significant, $F(1, 125) = 0.16, n.s.$ Participants who read the articles that attributed the sex difference to biological causes had significantly lower scores on the Implicit Person Theory Scale ($M = 3.45, SD = 0.98$) than did participants who read the articles that attributed the difference to social causes ($M = 3.90, SD = 0.98$). Regardless of whether men or women were presented as being better at plant identification in the news story, the biological explanation led participants to believe more strongly that people cannot change.

The articles' coverage also affected endorsement of gender stereotypes. As predicted, we found a main effect for explanation, $F(1, 125) = 13.95, p < .001$. The interaction of explanation and sex was not significant, $F(1, 125) = 0.02, n.s.$ Participants exposed to articles that attributed the sex difference to biological causes endorsed more gender stereotypes ($M = 6.42, SD = 0.53$) than participants exposed to the articles attributing the sex difference to social factors ($M = 6.06, SD = 0.53$). Biological attributions caused participants to endorse more gender stereotypes regardless of whether men or women were presented as being better at plant identification. Participants' attitudes toward gender-relevant policies were unaffected by condition, $F(1, 125) < 1, n.s.$

STUDY 3: WHICH EXPLANATION DRIVES THE EXPERIMENTAL EFFECT?

The goal of Study 3 was to uncover the direction of the experimental effects found in Study 2. It could be that reading about biological explanations caused participants to increase gender stereotyping and endorsement of the belief that people cannot change. Alternatively, sociocultural explanations could have caused participants to decrease their endorsement of gender stereotypes and the belief that people are unchangeable. To test these possibilities, we replicated Study 2 and added a control condition in which participants did not read any of the news articles.

Method

Participants were 149 undergraduates (83 males and 66 females). They were randomly assigned to either read one of four fictional newspaper articles or not read any article. Participants completed the same measures used in Study 2.

Results

The manipulation check indicated that the manipulation was successful, with 99% of participants correctly answering the questions. We replicated the findings from Study 2. Specifically, participants who

read an article with a biological explanation were more likely to believe that people cannot change ($M = 3.59, SD = 1.03$) than were participants who read an article with a sociocultural explanation ($M = 4.2, SD = 1.02$), regardless of whether men or women were presented as being better, $F(1, 147) = 6.64, p < .01$. More to the point, the Implicit Person Theory Scale scores of participants in the control condition were nearly identical to the scores of participants who read an article with a biological explanation ($M = 3.58, SD = 1.14$). These results suggest that exposure to sociocultural explanations for sex differences increases the tendency to believe that people are capable of change, whereas exposure to biological explanations does not particularly affect this belief (see Fig. 1).

We also replicated our gender-stereotype findings from Study 2. Participants who read articles that attributed sex differences to biological causes endorsed more gender stereotypes ($M = 6.43, SD = 0.61$) than participants who read articles attributing sex differences to social factors ($M = 6.05, SD = 0.72$), regardless of whether men or women were presented as being better, $F(1, 147) = 6.26, p < .01$. Interestingly, participants in the control condition endorsed gender stereotypes to nearly the same degree as participants who read an article with a sociocultural explanation ($M = 6.03, SD = 0.44$; see Fig. 1). This suggests that exposure to biological explanations for gender differences leads to an increase in gender stereotyping, whereas exposure to sociocultural explanations has little effect on gender stereotyping.

Discussion

The results of Studies 2 and 3 are consistent with our hypotheses and related work (Levy et al., 1998) in demonstrating that exposure to biological explanations increased subjects' endorsement of gender

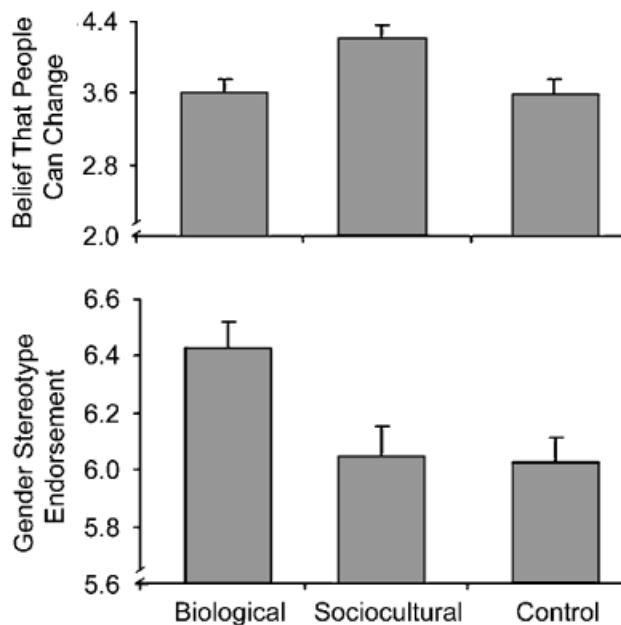


Fig. 1. Mean endorsement of the belief that people can change (top panel) and of gender stereotypes (bottom panel) among participants who read a newspaper article proposing a biological or sociocultural explanation for sex differences and among control participants, who did not read a newspaper article on sex differences.

stereotypes and exposure to sociocultural explanations increased subjects' belief that people are capable of change. Martin and Parker (1995) found a relationship between biological essentialism and gender polarization: The more individuals thought that biology caused sex differences, the more they saw the sexes as different. Our results also indicate that belief in biological essentialism may affect belief in gender polarization. Specifically, exposure to biological explanations led participants to believe that men and women are more different from each other than did exposure to sociocultural explanations.

Additionally, our results suggest that only exposure to sociocultural explanations affected belief in whether people are capable of change. Exposure to biological explanations had no impact on participants' belief about the mutability of human behavior. These data can be interpreted in light of the tendency for people to make dispositional rather than situational inferences for the causes of human behavior (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Our sociocultural condition prompted participants to consider how situational factors might have been responsible for behavior, leading participants to endorse the belief that people are capable of change.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Study 1 revealed that political ideology and gender role beliefs influenced how newspapers presented scientific research on sex differences. Studies 2 and 3 demonstrated that exposure to biological explanations for sex differences caused participants to endorse more gender stereotypes and exposure to sociocultural explanations caused participants to see human behavior, in general, as more mutable. Together these studies suggest that political ideology influences the explanations for gender differences provided by the print media and that specific consequences result from such exposure.

The fact that politics may influence science reporting is somewhat unsettling. One might expect political ideology to infiltrate coverage of political candidates, editorial positions, or even coverage of certain topics. But one does not expect science reporting—which is supposed to be fact based and objective—to be comparably politicized. More to the point, when people read articles about science, their guard may be down precisely because they are reading about science. When people read newspaper explanations for sex differences, they may accept the explanations as objectively true rather than understand the explanations first and decide on their veracity later. Indeed, Gilbert's (1991) work suggests that there are not separate comprehension and evaluative processes in forming beliefs.

Moreover, these findings suggest that media reports of scientific findings may not only change people's beliefs but also reinforce existing political ideology. Thus, conservatives may begin with a preference for biological explanations for sex differences and also read conservative newspapers containing more biological explanations for sex differences. Such reading may further justify and reinforce pre-existing opinions about the causes of sex differences. But as shown by Study 3, exposure to biological explanations can increase endorsement of gender stereotypes. These beliefs may, in turn, intensify conservative ideology.

One important issue concerning the content analysis in Study 1 remains unresolved—our data do not reveal where political influence enters into the reporting process. Is it that conservative newspapers chose to cover research amenable to biological explanations and liberal newspapers cover research that can be explained in socio-

cultural terms? Or is it that conservative and liberal newspapers choose the same stories to cover but then explain these stories in biological or sociocultural terms, respectively? Although the present studies cannot address these questions, they do suggest that psychologists need to be more involved in the dissemination of their research—and, as consumers, people need to be wary of what they read.

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