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Pragmatic Reasoning Ability Predicts Syntactic Framing Effects on Social Judgments

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Abstract

Although subject-complement statements like “girls are as good as boys at math” seem egalitarian, the group in the complement position (boys) is often judged superior. Across two experiments, we examined whether this syntactic framing effect is driven by the ability to discern the pragmatic implications of the syntax. After reading subject-complement statements about the equal math ability of girls and boys or of unstereotyped social groups, participants judged which group was better at math. They also completed a novel measure of pragmatic reasoning ability for subject-complement statements. We found reliable framing effects regardless of stereotype strength, and these effects were uniquely predicted by pragmatic reasoning ability over and above other social-cognitive factors. Moreover, for unstereotyped groups, pragmatic reasoning ability predicted explicit recognition of, and resistance to, the influence of framing. Our findings point to pragmatic reasoning as both a mechanism driving syntactic framing effects and a tool for counteracting them.