Gender Roles on Female Self Esteem

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Ingraining counterfactual gender roles in the minds of young women positively affects their self esteem. There exists a clear difference in the frequency with which men and women are expected to perform some activities, in some places more than others (Fernández et al., 2016). Additionally, the environment in which a person spends their time strongly influences their self esteem (Jones and Lamke, 1985). Thus, imposing these gender role stereotypes on women negatively impacts their self esteem due to the negative prejudicial environment that it creates (Jones and Lamke, 1985). Providing women with the tools needed to oppose these negative effects positively impacts the way that they experience their professional lives (Cortland and Kinias, 2019).

The implicit study described in the peer review by Fernández et al. (2016) determines an array of stereotypes that seem to be the most strongly socially ingrained utilizing a Gender Roles Questionnaire. The participants are asked to explicitly categorize activities as either typically domestic female (DF), domestic male (DM), or domestic neutral (DN). The second portion of this review describes an implicit study as a means of validating the results found in the first study. The activities initially categorized as DF through the first part of this study tended to consistently result in quick responses, whereas the DM response times were similar to the DN response times, which means that they require more thought to decipher. Despite rising equity, many domestic roles are clearly still very strongly associated solely with the female (Fernandez et al., 2016).

This concept is crucial to note because of the incredible detrimental impacts of implicit stereotypes that often go unnoticed. Women typically are not positively reinforced for pursuing careers in male dominated fields because it is received as sex role "innapropriate" behavior. The

peer review by Jones and Lamke (1985) discusses a study in which women in engineering majors score significantly low on the self esteem scale. This brings attention to the theory that one's environment and the social prejudice that it may cultivate strongly influences self esteem. Women being in typical sex typed masculine jobs tend to have lower self esteems because the competitive environment that they are in inflicts self doubt (Jones and Lamke, 1985).

This historical prejudice that women are less competent and capable than men, makes not only masculine fields of study challenging but also male dominated career paths, creating a critical need for support. The peer review by Cortland and Kinias (2019) looks at successful women in male dominated fields and asks them what brought them the most encouragement in terms of breaking down the anxiety of confirming stereotypes. They found that role models as well as psychological support are crucial in balancing workplace equity. The negative stereotypes and general expectations can make pursuing male dominated fields appear unappealing. Making the environment more bearable and nurturing by breaking down stereotypes through example and internal motivation can help maintain engagement from women (Cortland and Kinias, 2019).

Gender role stereotypes are correlated with feelings of low self esteem so it can be expected that countering those gender role stereotypes positively affects self esteem. This study determines to what extent these practice systems can help a woman's self esteem in contrast to the effects of stereotypes. The hypothesis for this research is that women that practice thinking in counterfactuals to general stereotypes will result in increased self esteem scores because they will experience the self worth that comes from feeling that they are just as capable as anyone else. On the other hand, the women that receive a reminder of gender role stereotypes before working through a self esteem questionnaire will result in much lower self esteem scores,

because historically the traits and fields that women are generalized with are much less desirable, thus associating a woman with those roles will naturally make her feel worth much less. The implications that this experiment will have if this hypothesis is proven correct is that society should be engaging women from very young ages in conversations and experiences that gradually deconstruct gender stereotypes so that they may fully recognize their worth and potential.

<div align="center">Method</div>

<u>Participants</u>

84 undergraduate women attending a small liberal arts college in New England participated in this study (15 first years, 30 sophomores, 21 juniors, 18 seniors). Their average age was 20.23 years. Most (62%%) identified themselves as white/Caucasian. Women who identified as Black/African American (7%), Hispanic/Latina (5%, n = 13), and Asian/Pacific Islander (3.4%, n = 8) and other/not identified also participated. Participants were recruited from the entire school, an email was sent out to the student body informing them of the opportunity and these 84 students followed through as well as others that were not selected for the study. The email did not specify the gender of the target participants; it simply informed the student body that a study on self esteem was being conducted and out of the respondents that expressed interest we followed up with those that were assigned female gender at birth and still currently identify as female. The participants that were accepted were asked to not discuss their role in the research with any of their peers. For participating the students received $50 for their time.

<u>Materials</u>

- 84 participants
- Computer lab

- Participants have their own personal devices

- Counterfactual/Stereotype activity websites

Procedure

Once the participants were selected they were split into four groups using a random assignment generator. Participants were either put into the control group that did not receive stereotypes or counterfactuals, or they were put into one of three treatment groups either receiving just stereotypes, just counterfactuals, or both. Once placed in a group the participants were all provided with a day that they were expected to come into a computer lab to complete the in person portion of their participation.

The participants that were in the counterfactual groups were sent a link to a counterfactual activity three weeks prior to their in person portion. The link took them to a website where a ten minute activity is opened. The activity contains images of women in all sorts of professional attire on the left side of the screen (lab coats, pant suits, safety gear, etc.) and on the right side of the screen there were labels with all sorts of professions and societal roles (lawyer, doctor, electrician, house mom, teacher, secretary, maid, etc.) The participants in the counterfactual groups that were provided with this link were asked to complete this ten minute activity once every day for the three weeks leading up to their in person portion. The options vary slightly every day because the website has a large pool of images and profession labels that randomly appear every time the activity is opened. At the end of the activity there is an option to provide a name and an email so that a certificate of completion can be recorded. The participants in the counterfactual groups were each asked to put their given participant number in as their name and the provided email in so that the researchers would be able to record who completed the counterfactual portion and when. This ensured that every day leading up to the in person

portion each participant experienced practice in thinking in a manner that defied traditional gender role stereotypes.

For the in person portion of this study participants were all called in at individual times. When each arrived a research assistant brought the participant into a small room with one computer and asked them to take a seat in front of the computer. Those participants that were in the stereotype groups (half of which had already been receiving the counterfactual activity) were sat in front of a computer that had an activity very similar to the counterfactual activity pulled up, however in this case the participants were asked to associate traditional images of women with traditional female gender roles. The intention of this was to remind the participants of the social constructs that bind them daily. The research assistant stepped out of the room for fifteen minutes while the participants completed this ten minute activity. Just like the counterfactual activity, their results are sent to those conducting the study with their participant number.

The participants that were in the control group or the group that only received the counterfactual activity skipped this step and sat at the desk with the computer turned off.

Every participant is then provided a sheet of paper that at the top asks them to put their participant number so that their responses can confidentiality be paired with the group that they had been assigned to. This paper contains 10 questions that assess one's self esteem utilizing the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*.

The results were then collected and analyzed. The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* functions on a scale from 10-40, 40 being the lowest self-esteem and 10 being the highest self-esteem.

Results

Means

	No Stereotype	Stereotype	

No counterfactual	25.29	30.95	*28.12*
Counterfactual	20.76	16.00	*18.38*
	23.02	*23.48*	

Standard Errors of the Mean

	No Stereotype	Stereotype	
No Counterfactual	2.47	1.80	*1.55*
Counterfactual	2.00	1.27	*1.22*
	1.60	*1.60*	

The first independent variable and its levels in this experiment was whether or not participants were exposed to gender role stereotypes before taking a self esteem questionnaire. There was not a significant effect observed in this result so according to this data it can be concluded that there is no evidence found in the data that states that being exposed to gender role stereotypes has an overall impact on a woman's self esteem.

The second independent variable and its levels in this experiment was whether or not participants were exposed to a counterfactual of gender role stereotypes before taking a self esteem questionnaire. The p value for this observation was less than .05 which indicates that we have statistically significant evidence to note that the difference observed can be attributed to more than chance. A greater Rosenberg self esteem score in general was observed in the participants that were not provided with a counterfactual, indicating a lower self esteem. This allows us to conclude that counterfactuals cause an increase in self esteem.

The p value for the interaction between these two variables was less than .05 which indicates that the observed difference in interaction can be attributed to more than chance. This

statistically significant evidence allows us to draw the conclusion that, despite the conclusion that the presentation of a stereotype lacks a main effect and indicates no overall impact on self esteem, there is a cross interaction between stereotype and counterfactual presentation. Presenting a stereotype has opposing effects on self esteem depending on whether or not a counterfactual is presented. When no counterfactual is presented, being reminded of gender role stereotypes has a strong negative impact on self esteem, whereas when a counterfactual is presented self esteem increases after one is reminded of stereotypes.

Discussion

The counterfactual activity utilized in this study resulted in a significant main effect on self esteem indicating the value in breaking down the traditional stereotypes that are imposed upon young women. However, more importantly, a significant effect was observed within the interaction between counterfactuals and stereotype reminders. The groups that were provided with a stereotype reminder prior to filling out their self esteem assessment resulted in opposing effects depending on whether or not they completed the counterfactual activities beforehand. This can be explained by recognizing that receiving stereotype reminders alone prior to assessing one's self esteem can decrease it because it serves as a reminder of the prejudice that works against women pursuing male gendered paths as well as of the idea that women are more deserving of the less desirable jobs in society. Whereas, the counterfactuals prior to the in person assessment serve as a way of breaking down those stereotypes so when the counterfactual group was eventually exposed to a stereotype reminder they had already been conditioned to recognize that those roles are simply societal constructs and that women can just as easily be imagined in any other position.

Prior research already determined that gender roles exist and that the prejudice that comes from them often cultivates an environment in which a woman's self esteem is significantly impacted. To lessen this, studies note that providing women with the tools needed to navigate these negative effects can positively impact success in their professional lives. What this study implies is that in addition to support systems that provide mechanisms of coping with social gender expectations, ingraining the belief that realistically women can fit into any career that a man can, allows women to enter those environments geared with the tools to recognize irrational prejudice.

Naturally, the results of this study are not the most generalizable because the participants solely consisted of New England college women. The participant pool for this particular study was limited, however, it could be beneficial in the future to incorporate a greater range of participants in terms of age and background so that the results can be applied to women in general. Similarly, these results can only be applied to the one counterfactual activity utilized in this study so it could be beneficial to vary the types of activities to determine that it is in fact the practice that helps self esteem and not simply this particular activity.

The next step is to determine the effects of this practice on women of different ages as well as men. Minds and beliefs are far more pliable in one's youth, thus these counterfactual activities and others similar could have a far more lasting effect on self esteem if practiced on young women. Additionally, if men were to practice this way of thinking as well it could help to diminish the initial cultivation of the prejudicial environments. The combination of the two would allow for women to both feel more empowered as well as face less adversity in male dominated career paths.

References

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