



Forecasting the experience of stereotype threat for others



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Forecasters overestimated the affect of female experiencers under threat.
- Forecasters also overestimated the performance expectations of these women.
- Forecasters saw threat as a motivating challenge that women could overcome.
- Forecasts did not significantly differ by participant gender.
- Forecasting discrepancies emerged after controlling for alternative explanations.

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ABSTRACT

Women can underperform when they are concerned about confirming negative gender-based math stereotypes; however, little research has investigated whether female and male perceivers have insight into the experiences of stereotype-threatened women. Female and male participants were randomly assigned to take a math test under stereotype-threatening conditions (experiencers) or predict how a woman taking a math test would feel and perform in the same situation (forecasters). Although female and male forecasters expected female experiencers to have more negative emotional reactions than they actually did, forecasters believed that female experiencers would overcome these emotional reactions and perform at a high level—a much higher level than female experiencers actually performed. This discrepancy for performance expectations was driven by forecasters' beliefs that female experiencers could overcome threat. This research suggests that strengthening the perceived link between stereotype threat's impact on emotional experiences and performance outcomes could foster others' appreciation of its insidious influence.

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Introduction

Women can perform worse than their past performance would suggest due to concerns about confirming the negative, gender-based stereotype that “women are bad at math” (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Indeed, stereotype threat research reveals that when this stereotype is made salient, women experience heightened anxiety and worries (e.g., Cadinu, Maass, Rosabianca, & Kiesner, 2005; Osborne, 2001) and lowered performance expectations (e.g., Stangor, Carr, & Kiang, 1998). Concerns about personally confirming negative group stereotypes usurps cognitive resources needed to complete difficult math problems (e.g., Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008), thereby impairing women's performance (e.g., Schmader & Johns, 2003). Although the

stereotype threat literature has extensively examined how this experience unfolds for people targeted by negative stereotypes (e.g., Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012; Steele et al., 2002), less is known about whether people's experiences of threat are perceived and understood by individuals who are not in the position to confirm these stereotypes themselves. Can perceivers accurately predict how a woman under stereotype threat feels, thinks, and will perform?

Past research has examined whether a woman's math experiences affect a perceiver's outcomes. For example, female students' math achievement is negatively impacted by their female teachers' self-reported math anxiety (Beilock, Gunderson, Ramirez, & Levine, 2010). Moreover, women experience lower self-esteem and math efficacy when they believe that another woman might confirm gender stereotypes (i.e., collective threat; Cohen & Garcia, 2005). However, this past work has exclusively assessed the effect of women's limiting beliefs and underperformance on female perceivers' experiences of stereotype threat—examining whether threat is “contagious”. Whether people can predict women's experiences under stereotype threat, when they themselves are not in a position to confirm negative stereotypes, is an

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unexplored question as no published studies have directly asked female and male perceivers how stereotype-threatened women think, feel, and perform when contending with this identity-threatening predicament.

The current research directly explores whether lay people expect a woman to experience stereotype threat in a context that is known, by researchers, to reliably inspire it (i.e., taking a difficult, potentially gender-biased math test; e.g., Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007; O'Brien & Crandall, 2003; Spencer et al., 1999). Specifically, female and male “forecasters”, who did not expect to take the math test themselves, made predictions of the performance concerns and expectations that a woman in the stereotype-threatening situation might have. We examined the accuracy of these forecasts by comparing them to the self-reported experiences of women who expected to perform in the stereotype-threatening situation (i.e., “experiencers”). We were particularly interested in whether women and men would forecast the heightened performance anxiety and lowered performance expectations that stem from experiencing stereotype threat.

Forecasts of emotional experiences

Based on the past stereotype threat research (e.g., Cadinu et al., 2005; Osborne, 2001), female experiencers should report greater anxiety in stereotype-threatening situations than male experiencers. However, a comparison of women's experiences with forecasters' predictions may reveal discrepancies. Although it is possible that forecasters' predictions will strongly correspond with the actual anxiety of women under stereotype threat, forecasts are likely susceptible to durable biases in which predictions of anxiety are overestimated. That is, affective forecasting errors may occur among forecasters (for a review, see Wilson & Gilbert, 2003).

Consistent with past research demonstrating forecasting errors when participants predicted how angry, fearful, and disgusted they, or another person, would feel as a target of sexism or sexual harassment (e.g., Bosson, Pintel, & Vandello, 2010; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001), we expected forecasters to overestimate the anxiety reported by women in a stereotype-threatening situation. While gender and performance stereotypes should be equally salient to forecasters and female experiencers (as all participants read a math test introduction that contained stereotype threat cues), forecasters might expect women receiving such instructions to experience higher levels of anxiety than female experiencers actually feel. Furthermore, we predicted that female and male forecasters would show equivalent forecasting errors for anxiety (and all other forecasting outcomes) since forecasters of both genders were exposed to the same, explicit cues to stereotype threat.

Anxiety and worries are theorized to be the predominant emotions experienced in stereotype-threatening situations (e.g., Steele, 1997; Steele et al., 2002); however, targets may also experience performance pressure and additional negative affect such as anger and feeling disrespected. We, therefore, tested whether affective forecasting errors emerged for these emotional states. We expected that forecasters would overestimate how much performance pressure women under stereotype threat experience. In line with Bosson et al. (2010) and Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001), forecasters should also predict that a woman who has negative stereotypes applied to her will be angrier and feel more disrespected in the stereotype-threatening situation than stereotype-threatened women actually feel.

Forecasts of performance

Consistent with the past work (e.g., Stangor et al., 1998), female experiencers should hold lower performance expectations in stereotype-threatening situations than male experiencers. Will forecasters have insight to these expectations? Here, we investigated competing hypotheses. On one hand, female and male forecasters could expect that experiencing anxiety will impair performance. If

forecasters overestimate female experiencers' anxiety, they may also make forecasting errors of performance by predicting lower performance expectations than those made by female experiencers. On the other hand, female and male forecasters could predict that a woman in a stereotype-threatening situation will perform relatively well—despite the anxiety generated by stereotype threat.

We believed that the latter hypothesis was more likely than the former. Although female and male forecasters may expect a woman experiencing stereotype threat to have high levels of anxiety about the performance situation, forecasters may underestimate the influence of female experiencers' anxiety on their performance. Specifically, forecasters could have higher performance expectations for female experiencers than these women report. This prediction is supported by Cohen and Garcia's (2005) finding that participants rated a peer—presumably under stereotype threat—as having relatively high intellectual ability, even when the peer stated performance concerns. Thus, anxiety may be viewed as an important but not sufficient precondition for impaired performance because female and male forecasters may believe that female experiencers possess the ability to cope with their anxiety and will expend enough effort to overcome its negative influence.

To examine whether these assumptions about coping ability and effort account for potential discrepancies between forecasters' and female experiencers' performance expectations, we assessed forecasters' predictions of coping ability and effort. Compared to male experiencers, female experiencers may expend more effort (e.g., Jamieson & Harkins, 2007) and report lower coping ability (e.g., Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Major & O'Brien, 2005). However, we expected forecasters to believe that a woman under stereotype threat will apply more effort and feel efficacious; that is, that stereotype threat will be motivating, rather than debilitating, and this motivation should buffer performance. Therefore, we predicted that female and male forecasters would overestimate the extent to which a woman in a stereotype-threatening situation will try hard and feel efficacious, and these beliefs should explain the discrepancy between forecasters' and female experiencers' performance expectations.

To demonstrate that discrepant performance expectations were due to differences in beliefs about the effort and coping ability of women in this particular stereotype threat situation and not due to differences in forecasters' and experiencers' beliefs about how anxiety and performance are related in general, participants' personal beliefs about the anxiety-performance link were measured. Although forecasters may believe that there are ways to mitigate anxiety's negative impact on performance (i.e., through effort and coping strategies), we expected all participants, regardless of role, to endorse the general lay belief that anxiety impairs performance to a similar extent. Because we did not predict role differences in this general belief, we did not expect the strength of its endorsement to account for potential forecaster-experiencer discrepancies for performance expectations.

Actual performance

After making predictions or reporting their current experiences, all participants completed the math test. While forecasters did not anticipate this test, math performance was measured to explore whether performance would differ between the forecaster and experiencer conditions. This procedure allowed us to examine whether performance differences emerged between female forecasters and female experiencers. It is possible that the act of predicting another woman's experience within a stereotyped domain may later elicit stereotype threat for female forecasters when they complete the same difficult math test. Indeed, research by Cohen and Garcia (2005) concerning collective threat supports this possibility as Black participants who were aware of the possible poor performance of a fellow in-group member showed reduced performance themselves. Thus, in

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