



“You throw like a girl:” The effect of stereotype threat on women’s athletic performance and gender stereotypes



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: “Stereotype threat” occurs when people perform worse at a task due to the pressure of a negative stereotype of their group’s performance. We examined whether female athletes may underperform at an athletic task if prompted to think about gender stereotypes of athleticism. We also explored whether gender stereotypes regarding general athletic ability would be affected by a standard stereotype threat induction.

Design: We used a 2 (participant gender) × 2 (stereotype threat manipulation) factorial design with task performance and gender stereotypes of athleticism as dependent measures.

Method: Female and male tennis and basketball college student athletes performed two athletic tasks relevant to their sport: a difficult concentration task and an easier speed task. Participants were told beforehand that (1) there was a gender difference on the tasks (to induce stereotype threat) or (2) there was no gender difference (to remove any preexisting stereotype threat).

Results: On the difficult task, women performed worse than men only when stereotype threat was induced. Performance on the easier speed task was unaffected by the stereotype information. Interestingly, women’s beliefs regarding women’s and men’s *general* athleticism were also affected by the manipulation.

Conclusions: We concluded that one minor comment regarding a very specific athletic task may sometimes impair task performance and alter gender stereotypes of athleticism among women. Some implications for preventing negative stereotype threat effects are discussed.

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Introduction

In 2008, Gretchen Bleiler attempted to be the first snowboarder to achieve a second consecutive gold medal in the Winter X Games superpipe competition. As Bleiler attempted an impressive jump with a 900° turn, she took a big spill. Could the pressure for female athletes to prove their athleticism result in such negative performance outcomes? The commentator described Bleiler as the “most visible woman in snowboarding” at the time. If Bleiler had won this second consecutive gold medal, she would have set a record among both females and males in her sport. Thus, it is possible that gender was on her mind during the competition. We propose that when female athletes think about their gender, societal stereotypes

regarding lower female athleticism could become salient, thus impacting their performance.

Stereotype threat

Researchers studying a phenomenon known as “stereotype threat” have demonstrated that people can underperform at tasks when thinking about the negative performance expectations for their group (Steele, 1997, 1998). For example, a woman’s performance on a difficult math test may suffer if she is told that women tend to underperform in math or on that particular test. Thoughts about the negative gender stereotype may cause the woman to worry that her performance, if poor, would verify the negative stereotype of her group. Consequently, she may become particularly motivated to disprove the stereotype. Unfortunately, this excessive concern about performance can sometimes impair actual performance outcomes (e.g., O’Brien & Crandall, 2003; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999).

To support this notion, Spencer et al. (1999) found that female college students who were proficient in math performed worse on

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a difficult math test than their male counterparts when told that there was “a gender difference” on the test. However, the women and men performed equally well when told that there was no gender difference on the math test. It is noteworthy that a task must be quite difficult in order for stereotype threat cues to impair performance (O’Brien & Crandall, 2003). In fact, easy tasks sometimes result in improved performance under the pressure of a negative stereotype (O’Brien & Crandall, 2003).

Negative stereotype threat effects may occur even when no explicit stereotype regarding gender expectations is presented (Ben-Zeev, Fein, & Inzlicht, 2005). For example, Ben-Zeev et al. believe that stereotype threat is the “default” experience when women who care about math are taking a math test in a mixed-sex setting. If the same is true in the context of sports, then female athletic performance may regularly suffer due to the prevalent stereotypes about lower female athleticism. Thus, it may be important to remove already existing gender stereotypes by describing athletic tasks as gender-neutral.

Gender stereotypes in sport

Perceptions of lower female athleticism are pervasive (see Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Fontayne, Boiché, & Clément-Guillotin, 2013, for a recent review). Gender stereotypes are evident in media coverage of sports (e.g., Knight & Giuliano, 2001); referees’ calls during games (Souchon, Coulomb-Cabagno, Tractlet, & Rasclé, 2004); and funding of athletic programs (Hardin, Simpson, Whiteside, & Garris, 2007). They are also evident in teachers’ and parents’ views and treatment of girls and boys. Although a little research finds that physical education teachers give more encouragement feedback to girls than to boys (Nicaise, Bois, Fairclough, Amorose, & Cogèrino, 2009), most studies have shown that physical education teachers interact more with boys (e.g., Duffy, Warren, & Walsh, 2001; MacDonald, 1990) and are more encouraging of boys’ involvement in sport (see Cann, 1991, for a review). Physical education teachers also have gender-biased performance expectations in sports which are inconsistent with real group differences (Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Trouilloud, & Jussim, 2009). Parents display the same general patterns, favoring boys both in perceptions of athletic ability and in encouragement of their children’s involvement in sport (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005).

It is not surprising, then, that boys have better perceptions of their athletic ability (e.g., Biddle, Atkin, Cavill, & Foster, 2011; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Hilland, Stratton, Vinson, & Fairclough, 2009) and greater motivation to participate in sports (e.g., Knisel, Opitz, Wossmann, & Keteihuf, 2009). Just thinking about the common expression, “You throw like a girl,” conjures up an impression of women as unathletic. People seem to equate athleticism with masculinity rather than femininity (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Koivula, 1999).

Stereotype threat in sports

Negative beliefs regarding female athleticism may impede girls and females from performing to their true potential in sports contexts (Chalabaev et al., 2013). Interestingly, women need not endorse these gender stereotypes in order for their performance to suffer (Chalabaev, Sarrazin, Stone, & Cury, 2008). They may experience stereotype threat even if they disagree with the stereotype or believe that it does not apply to them personally (Steele, 1997) because their goal of disproving the stereotype may be present regardless. For example, a female athlete may have a coach who believes that men outperform women at her sport. Though the athlete may disagree, she may still fear that if she performs poorly in front of her coach, then that would (falsely) prove to the coach

that the negative stereotype was true. Thus, the mere existence and reminder of gender stereotypes regarding athleticism may continuously harm female athletes’ performance.

Stereotype threat in the context of sports has been investigated in only five prior studies (Beilock, Jellison, Rydell, McConnell, & Carr, 2006; Beilock & McConnell, 2004; Chalabaev et al., 2008; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999; Stone & McWhinnie, 2008), and all but one investigated the same athletic task, golf putting. These researchers have focused primarily on the effects of gender stereotypes on male athletes or the effect of racial stereotypes on the athletic performance of different racial groups. Although these issues are important, the prevalence of stereotypes regarding female athleticism warrants investigation on how gender stereotypes may impair women’s athletic performance. Only two studies have examined this issue (Chalabaev et al., 2008; Stone & McWhinnie, 2008). The present study builds on this past work, which sets the foundation for an important new focus in the stereotype threat literature.

Stone and McWhinnie (2008) examined golf performance in a sample of White female college students who were novice golfers but were at least somewhat athletic. The participants’ task was to putt a golf ball into one of three holes in each of eight different putting mat setups. Participants were to aim specifically for the smallest of the three different-sized holes, and the total number of strokes required to sink all eight balls was tallied. Participants took more strokes (performed worse) when the task was initially described as one with a gender difference in performance, as opposed to one with a racial difference or one in which no group differences were specified.

The same study was the first to discover that even a subtle stereotype threat cue may impair female athletes’ performance. Stone and McWhinnie (2008) found that the presence of a male experimenter reduced their female participants’ performance “accuracy,” which was defined as the number of times (out of eight) that participants sunk the ball specifically into the smallest of the three holes. Thus a blatant cue, the mention of a gender difference in performance, affected only the total number of strokes, whereas a subtle cue, the presence of a male experimenter, affected only the accuracy of the final putt. The authors supported their proposal of a “dual process” model, which suggests that threat cues may operate independently and affect different types of performance outcomes.

The authors explained that blatant stereotype threat cues, such as the mention of a gender difference in performance, may disrupt performance on only tasks requiring fluid, continuous motions, whereas more subtle cues may disrupt performance on only tasks requiring careful concentration. Their perspective is that a blatant stereotype threat cue causes individuals to become prevention-focused, due to a fear of failure. This would then result in an overly conservative approach, such as taking smaller strokes in a putting task in order to get the ball closer and closer to the hole, which would disrupt overall performance on a continuous task. However, careful concentration tasks may be more disrupted by subtle stereotype threat cues, given that they are more ambiguous and thus more likely to consume some of the necessary working memory for the task at hand (Stone & McWhinnie, 2008).

Other researchers have shown that blatant (gender) stereotype threat can reduce athletic performance on careful concentration tasks that also involve golf putting (Beilock et al., 2006; Beilock & McConnell, 2004). One difference may be that Stone and McWhinnie tested novice golfers, whereas the participants in the other studies were expert athletes in the relevant sport. Perhaps expert athletes are more globally impacted by stereotype threat cues. The strongest stereotype threat effects tend to occur for individuals who identify strongly with the domain in which they are negatively stereotyped (Leyens, Désert, Croizet, & Darcis, 2000;

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