

Gender Expectations Affect Task Choice and Performance

John Chaffin

Advisor: Kate A. Ratliff, Ph.D

Co-advisor: Morgan Conway, Ph.D

University of Florida

Abstract

The stereotype that women are worse at math than men can cause the unfair expectation that women will perform poorly on math tasks (Nosek et al., 2009; Picho & Schmander, 2018). If women are expected to behave in a similar way, knowing that other people expect a person to act in a certain way might pressure them to change their behavior. The present study looks at the role of gender stereotyping on task selection and performance. Women ($N = 27$) were randomly assigned to two study conditions. In the Gender Expectation condition, the experimenter told participants that past studies suggested that men and women would perform differently on different tasks. In the Control condition, the experimenter told participants that past studies suggested task performances was unrelated to gender. When presented with the same task options, participants were not more likely to choose the task that their gender was reported to be more successful performing, compared to participants who were not provided with any expectation of gender. Performance was not higher for tasks with a gender expectation compared to tasks that were completed with no reference to gender success rates. The study provides practical implication for expanding the understanding of stereotypes and attempts to reproduce results of other studies of stereotype.

Keywords: Gender expectation, stereotype threat, task choice, performance

Any person can be the victim of a negative stereotype, because each person has at least one social identity that others might discriminate against (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016). When a person is faced with a negative stereotype, they might alter their behavior to disprove that stereotype (Spencer et al., 2016). For example, a stereotype exists that different genders perform tasks differently (Ferrell & Finkelstein, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004). According to this stereotype, men are assumed to be more capable at mathematics, while women are assumed to be better at language skills (Hutchison, Lyons, & Ansari, 2018; Nosek et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004; Spencer, Steel, & Quinn, 1999). However, gender has been revealed to show little to no role in math performance differences (Hutchison et al., 2018; Nosek et al., 2009; Spencer et al., 1999). Nevertheless, this stereotype is sometime held by teachers and parents, who in turn provide the expectation to their students and children that a gender difference exists (Hutchison et al., 2018). These perceptions and expectations can have a strong influence on the person's self-concept (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2004). For example, if a girl is led to believe that girls are worse at math than boys, then that girl may not develop a strong interest in mathematics as a child (Hutchison et al., 2018).

Stereotypes develop when people from one societal group ascribe judgments to all members of a different group (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). Gender stereotypes frame people's perceptions of how other people should behave that are not based on that person's individual qualities but rather on assumptions about that person's gender. For example, if a teacher who is a man observes a student who is a woman struggle with math problems, he might judge that she is struggling with math problems because she is a woman (Abrams & Hogg, 2010).

The expectation of gender stereotypes can cause a threat to the person who is receiving them, and this stereotype threat can affect task performance (Spencer et al., 2016). For example,

people facing stereotype threat often have the added pressure of disproving the assumed negative stereotype that others, or even themselves, have placed on them (Spencer et al., 2016; Ferrell & Finkelstein, 2007). This added pressure can result in worse performance and may appear to prove the stereotype as true (Spencer et al., 2016; Ferrell & Finkelstein, 2007). Additionally, how a stereotype is presented can play a role in how the stereotype is perceived (Franceschini et al., 2014). Those stereotypes presented from an authoritative figure, such as from a teacher to a student, are shown to be more effective than stereotypes provided by an unauthoritative figure, such as from an adolescent's peers. (Picho & Schmander, 2018). Likewise, stereotypes presented from authority figures can override stereotypes that are already believed (Picho & Schmander, 2018). For example, if a student believes that girls are better at math than boys but is later told by their teacher that the opposite is true, that stereotype provided by the teacher can replace the stereotype that was already accepted (Picho & Schmander, 2018).

The perception of a stereotype plays a strong role in its effectiveness (Franceschini, Galli, Chiesi, & Primi, 2014). If a person strongly believes in a particularly negative stereotype, then that person might be more sensitive to cues that signal that stereotype (Franceschini et al., 2014). In such cases where a stereotype has been heavily internalized, explanations that no stereotype exists may not be enough to reduce the effects of the stereotype threat (Franceschini et al., 2014). For example, if a person holds the internal belief that they will not be evaluated fairly because of their gender, then the stereotype will be more salient and outside explanations of fairness will be less likely to change their mind (Franceschini et al., 2014). On the other hand, if the stereotype is not identified with strongly, then the stereotype cues may not be noticed (Franceschini et al., 2014).

With each person likely having a different level of knowledge and understanding of stereotypes, it is likely that a myriad of cues could elicit the negative effects of stereotype threat for a myriad of people (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). The way each person perceives a stereotype can influence the salience of the situational cues that promote it (Franceschini et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2009). When a stereotype is made more salient to the individual, the negative impact of that stereotype is more pronounced (Franceschini et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2009). For example, if the stereotype that women perform worse at math task than men is made salient, then the woman would be more likely to perform poorly on that math task (Franceschini et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2009). If a person is unaware of a specific negative stereotype, such as one stating that women perform worse on math tasks compared to men, that person can still be affected by that specific stereotype if it is made salient to them (Franceschini et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2009). Situational cues, such as those found in organizational diversity programs, can set the stage for the salience of the stereotype threat. (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Stereotype threat can cause great anxiety and reduced performance, especially when social cues make those threats particularly salient (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Harrison et al., 2009).

Description and implications of present study

While there has been extensive research on the effects of gender stereotypes on performance, to my knowledge, no study has been conducted to test how gender stereotypes affect task choice. The present research is aiming to examine how gender expectation that is provided by a pertinent individual might affect a person's task choice and their performance in that task. Female participants were randomly assigned to two conditions. In one condition, the experimenter led the participant to believe that women are expected to perform worse at math tasks and better at verbal tasks compared to men. In the other condition the experimenter led the

participant to believe that women and men performed math tasks and verbal tasks similarly. Both conditions allowed for participants to choose either a verbal task or a math task.

Hypotheses:

1. Participants will be less likely to choose a math task (over a language task) if the experimenter expects that they will do poorly on the task.
2. Participants will perform worse on a math task if the experimenter expects that they will do poorly on the task.

Method

Participants

Twenty-seven female students at the University of Florida participated in the study. The target sample size was 50; however, the size the participant pool limited my ability to obtain this number. All participants consented to participate in this research and the appropriate institutional review board approved the research. See Table 1 for a full breakdown of demographics.

Materials

Gender Expectation Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the Gender Expectation condition, experimenters read the participants a script that mentioned an expectation that one gender is more successful at math task than another gender. In the Control condition, experimenters read the participants a script that did not provide any expectation of genders. The scripts for both conditions were similar in length and content, but the script for the Control condition made no mention of gender. See Appendix A for full text.

Outcome Variables

Task Choice. Participants in both conditions were asked to choose to take either a math task or a verbal task. The task choice question was included in the script for both the Gender Expectation condition and the Control condition.

Task Performance. Participant's completed either the Math Task Test Booklet or the Verbal Task Test Booklet. The total number of correct answers measured performance. The Math Task Test Booklet was compiled with quantitative reasoning multiple choice questions taken from the Graduate Record Examination Practice Test Book (ETS, 2017). The Verbal Task Test Booklet was compiled with qualitative reasoning multiple choice questions taken from the Graduate Record Examination Practice Test Book (ETS, 2009). See Appendix B for question examples.

Expected task performance. Participants rated their expected performance for their chosen task by responding to the question: *How well do you think you did on the task you just completed?* (5-point scale; 1 = Extremely well; 5 = Not well at all).

Enjoyment toward task. Participants rated their enjoyment toward their chosen task by responding to the question: *How much did you enjoy the task you just completed?* (7-point scale; 1 = Like a great deal; 7 = Dislike a great deal).

Challenge of task. Participants rated how challenging they found their chosen task by responding to the question: *How easy did you find the task you just completed?* (7-point scale; 1 = Very hard; 7 = Very easy;).

Pressure while completing task. Participants rated how much pressure they felt while completing their chosen task by responding to the question: *How much pressure did you feel while completing the task?* (5-point scale; 1 = A great deal; 5 = None at all).

Procedure

Participants were asked to arrive at the Psychology Building at the University of Florida campus during specified times. Upon arrival, the participants were randomly assigned to either the Gender Expectation condition or the Control condition. The participants were then greeted by a woman experimenter and taken to a lab room with a computer. The experimenter provided the participant with an informed consent agreement and a brief overview of the study. After the participant signed the informed consent, the experimenter provided scripted information to the participant that further explained the purpose of the study and asked the participant to choose to take either a math task or a verbal task. After providing the scripted information, the experimenter stayed in the room with the participant until either the math task or the verbal task was chosen. Once either measure was selected by the participant, the experimenter provided the participant with the appropriate testing question booklet then left the room. Participant's answers to the questions from the Math Task Test Booklet or the Verbal Task Test Booklet were input into a computer. Each question in the Math Task Test Booklet and the Verbal Task Test Booklet had six possible response choices. Participants were encouraged to skip questions if they felt they did not know the answer. The participant was allotted twenty minutes to complete the measure. After twenty minutes, the experimenter came back in the room and directed the participant toward the outcome measures and demographics questionnaire before providing debriefing to the participant. Once the debriefing was completed, the experimenter gave

instruction on how the participant would obtain their course credit for participating in the study. The experimenter then dismissed the participant.

Results

Task Choice. A chi-square test examined the relationship between study condition (expectation or control) and which task (math or verbal) participants selected. There was not a significant relationship between study condition and task choice, $\chi^2(1, 27) = .31, p = 0.58$. Participants in the Gender Expectation condition ($N = 16$) were not more likely to choose the math or verbal test compared to participants in the Control condition ($N = 11$).

Task Performance. A multiple regression analysis tested whether study condition ($-.5 =$ expectation, $1.5 =$ control), task choice ($-.5 =$ math, $1.5 =$ verbal), or their interaction affected task performance. There was no difference in task performance based on whether participants were in the Gender Expectation condition ($M = 5.69, SD = 3.46$) or Control condition ($M = 7.45, SD = 4.27$), $b = 0.30, t = 0.33, p = .75$, Cohen's $d = .45$, 95% CI = $[-4.84, 1.30]$. Participants who chose to complete the math task ($M = 3.56, SD = 2.19$) performed significantly better than participants who chose to complete the verbal task ($M = 7.83, SD = 3.71$), $b = 1.96, t = 2.78, p = .01$, Cohen's $d = 1.40$, 95% CI = $[-7.05, -1.50]$. There was no interaction between study condition and task choice on task performance, $b = 0.43, t = 0.60, p = .55$. Answer responses from one participant from the Gender Expectation condition were input incorrectly and were not useable for the task performance analysis. Twenty-three participant responses were analyzed for task performance.

Expected task performance. A multiple regression analysis tested whether study condition, ($-.5 =$ expectation, $1.5 =$ control), task choice ($-.5 =$ math, $1.5 =$ verbal), or their

interaction affected expected task performance. There was no difference in expected task performance based on whether participants were in the Gender Expectation condition ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.07$) or Control condition ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.79$), $b = 0.07$, $t = 0.34$, $p = .74$, Cohen's $d = .02$, 95% CI = [-0.75, 0.80]. Participants who chose to complete the math task ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.73$) expected to perform significantly worse than participants who chose to complete the verbal task ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.77$), $b = -0.61$, $t = -3.69$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.64$, 95% CI = [0.59, 1.86]. There was no interaction between study condition and task choice on expected task performance, $b = -0.02$, $t = -0.14$, $p = .89$.

Enjoyment toward task. A multiple regression analysis tested whether study condition, (-.5 = expectation, 1.5 = control), task choice (-.5 = math, 1.5 = verbal), or their interaction affected enjoyment toward task. There was no difference in enjoyment toward task based on whether participants were in the Gender Expectation condition ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.82$) or Control condition ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.13$), $b = -0.18$, $t = -0.40$, $p = .69$, Cohen's $d = .09$, 95% CI = [-1.13, 1.41]. There was no difference in enjoyment toward task based on whether participants choose to complete the math task ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.80$) or verbal task ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.42$), $b = -0.31$, $t = -0.90$, $p = .38$, Cohen's $d = .35$, 95% CI = [-0.75, 1.86]. There was no interaction between study condition and task choice on enjoyment toward task, $b = 0.15$, $t = 0.44$, $p = .67$.

Challenge of task. A multiple regression analysis tested whether study condition, (-.5 = expectation, 1.5 = control), task choice (-.5 = math, 1.5 = verbal), or their interaction affected the challenge of task. There was no difference in challenge of task based on whether participants were in the Gender Expectation condition ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.22$) or Control condition ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.38$), $b = 0.08$, $t = 0.25$, $p = .80$, Cohen's $d = .21$, 95% CI = [-1.32, 0.76]. The rated challenge of task was significantly greater for those participants who chose to complete the math

task ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.93$) compared to those who chose to complete the verbal task ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.10$), $b = 0.78$, $t = 3.37$, $p = .003$, Cohen's $d = 1.52$, 95% CI = [-2.44, -0.68]. There was no interaction between study condition and task choice on challenge of task, $b = -0.02$, $t = -0.07$, $p = .94$.

Pressure while completing task. A multiple regression analysis tested whether study condition, (-.5 = expectation, 1.5 = control), task choice (-.5 = math, 1.5 = verbal), or their interaction affected pressure while completing task. There was no difference in pressure while completing task based on whether participants were in the Gender Expectation condition ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.87$) or Control condition ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.75$), $b = 0.21$, $t = 0.93$, $p = .36$, Cohen's $d = 1.07$, 95% CI = [-1.54, -0.20]. There was no difference in pressure while completing task based on whether participants choose to complete the math task ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.73$) or verbal task ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.02$), $b = -0.02$, $t = -0.14$, $p = .89$, Cohen's $d = .18$, 95% CI = [-0.95, 0.62]. There was no interaction between study condition and task choice on task pressure while completing task, $b = 0.25$, $t = 1.44$, $p = .16$

Discussion

The present research was intended to test the hypotheses that an expectation of a person's gender will affect what type of task that person will choose or how well they will perform in that chosen task. I expected that a participant's task choice and performance would match an expectation placed on their gender. However, the results did not support these hypotheses. Prior research by Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, (1999) produced significant findings showing that gender expectation can increase the salience of stereotype threat and influence task performance by utilizing similar methods that were utilized in this study. It is possible that the results are due to

the small sample size of the study, and I cannot say with confidence that the results are indicative of the study variables and not normal variation within the population.

Additionally, it is possible that the study experimenters were not viewed as authoritative figures by the study participants and the intended gender expectation presented by the experimenters was not made salient for the participants. The experimenters were all the same gender of the participants and were also students at the same university. The aforementioned research by Picho & Schmander (2018) succinctly shows that stereotypes presented by peers are less noticeable than those presented by authority figures. Future studies may alleviate this issue by having experimenters who are also faculty members or hold other authoritative roles provide the stereotype cues to the participants.

In total, participants for both conditions opted to take the verbal task more often than the math task. This alludes to a possible trend that women prefer verbal tasks over math task. A larger participant pool could be used in a future study to see if this trend would continue. It is possible that the reason for this trend is that the stereotype that women are worse at math than men was already prevalent for the participants. If significant stereotype salience is already in place, attempts to produce a control environment may not be effective due to contamination by real world bias.

Furthermore, it is possible that the decision to utilize questions designed for the Graduate Record Exam or GRE for this study may have confounded the results for the task performance. This may be especially true for the math task. Results show that participants who completed the math task performed significantly worse compared to participants who completed the verbal task. Additionally, the participants who completed the math task reported a lower expected performance and found the task significantly more challenging compared to participants who

completed the verbal task. While the GRE is a test that is typically taken after students complete or nearly complete their undergraduate education, the demographic data show that the mean age of the participants is 18.63 years old. It is possible that the participants were not yet familiar with the subject matter contained in the sample questions, and as a result, the overall performance for all participants may have been affected. Future studies may utilize questions that are more appropriate for participants who may be just entering college studies, such as those found in the SAT test.

Conclusion

This current study attempted to produce a gender expectation in the form of a reported finding. Realistically, gender expectation stereotypes are produced in various ways and intensities. The way a gender expectation is produced may have a different effect on how a person could perceive it. For a stronger manipulation of gender expectation, future studies could produce multiple forms of the expectation, such as reports of acceptance rates for women and men into math focused academic programs. Additionally, the current study did not meet the target sample size. Future studies with a larger sample size could produce a more realistic result.

This study attempted to demonstrate how lower women's math scores may be the result of an expectation that women are worse at math than men. The challenges associated with disproving this expectation can cause women to not perform as well as they otherwise might if the expectation was not present in the first place. When the expectation that women are worse at a math task is presented, it can result in a vicious cycle that makes the expectation appear true. Even though the present study was unable to replicate these results, I believe it is imperative that such expectations based on negative stereotypes be eliminated. The implications of the negative

effects that this study attempted to replicate are numerous, including organizational policy, family relations, and self-concept.

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APPENDIX A
SCRIPTED INSTRUCTIONS

Gender Expectation Condition Script

Hello, and thank you for participating in our study. We are looking to see how people perform on either math or verbal tasks. Prior studies show that on average women perform better on verbal task, and men perform better on math tasks. To test if those findings are true, we are going to have you choose to complete either a verbal or math-based task. Due to time constraints, we cannot have each participant complete both a verbal and math task at the same time. Please choose whichever task you prefer, either the verbal task or the math task, and do your best to accurately answer as many of the questions as possible in the time allotted. You do not need to worry about answering every question, just get through as many as you can without guessing. If you do not know the answer, simply skip the question and move on to the next. Which test do you want to take?

Control Condition Script.

Hello, and thank you for your participation in our study. We are looking to see how people perform on either math or verbal tasks. Prior studies show that on average individuals perform similarly on math and verbal tasks. To test if those findings are true we are going to have you chose to complete either a verbal or math based task. Due to time constraints, we cannot have each participant complete both a verbal and math task at the same time. Please choose whichever task you prefer, either the verbal task or the math task, and do your best to accurately answer as many of the questions as possible in the time allotted. You do not need to worry about answering every question, just get through as many as you can without guessing. If you do not know the answer, simply skip the question and move on to the next. Which test do you want to take?

APPENDIX B
TASK TEST BOOKLET QUESTION EXAMPLES

Verbal Task Test Booklet Question Example

Question 1 is based on the following reading passage.

Centuries ago, the Maya of Central America produced elaborate, deeply cut carvings in stone. The carvings would have required a cutting tool of hard stone or metal. Iron-ore deposits exist throughout Central America, but apparently the Maya never developed the technology to use them and the metals the Maya are known to have used, copper and gold, would not have been hard enough. Therefore, the Maya must have used stone tools to make these carvings.

1. Select and indicate the best answer from among the five answer choices:

Which of the following, if true, most seriously weakens the argument?

- A. In various parts of the world, civilizations that could not make iron from ore fashioned tools out of fragments of iron from meteorites.
- B. All the metallic Mayan artifacts that have been found by archaeologists are made of metals that are too soft for carving stone.
- C. The stone out of which these carvings were made is harder than the stone used by other Central American peoples.
- D. The technique that the Maya used to smelt gold and some other metals could not have been easily applied to the task of extracting iron from iron ore.
- E. Archaeologists disagree about how certain stone tools that have been found among Mayan ruins were used.

Math Task Test Booklet Questions Example

1. $\lim_{x \rightarrow 0} \frac{\cos(3x) - 1}{x^2} =$

- (A) $\frac{9}{2}$ (B) $\frac{3}{2}$ (C) $-\frac{2}{3}$ (D) $-\frac{3}{2}$ (E) $-\frac{9}{2}$

Table 1

Participant demographic information.

Demographic Variable	Study 1
Age	
Mean	18.63
SD	0.69
Gender	
Women	27
Men	0
Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino	5
Non-Hispanic/Latino	22
Unknown	0
Race	
American Indian	1
East Asian	1
South Asian	2
Pacific Islander	0
Black	3
White	17
Multi-racial (Black-white)	0
Multi-racial (Other)	0
Unknown	3
Political Identification	
Strongly Conservative	1
Moderately Conservative	1
Slightly Conservative	5
Moderate/neutral	6
Slightly liberal	5
Moderately liberal	7
Strongly liberal	1
Unknown	1
Religious Identification	
Very religious	4
Moderately religious	6
Somewhat religious	8
Not religious at all	9
Total N	27

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics Measured Variables by Condition.

Measure	Gender Expectation Condition <i>N</i> = 16	Control Condition <i>N</i> = 11
1. Task performance	5.69 (3.46)	7.45 (4.27)
2. Expected task performance	3.75 (1.07)	3.73 (0.79)
3. Enjoyment toward task	4.69 (1.82)	4.55 (1.13)
4. Challenge of task	2.81 (1.22)	3.09 (1.38)
5. Pressure while completing task	3.31 (0.87)	4.18 (0.75)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parenthesis under each mean.

Table 3

Correlations among Measured Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Task Choice						
2. Task performance	.54**					
3. Expected task performance	-.62**	-.39*				
4. Enjoyment toward task	-.17	-.27	.54**			
5. Challenge of task	.60**	.17	-.56**	-.19		
6. Pressure while completing task	.09	.18	-.06	-.20	.37	

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).