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# Selective self-stereotyping and women's self-esteem maintenance

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## **Abstract**

The process and implications of gender-based self-stereotyping are examined in this paper. Women displayed a tendency to selectively self-stereotype for personality and physical traits such that they endorsed positive stereotypic traits and denied negative traits as descriptive of the self and closest women friends. However, negative traits were endorsed as descriptive of women in general. Cognitive stereotypes were endorsed as more descriptive of all women than of the general university student. The tendency to selectively self-stereotype on physical traits was positively associated with appearance, social, and performance self-esteem. The results are discussed for their theoretical and practical implications.

## 1. Introduction

Stereotyping people based on their gender appears to be a universal phenomenon and has been extensively studied by social psychologists. A growing body of research also suggests that women internalize these gender-based stereotypes and that this internalization can influence their behaviors. In this paper we consider the process through which women self-stereotype as well as psychological implications of gender-based self-stereotyping. Specifically, we examine whether women selectively self-stereotype (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996) as a way to maintain a positive self-image.

When self-stereotyping, a person sees him/herself as possessing the characteristics and behaviors that are associated with the in-group (e.g., Biernat et al., 1996; Chiu et al., 1998). Furthermore, self-stereotyping is proposed to occur on positive and negative group-relevant attributes (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). Initial evidence suggests that gender-based self-stereotyping occurs under many of the same conditions that lead to the stereotyping of others. For example, Chiu et al. (1998) found that experimentally inducing gender salience resulted in female participants stereotyping others as well as increasing their own self-stereotyping on feminine traits. Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp, and Redersdorff (2006) found that gender-based self-stereotyping was pronounced when participants made intergroup, rather than intragroup, comparisons. Biernat, Crandall, Young, Kobrynowicz, and Halpin (1998) found that in conditions of solo status, military women, but not men, were more likely to engage in gender-based self-stereotyping. Interestingly, the effects of gender-based self-stereotyping appear to be stronger for women than for men (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1991).

Multifactorial gender identity theory (Spence, 1993) argues that gender implies both positive and negative traits about many characteristics including a person's personality, cognitive skills, physical appearance, and role expectations. In an exploratory study on the content and structure of gender self-stereotyping, participants were asked to generate a list of gender stereotypes and then rated the extent to which the stereotypes were true of themselves (self-stereotypes) and true of women in general (Oswald & Lindstedt,

2006). They found stereotypes listed for personality (e.g., nurturing, dependent), physical (e.g., petite, physically weak), and cognitive (e.g., verbally skilled, mathematically incompetent) traits. Furthermore, they found that female participants endorsed positive personality traits and both positive and negative physical and cognitive stereotypes as more descriptive of themselves than of the average women. Similarly, Lun, Sinclair, and Cogburn (2009) found that women implicitly and explicitly self-stereotyped on both positive and negative feminine traits. Thus, women appear to be integrating both positive and negative feminine stereotypes into their self-concept.

To date, most of the self-stereotyping research has examined the implications for women's behaviors and performance on stereotypic tasks (e.g., Wheeler & Petty, 2001). For example, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) found that Asian American women's math performance was worse when their female identity was salient, but improved when their Asian identity was salient. Oswald (2008) found that activating gender stereotypes resulted in women reporting greater perceptions of their abilities, and perceived liking, for traditionally-feminine occupations. Thus, research suggests that the activation of gender-based stereotypes can result in stereotyped task performance and preferences.

However, little research has considered the implications for variables such as self-esteem. To what extent does endorsing these positive and negative stereotypes as self-descriptive influence the way that women feel about themselves? To the extent that self-stereotyping occurs for positive traits, this could allow a person to maintain a positive self-image. However, self-stereotyping for negative stereotypes is potentially problematic for maintaining a positive self-image. Indeed, in a Chinese student sample Yu and Xie (2008) found that endorsing desirable feminine traits was positively associated with self-esteem while endorsing undesirable feminine traits was negatively associated with self-esteem.

Theoretically it has been suggested that individuals who are members of stigmatized groups should have lower self-esteem as a result of internalizing negative stereotypes (e.g., Katz, Joiner, & Kwon, 2002). This question is particularly interesting for women as research generally finds that endorsement of masculine traits is positively

associated with self-esteem while the endorsement of feminine traits has a negative or minimal association with self-esteem (Hirschy & Morris, 2002; Major, Barr, Zubek, & Babey, 1999; Orlofsky & O'Heron, 1987; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). Furthermore, a meta-analysis demonstrated that women have lower self-esteem than do men; although, the effect size was small and the difference was moderated by factors such as age, socio-economic status, and ethnicity (Major et al., 1999).

Thus, gender-based self-stereotyping appears to create a conundrum for women. Denying negative gender stereotypes might be difficult considering their current societal strength. However, self-stereotyping on negative traits is likely to result in lower self-esteem. One possible method for dealing with negative gender-based stereotypes is to *selectively* self-stereotype (Biernat et al., 1996). Selective self-stereotyping is the process by which members endorse positive group stereotypes for themselves and closest in-group affiliates, and distance themselves and the closest in-group from the negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes are endorsed as characteristic of the larger group rather than of the self and closest in-group affiliates. Importantly, negative stereotypes are also endorsed as more characteristic of the larger in-group than they are to a stereotype irrelevant group. Thus, stereotypes are not denied and this is not simply a process of in-group bias where the most exclusive groups are seen as more positive (having more of the positive stereotypic traits and fewer of the negative stereotypic traits) than the most inclusive group. This process of selective self-stereotyping allows one to acknowledge the negative stereotypes for the in-group "in general", while simultaneously protecting the individual's identity by denying the stereotype for the self and closest in-group. According to Biernat et al. "what is notable about this strategy is that individuals do not simply deny negative stereotypes of their groups; to do this would betray ignorance of social reality. They also do not exhibit a pure pattern of in-group bias (i.e., becoming increasingly less positive toward successively distant in-groups). Instead they are attentive to the content of attributes and exhibit this pattern specifically on stereotype relevant, negative dimensions" (p. 1196).

Biernat et al. (1996) found that fraternity/sorority members consistently engaged in this process of selective self-stereotyping.

Members did not endorse the negative sorority/fraternity stereotypes as true of "university students in general". Also, selective self-stereotyping did not occur for positive stereotype irrelevant traits; providing further evidence that this is not simply an example of in-group bias. Furthermore, the process of selectively self-stereotyping was positively correlated with participants' self-esteem and commitment to the group. Thus, selective self-stereotyping appears to serve a protective function. We wonder if a similar process may occur in regard to gender. That is, rather than deny that pervasive gender stereotypes are false, women may instead selectively self-stereotype in a way that maintains a positive identity.

That women self-stereotype based on gender is clear. However, yet to be examined is the degree to which women endorse stereotypes as true of self-relative to groups of varying inclusiveness. The first goal of the current study is to examine whether or not women stereotype themselves and groups of varying inclusiveness differentially and consistent with the process of selective self-stereotyping across the three domains of cognitive, personality, and physical feminine stereotypes.

The second goal is to compute a new individual difference measure which reflects this tendency to selectively self-stereotype. We then examine whether or not this tendency serves to protect women's self-esteem. This measure reflects a novel method of conceptualizing self-stereotyping by taking into account the relative stereotype comparisons between the participant and other women of varying closeness. Given that the process of selective self-stereotyping is theorized to protect self-esteem, we expected that the extent to which a woman engages in this tendency to selectively self-stereotype should be positively associated with her state self-esteem. However, multifactorial theory (Spence, 1993) suggests that the different stereotype content should be differentially related to various outcomes. For example, endorsement of math-relevant stereotypes is negatively correlated with women choosing a math major; however, endorsement of stereotypes that are math-irrelevant are not correlated with academic decisions (e.g., Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2004). Thus, we hypothesized that the tendency to selectively self-stereotype for cognitive traits should correlate positively with performance self-esteem; however it should not correlate with social

or appearance self-esteem. We hypothesize that the tendency to selectively self-stereotype for personality traits should be positively correlated with social self-esteem. Finally, physical appearance traits appear to play a role in social interactions, ability to perform tasks, and satisfaction with appearance. Thus, selectively self-stereotyping on physical traits is hypothesized to be associated with all three aspects of self-esteem.

## **2. Method**

One hundred and sixty-one female participants were recruited from a psychology subject pool and completed the study for partial course credit. Participants were predominately Caucasian ( $n = 131$ , 81.4%), 3.1% ( $n = 5$ ) were African American, 6.8% ( $n = 11$ ) were Asian American, 3.7% ( $n = 6$ ) were Hispanic American, and 5% ( $n = 8$ ) reported other ethnicities. The mean age was 19.22 years ( $SD = 1.28$ ).

## **3. Materials**

*Stereotype endorsement for self, closest women friends, women in general, and university students:* The items used to measure stereotyping were based on the qualitative findings by Oswald and Lindstedt (2006). We selected five frequently listed feminine positive and negative stereotypes, for each of the content areas of personality (e.g., nurturing, manipulative), cognitive (e.g., verbally skilled, mathematically incompetent), and physical (e.g., sexy, weak) stereotypes that were reported in their study. The traits were randomly presented and following Biernat et al.'s (1996) methodology, participants indicated the extent to which each trait was self-descriptive, descriptive of their closest women friends, of women in general, and of University students in general (1 = *not at all descriptive* to 7 = *very descriptive*). Positive and negative non-gendered traits were also included in the list. Subscales were formed to reflect the mean endorsement of the positive and negative

stereotypes in the three content areas and the gender-neutral traits, for each of the four targets.

*State self-esteem:* Participants completed the State Self-esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The scale consists of 20-items, with three subscales of social (e.g., I feel concerned about the impression I am making), performance (e.g., I feel confident about my abilities), and appearance (e.g., I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now) state self-esteem. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). In the present study the coefficient alphas for performance, appearance, and social self-esteem were .85, .86, and .85, respectively.

## 4. Results

To examine the endorsement of the stereotyped traits, a 2 (valence) x 4 (perspective: self, closest women friends, women in general, and university students) x 3 (trait: cognitive, personality, and physical) all within subjects ANOVA was computed. The three-way interaction was significant,  $F(6, 960) = 37.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ .

To follow up the three-way interaction a 2 (valence) x 4 (perspective: self, closest women friends, women in general, and university students) within subjects ANOVA was computed for each of the stereotyped areas (i.e., personality, cognitive, and physical). Of interest were the interaction terms. For personality stereotypes, the interaction was significant,  $F(3, 480) = 18.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ . Simple effect tests were computed for each valence separately, resulting in a significant effect for endorsement of positive personality stereotypes ( $F(3, 480) = 49.99, p < .001$ ). Post hoc tests indicated that ratings of positive personality stereotypes were not different between self ( $M = 5.48, SD = .92$ ), closest women friends ( $M = 5.43, SD = .80$ ), and women in general ( $M = 5.65, SD = .78$ ) but the rating for university students ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.03$ ) was significantly lower than all other groups. The simple effect test for negative personality stereotype was also significant,  $F(3, 480) = 55.46, p < .001$ . Although there was no difference in ratings between self ( $M = 3.83, SD = .94$ ) and closest women friends ( $M = 3.68, SD = .92$ ), ratings of women in



general were significantly higher than all other groups ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). Rating of university students ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) was lower than ratings of women in general and of self.

The 2 (valence)  $\times$  4 (perspective) interaction for cognitive stereotypes was also significant,  $F(3, 480) = 7.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . The simple effect test for positive cognitive stereotypes was not significant  $F(3, 480) = 2.48$ ,  $p > .05$ , indicating no differences in stereotype endorsement between the self ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = .75$ ), closest women friends ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = .75$ ), women in general ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = .67$ ), or university students ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = .80$ ). However, the simple effect test for negative cognitive stereotypes was significant,  $F(3, 480) = 14.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , with the rating of university students ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .85$ ) being significantly lower than the other three groups. However, ratings of self ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), closest women friends ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), and women in general ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) were not significantly different.

The 2 (valence)  $\times$  4 (perspective) interaction for physical stereotypes was also significant,  $F(3, 480) = 47.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .23$ . The simple effect test for positive physical stereotypes was significant ( $F(3, 480) = 47.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with women rating themselves ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) as possessing fewer of the positive physical stereotypes than women in general ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) and their closest women friends ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = .84$ ). Participants rated university ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) students as lower on physical positive stereotypes than women in general and closest women friends. However, there was no difference between self and university student ratings, and there also was no difference between ratings of closest women friends and women in general. The simple effect test was significant for negative physical stereotypes ( $F(3, 480) = 74.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with ratings of self ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) and closest women friends ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) being significantly lower than ratings of women in general ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) and ratings of university students ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = .84$ ). Consistent with expectations, ratings of women in general were higher than ratings of university students.

To ensure that the patterns observed were specific to gender stereotypic traits and not occurring for all traits, a 2 (valence)  $\times$  4 (perspective) repeated measure ANOVA was computed for the gender-

neutral traits. The interaction was significant,  $F(3, 480) = 20.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ . Simple effect tests indicated that for the non-gendered positive traits there was a significant difference across perspective ( $F(3, 480) = 7.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ ) such that people endorsed the positive traits highest for the self ( $M = 4.78$ ) followed by closest women friends ( $M = 4.71$ ), women in general ( $M = 4.49$ ), and university students ( $M = 4.54$ ). Post hoc comparisons indicated there was no difference between women and closest friends, all other differences were significant. For negative non-gendered traits the opposite pattern was found across perspective ( $F(3, 480) = 22.46, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$ ) such that negative traits were endorsed the most for university students ( $M = 4.63$ ) followed by women in general ( $M = 4.13$ ), closest women friends ( $M = 4.18$ ), and self ( $M = 3.98$ ). These findings for the non-gendered traits demonstrate a clear in-group bias where the ratings become progressively more negative as the target becomes more inclusive.

These results suggest that there is partial evidence that women are engaging in selective self-stereotyping. Biernat et al. (1996) argued that selective self-stereotyping should serve to protect the individual's self-esteem. To test this we computed an individual difference measure of the *tendency to selectively self-stereotype*. An individual who has a tendency to selectively self-stereotype should display a pattern of ratings for positive traits such that they are endorsed as most true of self, followed by close friends, women in general, and least true of university students. To capture this pattern, a score for each area (personality, physical and cognitive stereotypes) was computed as (positive stereotype of self - positive stereotype closest friends) + (closest friends - women in general) + (women in general - stereotype of university students), thus higher scores indicated stronger tendencies to selectively self-stereotype. For negative stereotypes the traits should be endorsed most for women in general, followed by university students, close friends, and least true of the self. The tendency to selectively stereotype on negative traits was computed as (stereotype of women in general - stereotype of university students) + (stereotype of university students - stereotypes of closest friends) + (closest friends - self). Higher scores indicate selective stereotyping in a way that reflects positively on self by distancing self from negative gender stereotypes. A score of zero indicates that the individual is providing equivalent ratings across the

different target groups. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and correlations. If selective self-stereotyping is a protective mechanism, then these measures should be positively associated with the measures of state self-esteem.

Multiple regressions were computed using the six tendency measures to predict each of the self-esteem subscores (see Table 2). Performance self-esteem was a significant model and the tendency to selectively self-stereotype on positive physical traits and positive cognitive traits were associated with performance self-esteem. Social self-esteem was also a significant model and both the tendency to selectively self-stereotype on positive physical traits and negative physical traits were positively associated with social self-esteem. Appearance self-esteem was also a significant model, and both the tendency to selectively self-stereotype on positive physical traits and negative physical traits were positively associated with appearance self-esteem.

## **5. Discussion**

The results provide evidence that women partially engage in selective self-stereotyping. Positive personality traits were endorsed for self, closest friends and women in general, but less so for university students. Thus, women were endorsing the positive stereotypes as descriptive of *all* women, not just themselves and closest friends. Negative personality stereotypes demonstrated the expected pattern such that negative stereotypes are endorsed as most descriptive for women in general, then university students, and being least endorsed for self and closest friends.

For negative physical stereotypes, the traits were endorsed as most descriptive of women in general, followed by university students, and as least descriptive of self and closest women friends. Thus, it appears that women are disassociating themselves from negative gender physical stereotypes as expected. However, the positive stereotypes were most endorsed for women in general and closest women friends, followed by university students and least descriptive of the self. We suspect that these findings reflects the "thin ideal" and

high societal standards for women's bodies (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). That is, women may perceive that they are not reaching the ideal standard of female physical beauty that "other" women are able to achieve. Furthermore, we speculate that even participants' endorsement of the positive physical feminine stereotypes might be counterproductive for their self-image. Consistent with this argument, Swami and Abbasnejad (2010) found that women's endorsement of gender stereotypic images and activities was negatively associated with body appreciation. Furthermore, Sanchez and Crocker (2005) argued that women who personally invest in the ideal physical standard rely more heavily on external contingencies for their self-worth, and ultimately experience poorer psychological self-esteem and well-being. This suggests women's attempts to meet societal based physical characteristics, regardless of if these physical characteristics are perceived as positive or negative traits, may always be a factor for women developing a positive sense of self.

Stereotyping on feminine cognitive traits displayed an interesting pattern of results. Positive cognitive stereotypes were endorsed as equally descriptive for all groups; however, negative cognitive stereotypes were endorsed as more descriptive of all of the women-related groups (self, closest women friends, and women in general) than of university students in general. Stereotypes about gendered cognitive abilities are especially problematic when we consider the potential implications for career choices (Eccles, 1987; Oswald, 2008). If women have internalized stereotypes about their academic skills, even the positive stereotypes about women being more verbally skilled, then this might direct women into traditionally-feminine fields despite their natural talents. Furthermore, given previous findings that endorsement of gender stereotypes is a barrier for women engaging in math-related tasks (e.g., Oswald & Harvey, 2003; Pronin et al., 2004; Schmader, Johns, & Barquissau, 2004), it is troubling that participants are self-stereotyping as being bad at math, science, quantitative tasks, etc. The joint self-endorsement of positive and negative gendered cognitive stereotypes might contribute to women's under-representation in math, science, and technology fields.

To the extent that women engage in selective self-stereotyping, does this process serve to promote women's self-esteem? Physical traits appear to have central importance in college-aged women's self-

esteem. The tendency to self-stereotype for both negative and positive physical traits was positively associated with performance, appearance, and social state self-esteem. The tendency to selectively self-stereotype for positive cognitive traits was only marginally positively associated with performance self-esteem. Interestingly, the tendency to selectively self-stereotype on personality traits was not correlated with any type of self-esteem. However, this is consistent with previous findings (Major et al., 1999; Orlofsky & O'Heron, 1987; Spence et al., 1975) which report minimal association between feminine personality traits and self-esteem.

These results suggest that physical, cognitive, and personality traits are not equally important for a positive self-view. For college-aged women, achieving gender-based physical stereotype standards appears to have a global impact on their state self-esteem. This may not be surprising given previous research on the importance of physical beauty for college-aged women. However, it is concerning that endorsement of positive personality traits is not associated with their self-esteem. We would hope that a woman who views herself positively for personality characteristics, even feminine traits, would feel good about herself. However, others have found that endorsement of feminine traits is negatively correlated with self-esteem, while masculine traits are positively associated with self-esteem (Major et al., 1999; Orlofsky & O'Heron, 1987; Spence et al., 1975). Thus, it is not the case that personality traits are unimportant for self-esteem, but that feminine personality traits are not associated with college women's self-esteem. This might reflect that feminine traits are still not valued within society and so positive self-stereotyping in these traits does not contribute to college women's sense of self-worth. Perhaps for female college students their physical aspects are overvalued while their personality is undervalued.

The results of this study suggest interesting future research. As suggested by Biernat et al. (1996) the extent that women are able to selectively self-stereotype is associated with higher self-esteem. One might suggest that women should be encouraged to engage in selective self-stereotyping as a way to maintain a positive self-esteem. However, by engaging in self-stereotyping, even on the positive feminine traits, to what extent are women undermining their agency for masculine domains in exchange for state self-esteem boosts?

Hirschy and Morris (2002) found that endorsement of masculine ideology, but not feminine ideology, was positively associated with making success attributions, higher self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Further research examining how the pursuit for self-esteem based on achieving cultural feminine standards might simultaneously undermine other areas of performance is a worthwhile area for future research.

Although the results of this study provide novel insight into the processes of women's self-stereotyping and the implication for self-esteem, there are limitations to this study. The sample consisted of predominately White, college-aged women. However, these findings may vary by ethnicity. For example, African American women may not be as influenced by cultural stereotype about weight to the same degree as White/European women. Self-stereotyping might also vary with age and social roles as personality and cognitive stereotypes might be more central for older or professional women. An examination of self-stereotyping for different samples is warranted. Finally, until longitudinal and experimental research is done, the causal effects of self-stereotyping remain theoretical.

Gender stereotypes are pervasive in our society and influence the way that we view other people and our self-image. Research should continue to examine the implications of self-stereotyping for wellbeing and life choices and strategies used to cope with negative stereotypes.

## Note

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## Appendix

**Table 1 Tendency to selectively self-stereotype descriptive statistics and correlations**

	Positive cognitive	Negative cognitive	Positive personality	Negative personality	Positive physical	Negative physical
Positive cognitive	-.03 (1.01)	.06	.35**	.02	.22**	.15
Negative cognitive		-.02 (1.21)	.06	.41**	.02	.51**
Positive personality			.75 (1.26)	-.15	.06	.05
Negative personality				.70 (1.04)	.13	.47**
Positive physical					-.07 (1.46)	-.11
Negative physical						.95 (.98)

Note: Mean and (SD) are on the diagonal.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2 Regression analyses**

	Performance self-esteem	Social self-esteem	Appearance self-esteem
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
TSS positive personality	-.09	-.08	-.07
TSS negative personality	.04	.03	-.10
TSS positive cognitive	.15 <sup>+</sup>	-.05	-.08
TSS negative cognitive	.03	.008	.03
TSS positive physical	.20*	.37**	.46**
TSS negative physical	.14	.21*	.35**
	F(6, 153)=3.13, $p < .01$ , Adjusted R2 = .07	F(6, 153)=5.16, $p < .01$ , Adjusted R2 = .14	F(6, 153)=8.76, $p < .01$ , Adjusted R2 = .23

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .