

I'm good, she's good: The relationship between  
Self-Esteem and Attitudes Towards Women in the Work Force

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### Abstract

This study seeks to better understand the impact of self-esteem on attitudes towards others, specifically the perception of women's abilities in power positions in the work force. The hypothesis states that men and women who have higher self-esteem will perceive women more competent in a managerial role than men and women with lower self-esteem. Another hypothesis states that women will rank the female candidate as more qualified than men will, regardless of self-esteem levels. Ninety three students from a midwestern university participated in the study. A 29-item survey was compiled using the Current Thoughts Scale (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991), a work place scenario, and statements about the candidate in the situation. In the future this research could lead to an increased awareness in the importance of understanding the connections between the way individuals view themselves and the impact it has on their opinions of others.

*Keywords:* self-esteem, attitudes towards women, work force

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The way people view themselves can have serious implications on other aspects of their lives. Things like the types of relationships that are formed, how they present themselves to others, as well as how they see the world and other people can be influenced by self-concept. The current research sought to examine the relationship between self-esteem and perception of a candidate in a job promotional situation. More specifically, this research was interested in the difference in perceived competency of a female in a job stereotypically categorized as a male position in participants of higher and lower self-esteem. This study also sought to evaluate if there was a significant difference in attitude between gender of participants. Although women have come a long way in the roles and contributions they play in the work force, things are not equal between males and females. This problem is concerning in that there is a perception about women that is keeping them one step behind men, despite the growing trend of more women than men attending college. The current study sought to analysis how personal beliefs effect beliefs about others in an attempt to better understand how future change might occur.

**Background: Self-esteem and self-perception**

Research has looked at the connection between self-esteem and attitudes towards perception of personal ability (Instone, Major, and Bunker, 1983). They found that men and women differ in some ways in regards to belief about how well they will confront issues based on their self-esteem levels (Instone, Major, & Bunker, 1983). The gender differences among male and female managers of similar status in strategies used to influence subordinates was examined. The study addresses the relationship between self-confidence and influence exercised. It outlines the

general finding that women have lower levels of self-confidence than men because of situational variables. The study also takes into account the sex of the subordinate and the method of influence the manager uses. This study gives evidence that there is a connection between gender and situational behavior.

In addition, research has shown a relationship between self-esteem and self-expectation in academic settings (Skaalvik, 1990). The study looked at how well students expected they would do and how well they actually did in certain areas. The most significant result of this experiment was that females tended to have higher expectation and achievement levels than the males did (Skaalvik, 1990, p. 595). This finding may imply that if women expect more of themselves, they might expect more of other people or other women. On the other hand, men might have even lower expectations for women than they do for themselves and other men.

While it might be clear how self-esteem effects perception of one's own value, it is a little more difficult to ascertain how self-concept may alter one's critic of another's ability. Research on the role gender plays on the perception of men and women in similar scenarios has been done that specifically addressed the way women review other women in the work force (Lips & Colwill, 1988). The results showed that women generally tended to show preference for the hypothetical female manager by judging them as more intelligent and likable than male counterparts (Lips & Colwill, 1988, p. 59). This study may imply that females participating in the current experiment will rate the female candidate higher than the male candidate, regardless of the profiles being identical.

### **Gender Differences**

Research done on the gender differences in automatic in-group bias in a population of college age students found significant results that have implications for the relationship between women

and men (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). They found that there is a tendency of women to prefer women more than men prefer men in situations despite in-group bias research in areas such as race, religion, and social class. Further, the conflicting attitudes of men was discussed; such as how men tend to associate the female gender with negative traits yet have a weaker in-group bias. Topics that are discussed as factors in this phenomenon are balanced gender identity, preference for maternal caregiver, threat perception, and sex attitudes (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004, p.499-502). This may have implications for how positively the male subjects in the current study rate the female candidate as being qualified. It also may imply that further research into what causes men to have weaker in-group biases yet continue to view women as the weaker gender.

Self-esteem differences in men and women is another topic that adds to the foundation of the current study by helping to explain possible inconsistencies. Of particular concern are the factors that may differ in contributing to self-esteem levels in males and females. Research was conducted in a domain-specific study on self-esteem to identify gender differences in ten areas (Gentile, Grabe, Dolan-Pascoe, Twenge, Wells, & Maitino, 2009). The work addresses the concern that global self-esteem tests may not correctly account for possible variations among men and women. The study also defined the subgroups of self-esteem that were studied including the following: physical appearance, athletic, academic, social acceptance, family, behavioral conduct, affect, personal, self-satisfaction, and moral-ethical. The conclusion of this research showed that while there were only moderate differences in some of the subdomains of self-esteem, many of them were higher than the difference in global self-esteem (Gentile, et al., 2009). The implications of this study might be that when surveying self-esteem in both men and

women, a questionnaire that addresses several different aspects might be a more accurate method.

### **Gender Stereotypes in the Work Place**

Gender assumptions about work are present in almost all career fields; the way these assumptions and stereotypes effect perception is an important aspect in the current study. Research that measured the effect of gender typed information on perceived suitability for a job was conducted to show the impact of gender stereotypes (Reinhard, Schindler, Stahlberg, Messner, & Mucha, 2011). The core of the study was to identify if stating non gender specific weaknesses caused interviewers to make as many inferences about one's gender characteristics as stating gender typed weaknesses does. The conclusions showed that weaknesses that support or refute typical gender stereotypes can influence whether or not a candidate is viewed as a good fit for an observed gender typical position (Reinhard, et al., 2011, p. 152). The results of this study may imply that assigning certain strengths or weaknesses to hypothetical candidates of different gender can influence how well they are perceived by the test taker. In addition, further experiments might be conducted to test the affected perception difference between stereotypical gender weaknesses and non-gender specific faults or weaknesses.

In addition, the impact of gender-based perceptions of different areas of competency for managerial positions was studied (Robertson, Brummel, & Salvaggio, 2011). They were interested in seeing if there were differences in the way men and women rated certain characteristics in level of importance and the perceived gender association with each trait. There was also a scenario given with the character either being male or female and participants rated each in competency. Candidates were then asked if they would promote or select the candidate. The results showed that in all areas, the male character was favored over the female character for

both options (Robertson, et al., 2011, p. 24). The outcome of this experiment could imply that despite common thought that acceptance of women in the workplace has increased, men are still the more valued employee.

### **Challenges for Women in the Work Force**

Much research has been done in the area of challenges and stereotypes that women face when entering into the work force. Several experiments have been conducted that address areas relating to the role and impact of gender on success, modern sexism, and the glass ceiling (Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, 2010; Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter, 1995; Wickwire and Kruper, 1996). These studies show that there are still many obstacles that stand in the way of women being fully accepted as equals in the work force despite the possibility that they might be as well qualified as a male counterpart. These works address the growing need for leaders and women's role in filling those positions, the way sexism is concealed yet present in today's society, and the resistance of the glass ceiling to break. The implications for these experiments may be that the attitudes towards women will not be as progressive as hypothesized due to embedded ideas of gender roles.

Furthermore, literature regarding the implications of women succeeding in the work force were looked at in an attempt to formulate possible future actions regarding the outcome of the current study. Social penalties for successful women were studied by Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, and Tamkins. Heilman and associates' research focused on the adverse effects of success in male-dominated areas on women; specifically in the way they are viewed and appraised. The article addresses the duality of gender stereotypes of being both descriptive and prescriptive as well as how that effects views towards women. The study gave participants scenarios of a successful employee (either male or female) in a position that was self-reported by participants

as traditionally a male role. The results showed that participants showed significant levels of surprise when the successful employee was a female. The conclusion of this research was that there are social penalties for successful women. In addition, the negative consequences that result from these judgements include salary, job opportunities, and evaluations Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004, p. 420-423).

Lastly, an article that expands on how women should adapt to the changing environments they might be put in is by Terborg. Self-concept and career choice, blocked career pathways, stereotypes, and choice of organization are topic areas that relate to women entering into managerial positions (Terborg, 1977, p. 649). In addition, the importance of socialization stresses as a key aspect for women to be successful in the work force (Terborg, 1977, p. 651). This article implies that there could be ways to help women attain success in their jobs and is helpful in suggesting solutions to the discrimination that females face.

### **Hypothesis and Operationalized Variables**

The hypothesis states that higher levels of self-esteem leads to a more positive opinion of the ability of others. Within this broad hypothesis, a more specific hypothesis states that men and women who have higher self-esteem will perceive women more competent in a managerial role than men and women with lower self-esteem. In addition, the current research hypothesizes that there will be a gender difference in that women will rank the female candidate as more qualified than men will, regardless of self-esteem levels. Self-esteem in participants was measured by self-reported responses to Heatherton and Polivy's Current Thoughts Scale (1991) scored on a 7-point Likert scale. The variables of age and sex of participants was also self-reported. The dependent variable of candidate competency was measured by responses to statements about the candidates ability to perform in a managerial role scored on a 7-point Likert scale.



## **Method**

### **Participants**

Ninety-three undergraduate students from a midwestern university voluntarily participated in the study; they did not receive any form of compensation or reward. Participants were asked to self-report their age and gender; of the 93 participants, all filled out both sections. Breakdown of the gender of participants was 37.6% male and 62.4% female. Age of the participants ranged from 18 to 41 years of age; the breakdown of age was as follows: 47.3% age 18-20, 43.1% age 21-24, and 9.9% age 25 and above. Data were collected in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010).

### **Materials**

A 29-item survey was compiled that consisted of demographic questions, the Current Thoughts Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), a vignette, statements that rated the candidate's competency, personal promotion decision, and an open ended portion to explain their promotion decision. The demographic information that was gathered was gender and age. The Current Thoughts Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) is a 20 item measure of self-esteem; it is usually scored on a 5 point Likert scale but it was adjusted to a 7 point Likert scale for more accuracy. Of the 20 items on this scale, 13 are reverse scored. The vignette was a scenario created specifically for the current research; participants either received a survey where the scenario had a male candidate or a female candidate. The male and female candidates were identical in qualifications and flaws. Five statements about the candidate's competency for a high management position followed the vignette and participants were asked to rate the candidate on a 7 point Likert scale. The last two items on the survey were a yes or no question asking if the

participant would promote the candidate and an open ended section for the participant to explain their promotional decision.

### **Procedure**

Participants were asked if they would be willing to complete the 29-item survey during class time, in campus organization meeting time, and during free time in dining areas. The researcher explained the general goal of the study and stated that the survey was completely voluntary. Participants were informed verbally and in written instruction that all responses were anonymous; they were also asked to fill out a consent form. The completion of the survey took no longer than 15 minutes for the participants to complete. After completion of the surveys, the experimenter debriefed the participants and answered any questions regarding the research study. The researcher informed all participants that they could find contact information on the consent form if they had any questions at a later time.

### **Results**

In order to test the hypothesis that higher self-esteem lead to a higher rating of the candidate, a Pearson's bivariate correlation was performed between total self-esteem score and total candidate competency score. Results indicated that there was a significant relationship between these two variables with  $p=0.026$ . The hypothesis that there would be a gender effect of participant was tested by performing another Pearson's bivariate correlation. The results indicated that there was not a significant difference between male and female participants in either self-esteem levels or view of the candidate. In addition, the overall competency ratings of the two candidates were analyzed to test for a significant difference. The male candidate mean

was 25.58 and the female candidate mean was 24.91. These results showed that there was no significant difference in the overall ratings for the male and female candidates in the scenarios.

### Correlations

		totalse	totalpd
totalse	Pearson Correlation	1	.202*
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.026
	N	93	93
totalpd	Pearson Correlation	.202*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.026	
	N	93	93

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

### Discussion

The original hypothesis stated that men and women who have higher self-esteem will perceive women more competent in a managerial role than men and women with lower self-esteem. In addition, it stated that there will be a gender difference in that women will rank the female candidate as more qualified than men will, regardless of self-esteem levels. Although these two hypothesis were not supported by significant results, there was a direction in the results that may indicate that a larger sample size would show more significance. Also, a closer look at other results led to implications that could be foundation for future research. There were no significant results between gender variables and the promotional decision item on the survey but there was a direction that showed favor towards the male candidate. For instance, in the 12 cases

that the candidate did not get promoted, the male candidate was denied 4 times where the female was denied 8 times. Further, the promotional decision led to another implication about the effect of gender of participants. Of the 12 participants who denied promotion to the candidate, 3 were male while 9 were female. These results show a direction that might support the idea that females judge candidates more harshly than males. Future research might be done to test the hypothesis that women have higher expectations of themselves and others than men do.

### **Limitations**

If this study is repeated in the future, there are several changes that could be made to achieve more accurate results. To begin with, a larger sample size could have led to a more conclusive result of the implication gender has on the outlook of the candidate. Without a large sample of both male and female participants, the data cannot be significant. Also, the original survey would be altered to better measure attitudes towards females in the work force. In the future, the scenario would have more characteristics that conflict with gender stereotypes and the candidate would qualify as an average employee instead of an exceptional one. The open ended question could be eliminated to shorten the test because it did not provide any significant results.

### **Implications**

In the future, this project can help in better understanding the importance of self-esteem on the way people look and deal with other people. This concept can be applied to the work force, especially service industries, in the importance of attitude of employees who work with customers. Future research may include an alternative scenario that addresses a different target environment. It would be interesting to measure the extent to which self-esteem contributes to attitudes towards others in different situations. Branching out more in the direction of attitudes of

women, may lead to research in gender differences in expectations of self and others. The results of this study seemed to indicate that there may be support to a hypothesis that females have higher levels of expectation. This project appears to be a catalyst for many more hypothesis about the relationship between how people reflect inward on themselves and how they reflect outward on others.

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