

The Cyclical Nature of Self-Esteem in Mothers, Daughters, and Womankind:

A Review of the Research Literature

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ABSTRACT

While it might be possible to hypothesize and imagine, no one truly knows what it would be like to live in a world where all women have high self-esteem. Given the nature of androcentric culture, low self-esteem seems to be covertly, and at times not so covertly, woven into the fabric of womanhood. Women seem to be locked in a self-perpetuating cycle where they are fed stereotypical definitions of what it is to be feminine and to be a woman by society and then they live into these stereotypes. Research shows that women can impact the way they feel about themselves by changing the way they define themselves. This literature review traces the circular nature of the self-esteem of women in the public sphere as it loops into the private sphere, where mothers are raising their daughters, and back out again into the public sphere as daughters grow and live their own lives. In raising the self-esteem of the mother, there is the possibility of shifting this androcentric, negative, self-perpetuating cycle to a female-centric, positive one.

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“When you come to accept yourself,
you will stop picking on your mother.”

(Baruch & Barnett, 1983)

INTRODUCTION

Googling “impact of mother’s low self esteem on daughter” results in an extensive list of over 700,000 academic and pop psychology articles. When Googling “women and self-esteem”, over 39 million results show up. Hanna Rosin’s (2010) TedTalk, *New Data on the Rise of Women*, has garnered over one million views and Sheryl Sandberg’s (2010) TedTalk, *Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders*, has received over eight million views to date. These numbers show that the state of women and how women feel about themselves have made it into the everyday vernacular and are concerns of many modern day women.

Using a combination of books, journals, and videos ranging in date from 1975-2014, this literature review examines the connection between the self-esteem of womankind to the self-esteem of mothers who are raising daughters, how those daughters are impacted by their mother’s self-esteem and in turn, how those daughters impact womanhood when they leave the home and live their own lives.

In reviewing literature of today as well as literature from the 70’s and 80’s, similarities, growth, and changing attitudes of how women define themselves and their relationship to self-esteem is tracked. In order to cast a wide net, the majority of sources reviewed focused on women who were white, middle-class, heterosexual, and American with no known psychological diagnoses and ranging in age from infant to elderly. While women, body image, and self-esteem

are known to be correlated, and while body image is touched upon, this review does not delve into the intricacies of that correlation, leaving such research to be explored in a separate review.

Overviewing self-esteem revealed that certain researchers found self-esteem to impact every aspect of one's life (Mruk, 2006, p. 170; Sowislo & Orth, 2013), while others found there to be little empirical evidence for such claims (Edmondson et al, 2006; Small, 1988; Shrier, Tompsett, & Shrier, 2004). The self-esteem of womankind was found to be at the mercy of the androcentric nature of society (Mruk, 2006, pp.71-72). Research suggests that as women see themselves through connections to others (Chodorow, 1989, p. 58), a barrier is created wherein women are stunted from fully knowing who they are. They feel incomplete and to fill this void look to marriage and motherhood (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 329, p. 338). As a daughter grows, she is rewarded for imitating and displaying feminine behavior (Greene, 2003, p. 107). With the mother being the most important figure in a daughter's life and the daughter needing to maintain her identity in relation to her mother, the daughter will imitate and internalize the feminine behavior of her mother (Chodorow, 1989, p. 52, p. 64). From her mother, the daughter imitates what it is to be female, how to move as a female in the world, and how to feel about herself as a female. This imitation creates the daughter's own gender identity. This cycle is played out generation after generation (Chodorow, 1989, p. 41). However, current research suggests the androcentric nature of traditional psychology limits the ability for women to truly understand themselves (Greene, 2003, p. 48) and that gender identity is fluid given how societies shift and change over time (Greene, 2003, p. 112; Batalha & Reynolds, 2013, p. 165; Reid, Cooper, & Banks, 2008, p. 237). Certain aspects of past definitions of what it was to be a woman and valued in society as a woman are not necessarily relevant today (Greene, 2003, pp. 129-130).

With research suggesting that mothers are the most influential person in a daughter's life (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 74), changing how the mother defines and views herself could be the essential element in redefining modern day womanhood (Degges-White & Borzumato, 2014, p. 9).

SELF ESTEEM - AN OVERVIEW

Self-esteem is the tool used to measure whether a person likes herself or not (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 7; Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Neff, 2013), whether or not she believes she has inherent value (Mruk, 2006 p. 10-19), and whether or not she is a "capable, worthwhile, and successful" person (Onalyi & Erdur-Baker, 2013). People's sense of self-esteem is what pushes them to grow, or not grow, and helps them to maintain a sense of how they fit into the world and move through their lives (Mruk, 2006, p. 34).

One's level of self-esteem is obtained by how much one is able to accept oneself (Hewitt, 1998, p. 23) along with how a person is treated by others and what they are told about themselves (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 8). The interpersonal aspect of self-esteem is well recorded. The information one receives about oneself from others is directly correlated to how one will feel about themselves. (Mruk, 2006, p. 170; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Research shows that one's level of self-esteem is in direct correlation with how one is viewed by those closest to him or her, especially parents (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 9).

Self-esteem impacts health, both physical and mental, socioeconomic status, and is a predictor of the successes and failures one will have in their life (Edmonson et al., 2006; Mruk, 2006, p. 14; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Self-esteem and self-worth are closely linked. A person's

self-esteem rests on that which a person thinks their self-worth relies on. All decisions a person makes in her life will be based on that which she thinks will maintain her self-worth such as a good job, the right life partner, or perfect body. Her self-esteem will be determined by how successful she is at the areas of her life that give her self-worth (Mruk, 2006, p. 14; Sowislo & Orth, 2013).

On the spectrum of self-esteem lies high self-esteem on one end and low self-esteem on the other. High self-esteem, generally associated with positive qualities in regards to oneself, is said to help people accomplish goals easily, accept personal flaws, manage self-doubt, create healthy boundaries, develop self-respect, and communicate more effectively (Onayli & Erdur-Baker, 2013; Sanford & Donovan, 1985 p. 9-11, p. 40; Mruk, 2006, p. 153; Small & Williams, 1987). High self-esteem gives one a better chance at happiness and affects almost every aspect of one's life from relationships and career to day-to-day decisions (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 3). It has been noted that high self-esteem is responsible for decreased mental and physical health problems (Edmondson et al., 2006) and reduction in obsession with self-preservation (Hewitt, 1998). High self-esteem helps nurture perseverance in the face of obstacles, which assists with long-term life satisfaction and external rewards from others, (Sowislo & Orth, 2013) and gives people the skills needed to live a successful life (Small, 1988) with the sense that they are truly "good enough" (Mruk, 2006, p. 16).

Low self-esteem is associated typically with negative qualities such as self-doubt, being unmotivated, shy, anxious (Mruk, 2006, p.153), sad, angry, shameful, guilty, embarrassed, helpless, lonely, and experiencing a general sense of being irreparably lacking (Mruk, 2006, p. 3; Sanders & Donovan, 1985, p. 329; Small & Williams, 1987; Neff, 2013). Low self-esteem is a

combination of not feeling worthy or competent (Mruk, 2006, p. 152) and creates barriers to intimacy (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 123). There does seem to be a clear link between self-esteem and depression, however there is little certainty as to which is the dominating affliction (Sanders & Donovan, 1985, p. 355; Mruk, 2006, p. 6; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Along with depression, low self-esteem is associated with 24 American Psychiatric Association diagnosable illnesses (Mruk, 2006, p. 3), including narcissism (Felson & Zielinski, 1989). The behaviors and ways of thinking with low self-esteem are comparable with distorted ways of thinking such as perfectionism, black and white thinking, and negative self-talk. Attempting to deal with a mental health issue without addressing low self-esteem will hinder a patient's progress and sidesteps creating a foundation for real healing (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 285-314; p. xiv).

While research suggests that high self-esteem may have beneficial and productive effects on one's life, and low self-esteem exposes one to the possible negative outcomes in both physical and mental health as well as overall lessened life satisfaction (Sowislo & Orth, 2013), there are studies and research with an oppositional view.

Opposing research suggests that the empirical evidence making the claim that self-esteem has any impact on one's life at all, positive or negative, is lacking (Mruk, 2006, p. 18; Edmondson et al., 2006; Small, 1988; Shrier, Tompsett, & Shrier, 2004). Research suggests that self-esteem has been made up by American culture as another word for happiness and that happiness is the only area in which self-esteem is said to have any real impact at all (MacKinnon, 2015, p.14, p. 17; Hewitt, 1998, p. 142). Studies attempting to link self-esteem and

positive/negative life outcomes have proven to be insignificant and barren (Mruk, 2006, p. 18; MacKinnon, 2015, p. 12).

For others, high self-esteem is not the holy grail of psychological well-being but rather self-compassion is (Neff, 2013). Additionally, while earlier research suggested that low self-esteem was the cause of mental illnesses such as narcissism (Felson & Zielinski, 1989), current research seems to show a link between high self-esteem and narcissism (Mruk, 2006, p. 6; Neff, 2013; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 9).

One of the difficulties in measuring self-esteem is that study participants might not be able to be as objective since they themselves are the subjects of the study. Participants could be engaging in impression management, masking, either consciously or unconsciously, their true feelings about themselves (Hewitt, 1998, p. 60; MacKinnon, 2015, p. 60). Allies of the self-esteem movement seem to believe that everyone with low self-esteem wants to feel better about themselves, when actually it could be an impossible task because to do so would be to annihilate their core self (Hewitt, 1998, p. 118).

SELF-ESTEEM WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF WOMANHOOD

Historically, women's self-esteem has been seen as less important than men's self-esteem (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pg. 4). Darwin, using his evolution theory, found women to be weaker than men (Greene, 2003, p. 40). Per Freud, man was the ideal human and a woman was weak, lacking, and immature (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 255) while Erikson also believed women to be biologically, inherently weaker and lacking (Greene, 2003, p. 49).

Some believe that low self-esteem in women is the result of living in an androcentric society where women's access to their own self-awareness and self-knowledge is greatly limited by the culture's perceived requirement that women be nice, good, well-behaved, and where attending to the needs of men is priority (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. xiv; Chodorow, 1989, p. 49, p. 166). Women who identified closely with traditional feminine gender roles, and were more dependent on approval from society, suffered the most from low self-esteem (Mruk, 2006, pp. 71-72).

In making men's needs a priority, and making sure they are pleased with how women look, body image is the number one factor determining women's self-esteem (Neff, 2013). A majority of women do not like what they see in the mirror and often internalize the rejection of the exterior self to the internal self, creating a deep wound of self-hatred. Mixed with the media barrage of images of what is attractive and valuable, women feel powerless to make their physical selves valued. (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp. 288-232). Additionally, girls grow up in a culture where women are treated and viewed as sexual objects causing them to internalize this view of women and themselves as well (Goldenberg, Roberts, Morris, & Cooper, 2013, p. 401).

Of the 320 female participants in Sanford & Donovan's (1985) study, many felt they had nothing of value to offer and it was challenging for them to say what they liked about themselves (p. 7). Reasons for women having low self-esteem included: not knowing who they really were; not feeling that what they were good at was valued in society; being good at an activity or task proved that particular activity or task had no value; focusing on the one thing they felt unsuccessful at; and inability to recover from a major life event (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp.

12-23). It was also found that lacking a voice in both personal and public spheres created low self-esteem in women (Mruk, 2006, pp. 71-72).

The encompassing effects of low self-esteem, negative self-talk, and self-abuse can often start at quite a young age. According to *Real Girls, Real Pressure* (Dove Self-Esteem Fund, 2008), there is a crisis of self-esteem in girls in America today that negatively impacts every aspect of a girl's life from how she sees herself in the mirror to performance in school to connection in relationships. Out of the 4,000 girls in the study, ages 8-17, 7 out of 10 did not think they were a good enough person and 62% felt insecure. Of those who had low self-esteem, 71% did not think the way they looked measured up and 75% engaged in harmful activities such as unhealthy eating, cutting, or drinking. After the third grade, girls' perception of how attractive they are plummets, as does their self-esteem (Neff, 2013).

In schools, where textbooks and lessons are almost absent of female role models, there is much evidence for the supposed ineptitude of women, causing girls to lose interest in leadership and academics and unconsciously begin to place the construct of "woman as less valuable" into the perspective of herself and women as a group (Gilligan, Goldberger & Ward, 1991; Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 39-40). With the history of the world often taught as the history of men, and words like "mankind" used to describe all of humankind, it would be easy for a girl to assume that women made little to no contribution in the shaping of the world and that women simply are neither important nor make a difference in the larger scheme of life (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp. 180-185). The way in which women's lives had been recorded included few acts of heroism which made the history of women less worthy of telling (Greene, 2003, p. 139). In stories girls read, it was shown that while success of a male character grew out of his own abilities and skills,

success for a female character was usually attributed to others helping her or through some kind of magical circumstance the character found herself in (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 39).

When a girl is young, she is often rewarded for masculine traits, such as being assertive, but as she grows and discerns that she is female, she learns the behaviors that will give her the most reward are those that fall into the feminine category (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 69). She learns that she should be being nurturing, a good housekeeper, a good mother, know how to put on makeup, cook, and that she is responsible for making a man happy. At the same time that she learns this, and is being rewarded for following these types of behaviors, she sees that what she is being rewarded for is not actually valued in society. She sees that to be valued as a woman means to miss out on being valued as an innovator, risk-taker, and active contributor to humankind. She holds herself back to maintain the rewards she receives from being feminine and to avoid punishment from seeming masculine, overbearing, or unattractive (Chodorow, 1989, pp. 41-43). This, whether consciously or unconsciously, creates inherent inner conflict, self-doubt, and resentment in the woman over having to choose between being valued for her femininity or betray her gender all together to be viewed as a valued citizen of the world (Chodorow, 1989, p. 42; Flax, 1978).

A woman tends to see herself through her connections with the rest of the world, almost as if she is acutely responsible for everything and everyone around her while at the same time hopelessly reliant on those same people for this connection. This connection can create a loss of self, a loss of individuality, an inability to experience herself fully, and therefore a loss of self-esteem. While this connection for women can often be rewarding, what Chodorow described as an “inescapable embeddedness” (Chodorow, 1989, p. 58) can also happen, giving

the experience of livelihood and self-preservation fused together with others (Chodorow, 1989, p. 58; Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 48). When women turn the world's opinion of them into their own opinions of themselves, this can be debilitating to authentic self-growth (McHugh, 2013).

With the sense of self given by others and the world around her, a woman has a tendency to feel incomplete and in search of a fulfillment outside of herself that will make her feel whole. Two areas where women often find this completion is in a romantic relationship and in motherhood (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 329, p. 338).

When a woman desires, but does not have, a long term romantic partner, her self-worth and self-esteem will plummet (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 118; Mruk, 2006, p. 14; Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Often women can be quite successful in other areas of their lives but without a man, her self-esteem will take a hit and she will see herself as a failure. In essence, she is no one without a man. This urgent need to couple springs from the pervasive belief that to be a correct woman is to be with a man (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p.118, p. 137).

Motherhood is another way women find completeness in themselves. Just as a woman is nothing without a man, she is also nothing without a baby. At the same time as being a mother can give a woman higher self-esteem, she is also at risk of seeming to bow down to the patriarchy, giving herself up to raise the child, and enter an existence of monotony and boredom with little access to her own wants, needs, and desires. As a woman's life becomes consumed with raising the perfect child, new stresses can occur in the form of failing to raise the perfect child. If a woman, particularly a single woman, does not have a child, it can occur like she is not a real woman and unless she is doing something considered impressive with her life, she could

be viewed by herself and society as a failure. Girls are taught that to be a woman is to be with a man and with a baby (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp. 145-149, pp. 328-350) at the sacrifice of her own interests.

When a woman does not respect herself and her body as good, healthy, valuable, and vibrant, she is actually contributing to the hand of patriarchy (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 81). Being addicted to approval (McHugh, 2013), wanting to be seen as a “good” woman who is highly valued by men while simultaneously holding a deep desire to reach her highest potential as a person, feelings of inadequacy could develop in women causing them to create what Chodorow (1989) called “a self-perpetuating cycle of female deprecation ” (p. 41).

INTENSITY OF THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOND

Research has shown that the most significant and influential figure in a child’s life is their mother (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 74) and that the daughter’s relationship with her mother is the foundation on which all future relationships will be based (Hammer, 1975, p. 3; Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 75).

As an infant, children experience themselves as part of the mother, or rather the mother is part of them. A strong attachment is created as the child sees no separation between itself and the person caring for it. This stage lasts for about six months. (Hammer, 1975, pp. 15-16; Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 39).

Due to girl children being raised by females, the same gender as her, they experience this attachment for longer and more intensely than boy children. As children grow and begin the individuation and separation process they also begin to learn they are either a male or a female.

The male child will have an easier time with individuation and separation because he is not the same gender as his primary caretaker. The girl child's process of separation and individuation will take longer, and possibly be less effective, due to the girl child's primary caretaker being female and an inherent "sameness" existing between mother and daughter. The girl child could come to know herself, define herself, only in relationship to her mother (Chodorow, 1979, p. 93; Flax, 1978). The girl child might only develop a partial sense of separateness from the mother or might never experience a distinct sense of an individual self ever (Hammer, 1975, p. 16). This lack of separation and individuation with the most important relationship in a girl child's life stays with her throughout her life (Chodorow, 1989, p. 47).

While many daughters are able to separate and individuate, this lack of boundaries could create a sense of sameness in both daughter and mother, in which neither feels completely separate and whole without the other (Chodorow, 1979, pp. 109-110). While sensing the mother's desire to maintain this close bond and at the same time wanting to please her mother, a daughter might have to choose between being nurtured and developing her own sense of autonomy and individuality (Flax, 1978). Having another's identity dictate one's own identity will cause a person to feel less worthy (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 47). The mother's inability to allow her daughter to individuate could have long-lasting, damaging consequences to the development of the daughter (Hammer, 1975). Additionally, a daughter's overidentification with her mother could create bitterness and resentment in the daughter due to the daughter's ability to see how her mother has allowed herself to be held back and how the daughter may have unknowingly been influenced by this and allowed herself to be held back as well (Flax, 1978).

While many women are afraid to be like their mothers and do not want to turn into them (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 90), they have a tendency to carry their mother's expectations of them and their lives far into adulthood, often creating a life heavily shaped by their mother's influence in an attempt to fulfill the un-lived dreams of their mother. This creates a tendency to feel unfulfilled, living life through their mother's eyes. They are only able to shift their feelings of life dissatisfaction by going after their own dreams. Ways in which daughters were able to do this were through a romantic partnership and/or career (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 75). Additionally, while many researchers agree that the mother is the most influential and impactful person in a daughter's life, Greene (2013) stated there was an over-reliance on this idea, leaving only one source, the mother, as the cause of any problems in the daughter's life (p. 143).

If the mother of a girl child, after the first 6 months of the life of the child, is neither dismissive nor controlling over the child, the mother will allow the baby to begin individuating and separating (Hammer, 1975, pp.15-16). However, just as the bond from girl child to mother is stronger than with boys, mothers identify more with their daughters than with their sons (Flax, 1978; Chodorow, 1989, p. 49). When raising a daughter, the mother re-experiences her own childhood and relationship to her own mother. This "seeing daughter as self" makes the process of the daughter's individuation much more difficult (Chodorow, 1989, p. 49). Without a clear sense of even a physical boundary between mother and daughter, the ability for the daughter to separate and individuate is heavily restricted, (Flax, 1978; Chodorow, 1989, p. 59). Mothers want to pass on what they believe to be good about themselves and fill in the gaps where their own mothers were lacking (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 25).

GENDER IDENTIFICATION INHERITED FROM THE MOTHER

A child's gender identity, the sense of being either a boy or a girl, is solidified in most children by age 3 (Greene, 2003, p. 107). At age 6, children are motivated to imitate the behavior of their gender and begin to be aware they are rewarded for this imitated behavior (Greene, 2003, p. 107). While possibly a tomboy when young, a girl child showing her masculine traits will eventually be curbed of this behavior (Greene, 2003, p. 108). As a girl child grows and learns more and more what it means to be female and how to show her "femaleness", she will receive more external reward and validation for imitating this socially accepted, stereotypically female behavior than for modeling masculine behavior (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 69). The person she will be imitating the most, and trying to please the most, is her primary caretaker, her mother (Chodorow, 1989, p. 52; Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp. 66-67).

Sharing feminine ways of being and feminine behaviors such as shopping, cooking, and putting on makeup are fun ways in which mothers bond with daughters (Degge-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 58). Dressing little girls up in pink, frilly clothing communicates to the daughter her gender status (Reid, Cooper, & Banks, 2008, p. 241). It is not just through this conscious teaching that a girl learns what it is to be female but also in the day-to-day observations of how her mother interacts with herself, others and events. If she is observing a mother who fits the traditional female model, the daughter will be observing a passive woman who is devalued in society. She will observe how her mother responds to day-to-day life and then, to maintain her own identity in relation to her mother, the daughter will imitate and internalize this behavior (Chodorow, 1989, p. 52, p. 64). This role-modeling, both conscious and unconscious, is how the daughter learns to respond to herself and others and develops her

behavior, personality, and values (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 65). As the daughter continues to grow, whether her mother is enthusiastic, outgoing, and engaging or boring, self-loathing, and depressed, the daughter will actively be encouraged to imitate her mother and come to think that to be a woman is to be these things (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 69; Lynch, 2011). This exacerbates the intense mother-daughter bond through adulthood, sealing the sense for some daughters that they do not know “where they end and their mothers begin” (Flax, 1978).

Mothers experience the challenge of wanting their daughters to do better than they did but are attempting to teach daughters to be risky, outspoken leaders while the mother herself, growing up under patriarchal rule, had no real experience of such things. While the mother wants the daughter to succeed, she unconsciously could be telling the daughter she should expect less (Flax, 1978). Even if the mother never implicitly tells the daughter to expect less, the child will sense this judgement and internalize it to be true (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 32). Daughters might even hear statements such as, “You can be or do anything!”, which are meant to be, and often are, inspiring. However, daughters are told this without being given the tools or models to manage the subtle and not-so-subtle oppression and discrimination against women. Given this, daughters who were told they can be or do anything could internalize their failures, possibly blaming it on their gender, as opposed to seeing their failures as failures of the system (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp. 77-78).

Mothers themselves are not to blame for this conflict in parenting. The mother’s unawareness of her own psychological makeup and inability to know how to overcome it partially contribute to the cycle of women holding women back (Flax, 1978; Chodorow, 1989, p. 41). The over-identification of the “daughter as herself” causes the mother to confuse her

concerns about her own body, place in society, levels of guilt, shame, and embarrassment with her daughter's, stunting the daughter's ability to experience her own relationship with herself and her body (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 58, p. 79; Hammer, 1975). Given the role-modeling aspect of the mother-daughter relationship, as opposed to attempting to teach the daughter how to be a "better woman", the mother would be more successful to inhabit and exude the qualities she wants her daughter have (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 81).

Just as a daughter may internalize her mother's depression, stress, and anxiety, she may internalize her mother's experience of being a woman (Sarkhanlou & Kiamanesh, 2015). It is possible, if the mother has low self-esteem, the daughter could define her own gender identity to be someone with low self-esteem (Chodorow, 1989, p. 64). When a mother doesn't value herself and the daughter is supposed to imitate the mother's behavior to fit into society and maintain value as a woman, this can create hostility in the daughter towards not only the mother but all women as this kind of self devaluation upholds patriarchal domination (Flax, 1978). As the daughter grows, these internalized experiences will be externalized, perpetuating the same beliefs and behaviors from generation to generation (Chodorow, 1989, p. 54).

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS AND SELF-ESTEEM

It is easy to assume that mother-daughter attachment and self-esteem are connected. (Lynch, 2011). Findings show the style of parenting during the first four years of a child's life, whether a boy or a girl, determine the level of self-esteem the child will have as its foundation (McKay, Fanning, & Johnson, 1987, p. 2). It has been found that children with low self-esteem had parents with low self-esteem (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 29). The development of the

child's self-esteem was found to rest on several factors such as the parent's self-esteem, whether or not the child was wanted, and the quality of the parent-child relationship (Small, 1988; Sanford & Donovan, 1985, pp. 30-31). While there have been studies that show no correlation between the mother's self-esteem and the daughter's self-esteem (Edmonson et al., 2006), other studies have shown a positive connection between the self-esteem of the mother and the self-esteem of the daughter (Onayli & Erdur-Baker, 2013; Edmondson et al., 2006; Small, 1988).

It has been found that the mother's affection for the daughter is a factor in development of self-esteem in daughters. Daughters that believed their mothers to be very affectionate towards them were more likely to have high self-esteem. Those who overidentified with their unaffectionate mothers had lower self-esteem (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 9).

In a study by Small (1988), which included 42 mother-daughter dyads, Small found that the biggest impact on the daughter's self-esteem was the behaviors in which mothers with low self-esteem engaged. Mothers with low self-esteem were more concerned about their daughter's behavior, gave the daughter less autonomy, and were quicker to punish. Small asserted that because mothers with low self-esteem felt helpless and ineffective, they would assert more control in areas where they did have power, such as with children. At the same time, mothers with low self-esteem might not have been equipped or might have been too self-involved to recognize the needs of the child.

The act of mothering itself can challenge a woman's self-esteem. Mothers felt a high level of stress in trying to raise the perfect child and an exorbitant amount of guilt and lack of skills. They felt family life was often chaotic and overwhelming. As a result, the daughter could experience a particularly stressed, self-doubting version of her mother, even though the mother

may not have been like this previous to the arrival of her daughter. While women said they got satisfaction from work, many women wished they didn't have to work, finding the dance of balancing work and home-life to require more energy and organization than they had and beating themselves up for this perceived lack of stamina. It has been shown in the past 20 years, that to be a good mother means to sacrifice for the child (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 7, pp. 21-23).

The anxiety and insecurity that comes with having low self-esteem has a negative impact on relationships, and this anxiety and insecurity from the mother teaches daughters to be anxious and withdrawn as well (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 73). With 57% of mothers criticizing their own looks (Kearney-Cooke, 2008) and mothers unaware that the daughter is learning about herself and how to be a woman by observing and imitating her mother (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 28), mothers unknowingly transmit a negative and possibly harmful body image onto their daughters (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 70).

Women with low self-esteem have a tendency to rely on "pleasing others" as a measurement of success as opposed to looking to their own accomplishments (Edmonson et al., 2006). In the mother-daughter relationship, it has been shown that as interdependency increases, self-esteem of the daughter decreases (Onayli & Erdur-Baker, 2013). Mothers who are doing whatever is necessary to address every single need of their daughters create daughters who are unwilling to meet their own needs and are unable to self-soothe (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 34). When mothers negatively and harshly judge themselves it impacts how they feel about the child they are raising. If mothers feel they are not doing a good job, chances are they also feel like daughter is not the best version of herself. In feeling that she

is failing as a mother, there could be feelings that the daughter is failing also. A daughter will accept the opinion of her worth and value as demonstrated by how she is treated by her mother and affirm her mother's opinion and own self-concern as truth of the daughter (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 9).

With many studies focused on the chaos and unhealthy boundaries of the mother-daughter relationship, additional studies suggest that empirical evidence for the universality of this toxic relationship is heavily lacking and the evidence that does exist shows the mother-daughter relationship to be positive and fulfilling for many women (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Shrier, Tompsett, & Shrier, 2004). It has also been found that there is no guarantee that the daughter of a mother of with low self-esteem will inherit these traits (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 71).

Mothers with high self-esteem were found to be more trusting of their children and able to give them more freedom and autonomy (Small, 1988). These mothers did not place the concerns they had about themselves on their daughters, and witnessing their mothers doing well was uplifting for daughters and positively impacted their self-esteem (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 79; Baruch & Barnett, 1983). Mothers who were not afflicted with the the overwhelming need to make child-care her only focus in life and who had a strong, valuable sense of self were able to raise well-balanced, mentally healthy children (Chodorow, 1989, p. 59). The most important thing a mother could have done to positively impact her daughter's self-esteem was to model positive and high self-esteem herself (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 81; Small 1988). Just as with low self-esteem, there is no guarantee that a daughter will inherit these traits either.

The questions remain: What would a world where all women have high self-esteem look like? And, will that ever be possible?

SHIFTS IN PERSPECTIVE

Changing Psychologies. Current research has shown the Freudian perspective and traditional psychology, which has been the lens through which psychology has attempted to understand and define women, to be both an “obstacle to truth”, as Betty Friedan stated in 1963 (as cited by Greene, 2003, p. 48) and also quite limited in its scope of truly understanding women due to the androcentric nature of traditional psychology (Greene, 2003, p. 56). Trying to give women a sense of self that has been created from the male perspective cannot give women a complete, knowable, and grounded sense of themselves (Greene, 2003, p. 104).

With growing awareness of the need to address issues from a perspective of gender (Shrier, Tompsett, & Shrier, 2004), challenges to traditional psychology and fixed ways of being have resulted in changes to the perception of the feminine self (Greene, 2003, p. 112), showing that a woman these days can be anything, at any age (Greene, 2003, p. 141). Most psychologists agree that to understand women, one has to take into account both biology and environment, seeing how the two work together as opposed to each in a vacuum (Reid, Cooper, & Banks, 2008, pp. 237-238).

While traditional psychology has always pushed the past as the main component in the fate of one’s life, new models are being developed that celebrate the ideas of “emergence and possibility” (Greene, 2003, p. 143).

Gender Fluidity. While gender stereotypes are still prevalent in the culture and psychology of today (Batalha & Reynolds, 2013, p. 180), where girls are expected to be obedient and caring and boys expected to be assertive and commanding, these feminine and masculine traits can work in tandem with one another as opposed to being on opposite sides of the fence (Reid, Cooper, & Banks, 2008, p. 240). It has been shown that as society changes and as history is made, definitions of gender and gender stereotypes shift and change as well (Greene, 2003, p. 112; Batalha & Reynolds, 2013, p. 165; Reid, Cooper, & Banks, 2008, p. 237). While Chodorow (1989) believed that women were trapped in a “a self-perpetuating cycle of female deprecation ” (p. 41), others believe the “self-fulfilling prophecy” concept to be a direct result of gender stereotyping (Ryan & Branscome, 2013, p. 169). As opposed to seeing these stereotypes as fixed ways of being for women, they are beginning to be seen as fixed ways of being that are thrust upon women (Bezt, Ramsey, & Sekaquaptewa, 2013, p. 428-444).

Mothers are doing ok. In recent research, it was shown that most women want to raise daughters who love themselves, have self-respect, and high self-esteem. Mothers are teaching their daughters to be independent and reach their highest potential, often pushing education first over romance and love (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, pp. 127-128). They want their daughters to have fulfilling careers as opposed to just any old job to pay the bills and encourage their daughters to work (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, pp. 149). A mother’s positive expectations of her daughter at the age of ten can have a great financial impact on the daughter 20 years down the line. Giving daughters a sense of belief in one’s self and that they can control their own destiny directly affects her level of income (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, pp. 152).

Women's progress. For every two men that graduate college today, three women will graduate college. Of PhD's earned, more of them are earned by women (Rosin, 2010). While women still earn roughly 77% of what a man earns for the same job, the numbers of women in the workforce have grown exponentially in the last 30 years (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, pp. 149-150). Not only has the female working population grown, they are succeeding. Women hold 51.4% of management and professional positions, up from 26.1% in the 1980's, and single, childless women are earning more than men (Rosin, 2010). While girls continue to be told and influenced by fairy tales and stereotypically female confines that in the past restricted women to the role of wife and mother, these confines are not relevant to the modern day woman (Greene, 2003, pp. 129-130).

CONCLUSION

High self-esteem has been found to give women the perseverance, self-confidence, and positive sense of self needed to live a successful, fully realized life (Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Small, 1988; Mruk, 2006, p. 16). A woman's level of self-esteem is directly correlated with the opinions those closest to her have about her (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 9). With the close bond daughters have with their mothers (Chodorow, 1979, p. 93; Flax, 1978), mothers are the most influential person in a daughter's life (Chodorow, 1989, p. 47).

Young daughters are rewarded by imitating feminine behaviors and the feminine behavior they imitate the most is their mother's (Sanford & Donovan, 1985, p. 69). In the past 20 years, women have entered the workforce in record numbers (Rosin, 2010) but 20, 30, and 40 years ago, women did not have as big a voice in the public sphere. Evidence has been found that

low self-esteem in women is caused by a lack of voice and audience in public spheres (Mruk, 2006, pp. 71-72). Many mothers of today grew up under those kinds of circumstances. Research shows that daughters imitate mothers (Greene, 2003, p. 107) which means unless the mothers of today interrupt their own relationship to what it means to be a woman, she could pass this cyclical, stereotypical, learned femininity onto her daughter (Chodorow, 1989, p. 41).

A New Self-Perpetuating Cycle. Society is beginning to see that the “world can no longer afford to suppress half its population” (Armstrong, 2014, p.1). The research states that a mother is the most influential person in a daughter’s life (Chodorow, 1989, p. 47), but that being a mother, whether or not the woman had self-esteem issues to begin with, brings new self-doubts, anxieties, judgments, and concerns. Building the self-esteem of mothers worldwide would give them the tools needed to be the women they want their daughters to be (Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey, 2014, p. 9) and begin to create a re-designed, re-defined, female-centric, positive, self-perpetuating cycle.

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