In the New York Times article, “Careers for Women in Technology Companies Are A Global Challenge,” writer Alina Tugend discusses the similarities and differences for women around the world working in the tech field. Tech companies in the United States suffer from a male-dominated, “bro” culture that gives a cold shoulder to female coworkers. In other places, such as the United Kingdom or the Netherlands, the problem lies with class differences, leading to the alienation of middle-class and poor women. The article sums that, while the execution of these issues vary around the world, the underlying effect is still the same: women have a much harder time entering and remaining in the tech field.

The lack of female representation in STEM is not new. While there are many factors that lead to this problem, the one with the deepest consequence is negative stereotypes planted at a young age.

In psychology, we learned about the idea of stereotype threat: a phenomenon in which people are reminded of negative stereotypes of a group they belong to and hence perform on given tasks conforming to those stereotypes. In 1997, researcher Steven Spencer applied this idea to classrooms and discovered that equally intelligent women performed worse on a math exam than their male counterparts after being told that the test showed gender differences. This characterization evoked the negative stereotype of women’s lack of math skills and led them to under-perform on the exam. In contrast, he found that if, before the test, participants were led to believe that both parties performed equally, women’s scores were similar to the men’s. Additional research post Spencer’s experiment has further supported this idea, proving that negative stereotypes in gender as well as race and ethnicity reduces the performance of individuals.

This institutionalized idea that women are not as capable of performing mathematical or technical tasks as well as men is deeply rooted in our culture, starting in elementary schools all the way to professional work settings. Learning about stereotype threat was eye-opening because it allowed me to see the deeper effects of the way we teach children about careers and how it differs in males and females. Dr. Spencer’s experiment involved one math exam; however, the negative stereotypes about women’s lack of technical skills are prevalent universally. The most corrosive part of this narrative is that men are led to believe these same ideas, so in the future they are equally as unwelcoming of women, a disheartening reality reflected in our companies today.
It is vital that we start debunking these myths and start encouraging women from young ages to be open about any career. Most importantly, we need to teach both men and women such values, so that men can also live in a world where the idea of women being empowered to work in any field is a standard, a world in which creativity and innovation need no gender classification.