

Stereotypes may affect female math ability

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A U.S. study suggests implicit stereotypes and gender identification may affect female math performance.

The research by psychologists Amy Kiefer of the University of California-San Francisco and Denise Sekaquaptewa of the University of Michigan might provide insight as to why, despite recent progress, women remain underrepresented in mathematics-related professions.

Kiefer and Sekaquaptewa point to an interaction between women's underlying "implicit" stereotypes and their gender identification as sources for the underperformance and lowered perseverance in mathematical fields.

Studying undergraduates enrolled in an introductory calculus course, the researchers discovered women possessing strong implicit gender stereotypes and likely to identify themselves as feminine performed worse relative to their female counterparts who did not possess such stereotypes and who were less likely to identify with traditionally female characteristics. The same underperforming females were also the least inclined to pursue a math-based career.

The researchers say their findings shed light on why women are less likely to complete a major in mathematics in college, pursue math-intensive careers such as computer science or engineering, and are more than twice as likely as men to drop out of such courses.

The study appears in the January issue of Psychological Science.

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