

Group discussion enough to shatter stereotypes

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Having a short group discussion about why a negative stereotype is invalid is enough to overcome that stereotype and improve performance, according to a University of Queensland researcher.

Psychologist Dr Laura Smith from UQ Business School conducted two studies with 380 undergraduate university students in the UK to debunk the stereotype that women are not as skilled at mathematics as men.

Dr Smith found that women performed better on a maths exam after they had joined in a group discussion about why that stereotype was not true.

Similarly, women who discussed why the stereotype might be true did not perform as well as their male counterparts on the maths exam.

Dr Smith said the findings had huge implications for learning and work.

“Stereotype ‘threat’, which is the negative impact that an activated stereotype may have on a stigmatised individual’s performance, is well documented,” she said.

“Basically this can affect performance in many domains including women and career choice, race and academic performance, and social class.

“In many countries, we see [teenage girls](#) doing worse than boys in maths

exams and consequently women are very much underrepresented in maths and engineering professions. There's a big [gender gap](#) in these areas.

“The broader implications of our research are that it looks like we could really use discussion to promote positive social change and eliminate some of these inequalities.”

Dr Smith's research — conducted with Professor Tom Postmes from The University of Groningen in The Netherlands — involved students participating in five to ten minute group discussions about the validity — or invalidity — of stereotypes before sitting the exam.

“You need a social intervention to breakdown a [stereotype](#) because stereotypes are socially shared representations of [social groups](#),” she said.

“They only derive their power from being agreed upon and validated by others.

“We aren't isolated beings, we're social animals and any ‘objective’ measures of our performance and intellectual ability are actually dependent on what other people think of us. This social problem needs a social solution.”

Dr Smith said she would like to do further, long-term work in the area to follow people over time and see if multiple discussions could really eliminate these inequalities altogether.

“The next stage would be to test whether repeated discussions on this topic of gender performance in mathematics could be powerful enough to change stereotypes, and be able to endure through exposure to occasional contradictory conversations,” she said.

Dr Smith's research has recently been published in *The British Journal of Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Queensland

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