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Study: Women score higher on math exams when men not present

By Mirra Levitt
Contributing Writer

Women score as many as 12 percentage points higher on math exams when tested without men in the room, according to an ongoing Brown study.

The study, co-authored by Michael Inzlicht GS and Talia Ben-Zeev, an assistant professor of psychology at Williams College, indicates that women perform at an average 70 percent accuracy rate on math tests when evaluated in single-sex environments — on par with an accuracy rate of 67 percent for men.

Women's scores fall to 64 percent when tested with men, and more drastically to 58 percent when men outnumber women.

In fact, when examining the data it appears that women's scores decrease in proportion to the number of men in the room, Ben-Zeev observed. The study found that men performed equally well in all testing situations.

The study was conducted at Brown, using Brown undergraduates in a variety of concentrations as subjects. Students were tested on verbal and math questions in same-

sex, coed, and minority situations.

Students were given Graduate Record Examination (GRE)-type questions, and were told only that their answers would be compared with other students' at the end of the test. Inzlicht stressed that the findings draw only from the math questions, noting that "whether women were in the minority or in a same-sex situation, they did just as well on verbal tests."

Why do women's scores drop when they are the minority? Why does this happen on math, but not verbal examinations? The answer, according to the study, is that women respond to

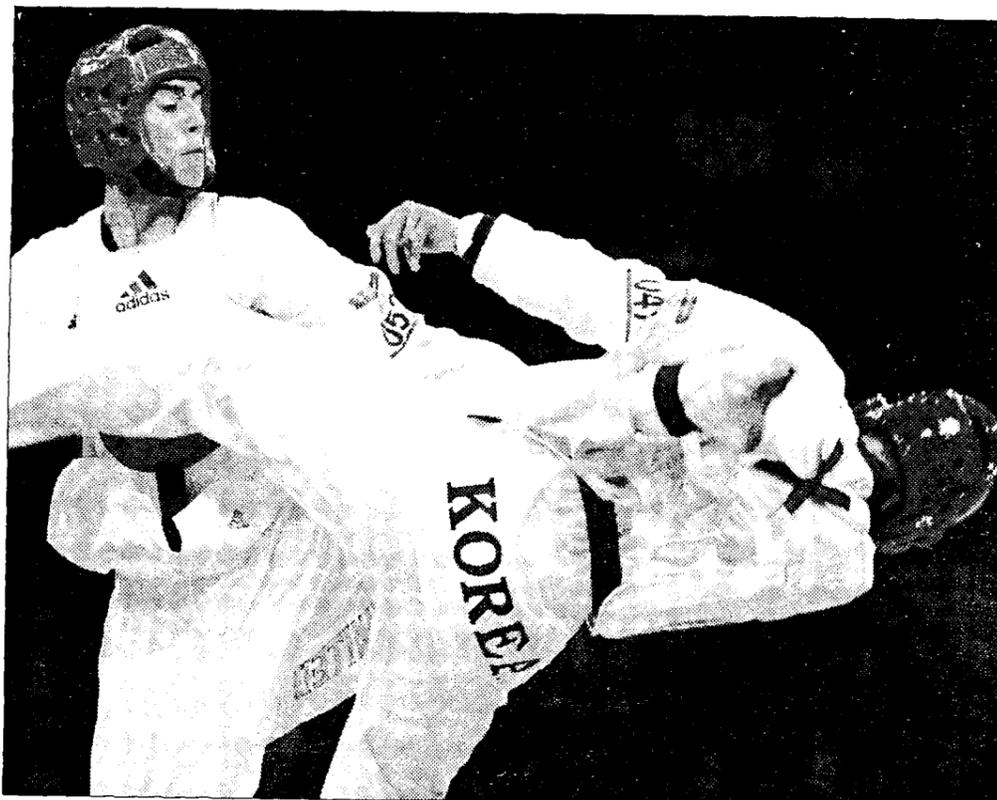
The answer, according to the study is that women respond to a phenomenon called "Stereotype Threat."

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"Stereotype Threat" is the idea that, as Inzlicht explained, "people who are the target [of a stereotype] are scared of confirming that stereotype."

When they unconsciously worry about the stereotype they are likely to "distract themselves, become anxious or freeze up," Inzlicht said. "Stereotype Threat" research looks at racial as well as gender-based stereotypes, and studies how the target group performs when reminded of the stereotype.

Aiming High



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TAEKWONDO GOLD medal winner American Steven Lopez (left) defeats Korean Sin Joon Sik in the finals Thursday at the Sydney Olympic games.

In Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev's study, the stereotype being considered is that "men are better at math than women." What is exceptional about this study, however, is that Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev did not remind or confront the targets with the stereotype.

Ben-Zeev said the study examines "environmental cues" for the stereotype. It explores the possibility that "the mere presence of males is enough to cue a female that she is a female" and trigger the stereo-

types involved.

These environmental cues were enough to remind females of the stereotype and to negatively affect their scores. The single-sex setting did not remind women of such stereotypes, and those women then performed better.

Though the study deals with math, Inzlicht said he and his co-author believed its results may also apply to domains such as the sciences and computer science where stereotypes about women persist.

In terms of broader implications, both Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev said they are still considering the possibilities.

Questions like "What can be done?" and "How can we reduce this effect?" are still being explored, Ben-Zeev said.

Along the same lines, Inzlicht said the study "points to an area [in which] more research needs to be done," stressing that larger studies and field research are necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn from the study.