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## Academia

# Study: Math stigma environmental

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In 1981, Yewande Olubummo left Nigeria for the first time to pursue her master's degree in mathematics. She was one of the few female students and the only black student studying in the Yale University math department.

"It was overwhelming," she said. "I felt like I was trying to sink or swim."

Olubummo's isolation in Yale's majority-male and predominantly-white math program eventually led her to transfer to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The root of Olubummo's discomfort, and the discomfort of many students like her, is now receiving scientific weight, thanks to new research by Michael Inzlicht, a post-doctoral fellow at the Steinhardt School of Education, Inzlicht studies stigmatization of minority populations from the perspective of black students in majority-white colleges and women in majority-male academic programs.

Last December, Inzlicht published a study in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, showing that

their peers in an all-male environment.

Inzlicht attributes his results to what he calls "the stereotype threat." Minorities, he said, perform worse because of negative stereotypes about their ability in a particular subject.

In his study, 54 female undergraduates took a math and verbal exam. Some women took the exams in a room with two other women. Others took the exams in a room with two men. Students in the all-female setting did better on the math exam. The verbal results were the same in both settings.

Sylvia Serfaty, an assistant math professor at NYU, said that in basic math courses, like "Calculus I," the male to female ratio is about 1-to-1. In the more advanced courses, especially at the graduate level, she said, there are fewer women.

At NYU, women represent 24 percent of all math graduate students. The computer science graduate school is 22 percent female.

Margaretha Lam, a Cooper Union engineering professor, said she was often the only woman in her graduate courses.

said. "[Men] liked having you in the class. Otherwise it would be all males, and that's no fun."

Yet Lam said that men in her lab groups singled her out as the brunt of jokes.

"I'd zing them right back as quickly as they gave them to me, and it was all in good fun," Lam said.

Lam, who is 6-foot-3-inches, said she had no problem making herself heard.

"I'm big enough. They can't miss me," Lam said. "Whereas I know that is a problem for other women, that's not a problem for me."

Although Lam and Serfaty have proved successful in male-dominated fields, they argue that men and women have naturally different aptitudes.

"There's an inherent difference between boys and girls, as much as I hate to admit it," Lam said. "I believe that inherent difference probably makes some fields more attractive to women versus men."

Within engineering fields, Lam said, chemical and environmental engineering, which are less math-intensive than other fields, attract



NYU TODAY

► Steinhardt post-doctoral fellow and researcher Michael Inzlicht.

concrete areas.

Still, an increasing number of women are entering medical fields. Last fall, 49.7 percent of the students entering medical school in the United States were women, according to the Associated Press.

This trend is amplified in historically black colleges. According to *Ebony Magazine*, women represented 58 percent of the students at the Morehouse School of Medicine in 2002.

For 12 years now, Yewande Olubummo has taught at Spelman College, an all-black women's college in Georgia.

Despite these changes, College of Arts and Science junior Mimi Tam, a computer science major, said she is used to "not being taken seriously" in her science classes.

In a computer science group project, Tam told her classmate several times that a certain symbol needed to be put in a program, but he didn't listen.

"Of course, the program didn't work — I was right," Tam said. "I think we need more girls in computer science."

Margaret Wright, chair of NYU's computer science department, said the predominantly male computer science faculty in universities might gear curriculum for male learning styles.

But Inzlicht wholeheartedly rejected chalking differences up to biology.

"Genetic changes take thousands of years, whereas we can see changes in one generation," Inzlicht said.

Inzlicht said this shows that anyone can do well, given the right environment.

"These things aren't ingrained.