



### **Activity 3 –**

There are various stereotypes and social demands placed on men and women. Stereotypes are so prevalent in our society and individuals are undoubtedly sensitised to stereotypes related to their sex. According to the theory of stereotype threat, when a negative stereotype is activated, performance in the relevant domain is impaired in individuals in the stigmatised group due to a fear of confirming the stereotype (Steele, 1997; Spencer et al., 1999).

For example, in a sample of men and women of high ability and highly invested in maths, women underperformed in a maths test compared to men only when the test was difficult (Spencer et al., 1999). Follow-up testing revealed that women's underperformance on the difficult maths test was eliminated when participants were told the test revealed no sex difference. However, when told the test had revealed a sex difference, women underperformed compared to the male participants (Spencer et al., 1999).

Such an effect is thought to be most prominent in women who are invested in and possess high ability in maths (Aronson et al., 1998; Davies et al., 2002). Such research perhaps suggests that the various female-directed stereotypes that permeate the culture in which women live carry the potential to undermine women's performance in stereotype-ridden domains.

More recent research has shown that teaching women about stereotype threat may act to reduce its detrimental effect on their maths performance (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005). Ultimately, it appears that environment plays a role in influencing differences observed between men and women, at least when it comes to maths performance.

In studies surrounding stereotype threat, the ecological validity of the experimental manipulations can be questioned. In particular, the threats participants are exposed to in the experimental setting may not realistically translate to the stereotypes women face when striving to excel in fields such as mathematics. Indeed, the dynamics of real-life stereotypes are undoubtedly more complex than purely being told that a maths test has produced a sex difference. Therefore, it is perhaps dubious to generalise findings from the study scenario to real-life high-stakes examinations and situations that affect job applicant selection.

In a meta-analysis by Hyde and Mertz (2009) which considered studies that had explored national datasets, it was found that the gender gap in maths performance was smaller in countries which had more gender equality, such as in educational opportunities and economic participation. Furthermore, in countries with greater educational and career opportunities, more women were seen to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and maths ('STEM') fields. Ultimately, it appears that the social-cultural environment and stereotypes held by the people in the environment in which we live can at least partly explain differences observed between men and women.



Stereotypes are prevalent in our culture and can be found in many places. For example, the media carry many gender-specific stereotypes which often go unnoticed. Watch this advert as an example:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJo9vnrnss>

- How many gender stereotypes can you spot?
- Where else in the media can we see gender stereotypes?

**As an example, think about your favourite film.**

- What do the main characters do?
- What are their traits?
- Are they male or female?