

Research on stereotypes shows not only that we react differently when we have a stereotype of a certain group of people, but also that stereotyped people themselves react differently when they are aware of the label that they are forced to wear (in psychological parlance, they are “primed” with this label). One stereotype of Asian-Americans, for instance, is that they are especially gifted in mathematics and science. A common stereotype of females is that they are weak in mathematics. This means that Asian-American women could be influenced by both notions.

In fact, they are. In a remarkable experiment, Margaret Shin, Todd Pittinsky, and Nalini Ambady asked Asian-American women to take an objective math exam. But first they divided the women into two groups. The women in one group were asked questions related to their gender. For example, they were asked about their opinions and preferences regarding coed dorms, thereby priming their thoughts for gender-related issues. The women in the second group were asked questions related to their race. These questions referred to the languages they knew, the languages they spoke at home, and their family’s history in the United States, thereby priming the women’s thoughts for race-related issues.

The performance of the two groups differed in a way that matched the stereotypes of both women and Asian-Americans. Those who had been reminded that they were women performed worse than those who had been reminded that they were Asian-American. These results show that even our own behavior can be influenced by our stereotypes, and that activation of stereotypes can depend on our current state of mind and how we view ourselves at the moment.

Perhaps even more astoundingly, stereotypes can also affect the behavior of people who are not even part of a stereotyped