

aggressive than women, and some past studies have found this sex difference (Hyde 1984, 2005). But how much of that difference is just a matter of people doing what others expect of them rather than enduring differences in preferences? To find out, the researchers randomly assigned half of the students who had agreed to be in their study into each of two groups. As long as a truly random process is used, this guarantees that the two groups should be equivalent on just about anything before the treatment. In this **random-assignment experiment**, participants in one group were led to believe that their actions during the video game would be monitored by the researcher. The other group received a different treatment; they were given the impression that no one would be monitoring their games. Among this second group, men did not drop any more bombs than women. In the first group, the group that believed they were being watched, men dropped significantly more bombs than women (Lightdale and Prentice 1994).

As Figure 12.2 illustrates, the researchers concluded that gender-stereotypical behavior is more likely to happen when people believe that they are being watched. Of course, people are being watched by others in a good deal of their life—in school, at home with family, at work, at social gatherings, or out on the street. This suggests that some of how women and men act results from trying to live up to what they think others expect from someone of their sex. Apparently this social pressure, even with no rewards or punishments, has an effect. Although this study only focused on aggression, you can imagine all sorts of other gender differences that social expectations might affect.

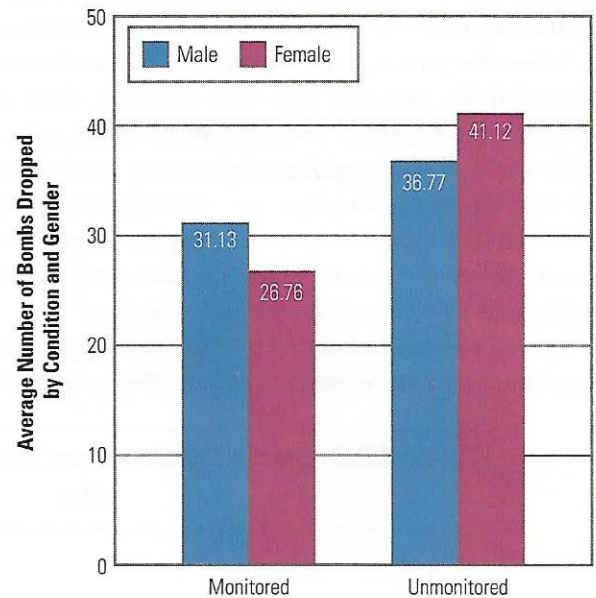
The Impact of Stereotypes

12.1.4: Discuss the role of stereotypes in constructing social expectations of gender.

Some social expectations are based on **stereotypes**, beliefs about a group that are often untrue or exaggerated as a description of the group. These beliefs are then applied to individual members of the group, for whom they may not be true at all. Educators worry about the stereotype that girls and women perform worse in math because math is so crucial for many technical majors and careers. Men do better on the math SAT test, on average, as we saw in Figure 12.1. But a recent review of many studies showed that most other standardized math tests show only small gender differences, with the average differences virtually disappearing on most tests but the SAT since the 1990s (Hyde et al. 2008). Despite the lower average scored by girls on some standardized tests, when they take math classes in high school or college, girls average higher grades than boys, mainly because they study more (Dee 2007; DiPrete and Buchmann 2013).

Researchers have wondered if exposure to the idea that men perform better at math helps to produce the very reality it claims to merely describe. To find out, one researcher randomly assigned male and female college students to two

Figure 12.2 Average Gender Differences in Aggression in Monitored and Unmonitored Conditions



SOURCE: Data from Lightdale and Prentice (1994).

groups—one in which they were told that men perform better on tests, on average, and one in which they were told that there is no average gender difference on such tests. Then male and female participants were asked to assess their own skills on a scale. In the group that had been told that men perform better, women assessed themselves lower on the scale than men did, but this difference was smaller in the group told there is no gender difference (Correll 2004).

Another experiment randomly assigned two groups in the same way and then asked each group to take a math test. In the group told that men perform better, the male students scored higher, on average, than the females, but in the group told that there is no gender difference in the population, the men and women scored the same (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999). In these studies, we see that what people hear from others about whether their sex is better at something affects their confidence and even their actual performance—and this is true even if the generalization they are told is untrue. Thus, stereotypes that are untrue or exaggerated will tend to produce the very difference they claim is true, even if the difference didn't exist before.

Social context can also determine how “macho” men act. A team of sociologists showed this in a recent experiment in which male and female college student participants were randomly assigned to two groups. First, the students were given a gender identity survey. Then they were given feedback on whether their answers to the survey showed them to be more feminine or masculine. But, in fact, what they were told about their scores on the survey was made up. Men randomly assigned to the group having their gender identity threatened were told they were somewhat feminine; the others were told they were masculine. Similarly, a group of women was randomly assigned to have their gender identity threatened by telling