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Social Influences on the Spatial Perspective-Taking Abilities of Males and Females

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Abstract: Female performance on tests of spatial ability may be hindered by the presence of stereotype threat. We examined sex differences in performance on two perspective taking tests when these tests were framed as measuring either spatial or social (empathy) abilities. In the spatial condition, the tasks were framed as spatial and participants were reminded of the male advantage on some spatial tasks. The social condition included modified versions of the tasks to include avatars of human figures, and framed the tasks as social tasks with a female advantage. Results showed a gender difference in favor of males in the spatial condition, but not in the social condition. Framing did not affect male performance. However, females in the social condition outperformed females in the spatial condition. These results suggest that females may underperform on spatial tests in part because of negative performance expectations rather than their actual spatial abilities.