social stereotype. Consequently, women are susceptible to stereotype threat in math when their gender identity is salient (R. P. Brown & Josephs, 1999; Quinn & Spencer, 2001; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). An investigation by Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev (2000) highlights just how easily this can occur. These investigators had women take a math test in three-person groups. In one condition the groups were comprised of all women, in another condition there were two women and one man, and in another condition there was one woman and two men. On the basis of evidence that minority status influences identity salience (see Chapter 5), Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev predicted that stereotype threat would be most apt to undermine the performance of women in the one-woman/two-men condition. The data displayed in Figure 10.11 indicate that these predictions were confirmed. Apparently, simply being in the minority was sufficient to activate stereotype threat (see also Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003; M. Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002).

Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev’s findings have important implications for current efforts to improve the educational performance of women in engineering, math, and the sciences. According to a report by the National Science Foundation (1998), women constitute only 35 percent of undergraduate students enrolled in physics, math, and computer science courses, and less than 20 percent of those enrolled in engineering classes. Being surrounded by men might undermine women’s performance in these courses, leading them to avoid taking such classes in the future. This possibility lends support to those who advocate single-sex educational environments. (A more detailed discussion of these issues can be found in a report by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1998.)

3. Reducing Stereotype Threat

Fortunately, several steps can be taken to reduce the negative effects of stereotype threat. First, stereotype threat can be attenuated by the presence of positive role models (Marx, & Roman, 2002; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2001). Apparently, being reminded that other people have persevered inspires minority students to rise above the stereotype and perform their best. Stereotype threat is also reduced when students

FIGURE 10.11
Task Performance and Group Composition

Women performed more poorly on a math test when they were in the statistical minority. These data suggest that minority status can heighten identity salience and identity salience, in turn, can undermine performance via stereotype threat.

Source: Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev (2000).