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## Group Differences in Intelligence - Gender

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Perhaps no other psychological field has generated as much controversy and debate as that of intelligence differences between groups. The history of IQ as a quantifiable construct has unfortunately been a dark one, and the use of IQ tests in schools, workplaces and the military has always garnered criticism.

Here, we'll consider one of the most common causes for dispute: the topic of gender difference in general intelligence, or *g*. Regardless of evidence either way, it's clear that the discipline of psychology is seldom value-neutral, and is bound in with culture, politics and ideology. How psychologists interpret IQ differences across groups reflects not only their theoretical, but also their ideological understanding of those differences.

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## Women and Intelligence

In ways that would rankle even the most conservative reader today, great thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century such as Freud, Hegel and Spencer argued for female intellectual inferiority. Reflecting the cultural values at the time, such thinkers argued that women were less moral, less rational and generally less mentally robust than men.

The argument relied on the assumption of the “natural” role of women in domestic life. It wasn't until the early 1900s that empirical testing showed that girls and boys differed little in

overall *g* and the idea that women were naturally less intelligent became less prevalent.

Today, the debate rages on, although several points have now come to be understood as well-supported:

- There is little difference between scores of IQ tests between men and women since the tests themselves have been designed to factor out gender.
- Males have repeatedly been shown to demonstrate a larger distribution than women, meaning that men are overrepresented in both extreme ends of the IQ scale. On *average*, however, men and women do not differ in IQ.
- There appear to be gender differences in specific skills, notably verbal and mathematical skills. Some, however, have suggested these differences as evidence of socialization, training, bias in testing or other effects.
- Some researchers have shown developmental differences, i.e. puberty affects boys' and girls' cognition unevenly.
- Lastly, men have been shown to have larger brains in proportion to their bodies.

## Are Men More Intelligent Than Women?

The answer is: it depends. Research over the years has favored many conflicting conclusions, depending on the way the research was carried out, on whom, by whom, and to what end.

For example, some researchers may find that girls score higher on tests of verbal proficiency. But others will point out that this result merely shows that boys are socialized not to verbally express themselves, and develop more slowly in this area than do girls. Some researchers have shown a definite male advantage when it comes to mathematics, but critics respond that our education system heavily discourages girls from pursuing mathematics, and that there is a self-fulfilling prophesy around the expectation that girls will do poorly at mathematics (also called "Stereotype threat.")

Evolutionary theories postulate that males may be better at some skills (spatial or mechanistic awareness) and women others (the common assumption that women are better at multitasking) to reflect their ancient roles in society. But it is still up for interpretation whether cultural influences have made men and women what they are, or culture merely reflects *innate* differences in men and women. Given how experimental research in psychology is particularly vulnerable to bias and replication errors, it's likely that many results are influenced by the conscious or unconscious bias of the researchers.

## A Question of Ethics

Within the social sciences, the researcher has a different relationship with the material they are studying compared to a researcher of the "hard sciences." Because their focus is the relative and value-laden world of human beings, their research questions will never quite be neutral – and neither will their interpretation of the results. Ultimately, the onus is on social scientists or experimental psychologists to ask themselves: *why* conduct this research at all?

If it were conclusively proved that women were intellectually inferior to men, what would be the social and political implications? Historical, philosophical and political assumptions inform the kinds of questions that a scientist can and perhaps even ought to ask. When a theory has the potential to not only measure a phenomenon but create feedback and *shape the phenomenon itself*

, it behooves any social scientists to ask careful questions about the nature and purpose of their inquiry.

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