

## Are men and women psychologically different? Does it matter?

Growing up in China, a conventional society cherishing patriarchy for thousands of years, I have learned that men and women are distinct in our ways of thinking and feeling about the world. However, are we really that different? I began to wonder if those differences are innate or constructed in society, as I embarked on a study in the science field. Every time when I find the subject hard to comprehend, I am overwhelmed by the fear that this course may not be what I am capable to learn as a girl. In this essay, I aim to investigate the reasons driving my fear, and the truth that if I am not good at science as implied by the mainstream culture, or if the traditional values restrict me by imposing psychological hints deep in my mind. In this essay, I will investigate the psychological differences including personality, cognition, behaviors, and emotions from two main factors: biological differences and social influences. Psychologists have been long debating if the nature, biological influences, or the nurture, social impacts, play a more important role in defining a person.

Nowadays, a patriarchy society still embeds with concepts of men and women are different. To start with, a difference does not necessarily mean a deficiency, so it is unjust to discriminate against sex difference. Similarly, being the same does not guarantee being equal. The reason why we remain biased toward the differences between men and women is mainly driven by gender stereotypes. As stereotypes increase the gender gap and eventually lead to a more significant gender inequality, it is critical for the modern society to recognize the key drivers of gender difference.

Sex differences mark by biological differences. Women and men have differences across the body, including the brain, genes, bone, hormones, and chromosomes. These various biological factors affect their psychology to different extents. These innate differences will affect their behavior mechanisms and body responses. For example, according to McEwen & Milner (2016), hormones influence men's and women's brains through genetic and nongenetic receptors. Estrogen is one of the major hormones in the body that affects mood, cognitive function, blood pressure regulation, cognitive function, motor coordination, pain, and opioid sensitivity (Marrocco & McEwen, 2016). There is a slight difference between the brain structure and thus functions between men and women, and this will lead to differential biochemical process that may affect their specific behavior, and susceptibility to certain disease (Ngun et al., 2011). According to Becker et al. (2007), one distinct difference between the genders in physiology is their sensitivity of stress and pain. As women have a higher stress response, this will tend to express more emotions than men. In addition, A study from Grabauskaite et al. (2016) indicate that females typically pay more attention to physical sensations, to understand the connections between these sensations and emotional states better, and to worry about or experience more emotional distress when they feel pain or discomfort. These differences provide a biological support for the psychological difference, as women's brain tends to detect

more emotions than men. However, this brain structure difference is not enough to explain the phenomenon that women tend to be more careful than male in daily life.

To conclude, as a sole factor, these innate differences are not fundamental causes of the psychological differences between men and women that we have perceived today. Instead, gender stereotypes constructed in the society tend to have a more important role in determining and exaggerating those differences.

Gender stereotypes reflect in a variety of fields including education, family, workplace, and politics. How men and women think, act, and feel differently can be affected by those stereotypes directly or subliminally. “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” is a classical phrase emphasizing the psychological differences between the two sexes (Gray, 2012). However, stereotypical phrases are not beneficial as they tend to over generalize certain features or characteristics of men and women. According to the statement of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, gender stereotype is detrimental when it restricts a woman's or man's ability to grow personally, pursue a career, and/or make decisions about their lives. As people grow up, they will experience different types of gender stereotypes or even gender discrimination. There is an interesting and common phenomenon that exists in infant products: boys' products are blue, and girls are pink; the slogan on boys' cloth says, “I am smart” and “I am beautiful” on girls' cloth. This causes a concept that boys represent intelligence while girls represent beauty for people at a very young age. People may grow up with these gender stereotypes, and as time elapses, such perception may become a psychological hint that will reduce their confidence or shape their beliefs when it comes to tasks related with gender stereotypes.

There is a widespread perception that boys are more skilled at math than girls (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Here comes an essential question: how do they internalize their social perception of them? Children's endorsement of this concept will affect their self-perception (Master & Meltzoff, 2020). Social cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 2011) is related to gender stereotypes. People's self-efficacy can be influenced by environmental and cultural factors. According to Hyde (2014), although girl performs the same in mathematics as boys, they tend to have lower self-efficacy--confidence in achieving a task--than boys. Different levels of self-efficacy influence those girls to accept or give themselves the opportunity and willingness to be challenged. The research of N. Ellemers (2018) shows that there is correlation between the psychological differences of the two sex and gender stereotypes: the expectation imposed by gender stereotypes will not only affect how differently men and women think, but also how they define themselves.

Gender role is another main factor that causes the psychological differences between men and women. For years, men seem to take the majority portion of leadership positions, because their gender traits are more suitable for the leader as some may

argue. Men tend to be more agentic and more assertive, leading men more frequently to take charge of leadership and tell people what to do. On the other side, female is often considered to be kinder, more sympathetic, and more patient, resulting in their roles mainly in nurturing fields and even more in the housework. Research shows that these traits are gradually developed due to the restrictions imposed by women's reproductive behavior, preventing them from engaging in activities that demand extensive training and skill acquisition and deplete their energy and time to do so (Wood & Eagly, 2002). This general image of women is widely spread in the mainstream culture even nowadays.

The gender difference in global labor force participation rate persists, which is only about 49% for women and 75% for men (International Labor Organization, ND). In addition, in the workplace, especially in the political arena, when a woman becomes a leader or got promoted, people will tend to doubt her ability as a female leader (*Speaking of Psychology: The Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership with Alice Eagly, PhD*, 2022). Whether she is capable to do well in that position; whether people will obey to her command, or whether she is tough enough to solve problems. These questions tend to put women in a disadvantaged place because this adds up invisible obstacles to their careers. This common phenomenon gradually becomes a term called “glass ceiling”, which is first proposed in 1978 by Marilyn Loden. In addition, such phenomenon can be explained with sociocultural theory (Scott & Palincsar, 2013): the objective body difference decides the different jobs two sex can do, and this affects gender role---men are physically stronger and thus is more prior than women. The historical gender labor gap is a result of unavoidable physical differences. As men tend to have better physical strength than women, men are more frequently engaged in activities like warfare (Gat, 2000), which elevates their status and increases their wealth in the past century (Hyde, 2014). This gap continues to the early modern era, when those men are associated with better analytical skills, they become more dominant in the society. As women participate more in household chores and duties, they tend to develop traits like patience and caregiving.

Gender stereotypes and gender roles are often interrelated in practice. Gender stereotypes reinforce gender roles, as a biased impression of men and women lead to a misconception that one gender is more suitable for particular employment than the other. Gender roles contribute to gender stereotypes when division of labor according to sexual strength causes society to hold specific image of men and women.

Finally, back to the question, are men and women psychologically different? I believe the answer is yes. If there is no difference or it is a trivial question to ask, why are there still debates in psychology and other social science fields? Also, along with the research, it is evident that although men and women are different innately, social norms and factors reinforce and exaggerate those differences. Thus, the psychological difference does matter in those aspects led to gender inequality: different confidence level in particular subjects, different subjects to study, schools to apply, opportunities

to chase, and careers to choose (Jacobs, 1996). The Global Gender Gap Report (2021) from the World Economic Forum estimates that women worldwide earn about 37% less than men in comparable roles. On the other hand, gender difference should not matter in scenarios like competition, college application, and measurements in personal abilities. In addition, let's rethink the binary definition of men and women. In the current society, there are wide-accepted identities, such as transgender, gender neutral, non-binary, queer, and so on. Are there psychological differences among them, and should such differences matter?

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