



# Research into gender differences

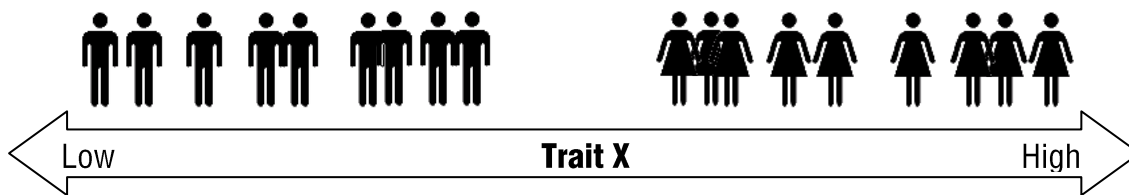
You are learning how to...	In the context of...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read about psychological research</li> <li>• Think critically about research findings</li> <li>• Consider the differences between scientific and 'lay' psychology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Gender differences</li> </ul>

Read the article and then answer the questions that follow.

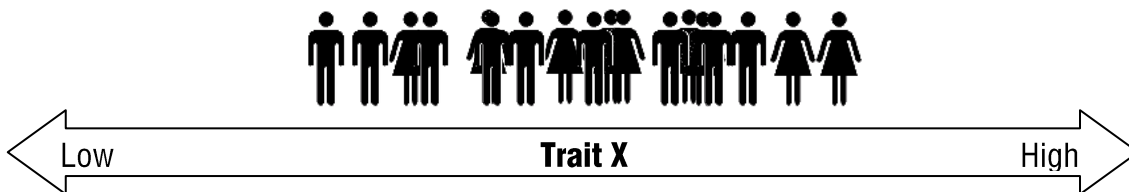
## How different are women and men?

If you casually ask people what they think about gender differences, or consult one of the many 'popular psychology' books on the topic, you are likely to be told that women and men are fundamentally different. 'Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus' says one best selling series of self-help manuals (Gray, 1993) and claims sympathetic to this position 'women are emotional, men are rational'; 'men can't multitask', 'women can't drive' are repeated, often with their veracity undisputed, wherever the differences between men and women are discussed. So what does psychological research have to say about this?

Few, if any, psychologists would dispute the idea that, as groups, women and men differ in some respects. However, most would also agree that the ways in which gender differences are talked about by many people are rather misleading. When people say 'men are like this whereas women are like that' there is an implied but unstated 'all' prefacing the statement. Most psychological research, however, reports that on the whole, women and men tend to be more similar than they are different. To illustrate the problem, suppose we measure a particular psychological characteristic (it doesn't matter which, let's just call it Trait X) in a large group of women and men and compare the results for the two groups. If we make the statement, 'women score higher on Trait X than men do', many members of the public will understand that statement to mean something like this:



The inference (because of that silent 'all') is that *all* women score higher on Trait X than all men, which, in turn, implies that *any* given woman will have a higher Trait X score than *any* given man. This is almost never true. For most of the characteristics that interest psychologists, the actual state of affairs is closer to this:



The Trait X scores of women and men overlap considerably. The mean (average) scores for women and men are different. The highest scoring women score higher than the highest scoring men and the lowest scoring men score lower than the lowest scoring women. But it does not follow from this that all women score higher than all men. In fact, for most traits on which gender differences are detectable, there is more variation within the groups of women and men than there is between them.

So, bearing in mind this caution, what differences have actually been found between men and women? One of the most influential studies of gender differences is a review carried out by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974). They reviewed over 1500 studies of gender differences in children and found strong evidence for only four significant differences: (1) girls tended to have greater verbal ability than boys; (2) boys had better visio-spatial abilities than girls; (3) from adolescence onward, boys were slightly better at maths; and (4) boys were more aggressive than girls. Subsequent studies have detected additional differences. Girls, for example, tend to show greater emotional sensitivity than boys (Shaffer, 1998). Boys are also more prone than girls to learning difficulties (including mental retardation, dyslexia and ADHD) and other developmental disorders, such as autism.

In adulthood, the most reliable source of gender differences remains aggression. As a group, men have higher aggression, regardless of how researchers measure it (e.g. self-report, observation). The difference is greatest when measurements of physical rather than verbal aggression are used (Perlmutter & Hall, 1991).

Women and men perceive themselves differently. Research focusing on personality characteristics has tended to find that men score higher on measures of self confidence and self esteem. Women tend to rate their abilities lower than men and to predict poorer performance than men when asked how they will do on a particular task (Bandura, 1986). Women tend to rate themselves higher than men on a range of traits including sensitivity, submissiveness, helpfulness and kindness whereas men see themselves as more ambitious, assertive and independent (Perlmutter & Hall, 1991).

Of course, much of this research is now rather old and the situation may well have changed, especially if we accept that these gender differences are at least partially a result of how society shapes the behaviour of men and women through socialization. There is plenty of evidence that gender differences in academic performance have altered substantially in the UK in the past 50 years. In the 1950s, boys tended to outperform girls at all educational levels. By 2000, girls outperformed boys in all A-Level and GCSE subjects (Eysenck & Flanagan, 2001), a situation which has been maintained ever since.

Remember, however, the point made earlier about the overlap between women and men. Girls outperform boys *on average* but it doesn't follow that any particular girl will inevitably outperform any boy with which we might compare her. Similarly, men are more aggressive than women *on average* but within any comparable groups of women and men there will be men who are less aggressive than at least some of the women. The over-riding message from the psychological research is that gender differences, where they are found, are usually pretty modest.

## Questions

- **Review the list of possible gender differences we compiled in class. Identify at least one that is consistent with what psychological research has found and one that is more likely to be a myth.**
- **Much of the research into gender differences in personality has focused on how men and women perceive themselves. Why might this be a poor indication of whether they actually are different?**
- **Suggest two different reasons why girls' performance at GCSE and A Level caught up with and then overtook boys' in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.**
- **If gender differences are generally quite small, why do you think it is that books like the Mars-Venus series, which claim otherwise, are so popular?**