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## **Men Are From Earth, and So Are Women. It's Faulty Research That Sets Them Apart.**

By ROSALIND C. BARNETT and CARYL RIVERS

Are American college professors unwittingly misleading their students by teaching widely accepted ideas about men and women that are scientifically unsubstantiated?

Why is the dominant narrative about the sexes one of difference, even though it receives little support from carefully designed peer-reviewed studies?

One reason is that findings from a handful of small studies with nonrepresentative samples have often reported wildly overgeneralized but headline-grabbing findings about gender differences. Those findings have then been picked up by the news media -- and found their way back into the academy, where they are taught as fact. At the same time, research that tends to debunk popular ideas is often ignored by the news media.

Even worse, many researchers have taken untested hypotheses at face value and used them to plan their studies. Many have also relied exclusively on statistical tests that are designed to find difference, without using tests that would show the *degree* of overlap between men and women. As a result, findings often suggest -- erroneously -- that the sexes are categorically different with respect to some specific variable or other.

Yet in the latest edition of its publications manual, the American Psychological Association explicitly asks researchers to consider and report the degree of overlap in statistical studies. For good reason: Even if the mean difference between groups being compared is statistically significant, it may be of trivial consequence if the distributions show a high degree of overlap. Indeed, most studies that do report the size of effects indicate that the differences between the sexes are trivial or slight on a host of personality traits and cognitive and social behaviors.

Because of such serious and pervasive problems, we believe that college students get a distorted picture about the sexes, one that overstates differences while minimizing the more accurate picture -- that of enormous overlap and similarity.

It is easy to understand why college professors might spread myths about gender differences. Many of the original studies on which such findings were based have been

embraced by both the academy and the wider culture. As Martha T. Mednick, an emerita professor of psychology at Howard University, pointed out in an article some years ago, popular ideas that are intuitively appealing, even if inadequately documented, all too often take on lives of their own. They may have shaky research foundations; they may be largely disproved by later -- and better -- studies. But bandwagon concepts that have become unhitched from research moorings are rampant in academe, particularly in the classroom. For example:

**Women are inherently more caring and more "relational" than men.**

The chief architect of this essentialist idea is Carol Gilligan, the longtime Harvard University psychologist who is now at New York University. In the early 1980s, she laid out a new narrative for women's lives that theorized that women have a unique, caring nature not shared by men. Her ideas have revolutionized the psychology of women and revamped curricula to an unprecedented degree, some observers say. Certainly, almost every student in women's studies and the psychology of women is familiar with Gilligan. But how many are aware of the critics of her theories about women's moral development and the relational self?

Many scholarly reviews of Gilligan's research contend that it does not back up her claims, that she simply created an intriguing hypothesis that needs testing. But the relational self has become near-sacred writ, cited in textbooks, classrooms, and the news media.

Anne Alonso, a Harvard psychology professor and director of the Center for Psychoanalytic Studies at Massachusetts General Hospital, told us recently that she is dismayed by the lightning speed at which Gilligan's ideas, based on slender evidence, have been absorbed into psychotherapy. Usually new theories go through a long and rigorous process of publication in peer-reviewed journals before they are accepted by the field. "None of this work has been published in such journals. It's hard to take seriously a whole corpus of work that hasn't been peer-reviewed," Alonso said. The idea of a relational self, she charged, is simply an "idea du jour," one that she called "penis scorn."

**Men don't value personal relations.**

According to essentialist theorists, men are uncomfortable with any kind of communication that has to do with personal conflicts. They avoid talking about their problems. They avoid responding too deeply to other people's problems, instead giving advice, changing the subject, making a joke, or giving no response. Unlike women, they don't react to troubles talk by empathizing with others and expressing sympathy. These ideas are often cited in textbooks and in popular manuals, like those written by John Gray, a therapist, and Deborah Tannen, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, we are told. They just don't understand each other. But systematic research does not support those ideas.

An important article, "The Myth of Gender Cultures: Similarities Outweigh Differences in Men's and Women's Provision of and Responses to Supportive Communication," was

published this year in *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*. Erina L. MacGeorge, of Purdue University, and her colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania find no support for the idea that women and men constitute different "communication cultures." Their article, based on three studies that used questionnaires and interviews, sampled 738 people -- 417 women and 321 men.

In fact, the authors find, the sexes are very much alike in the way they communicate: "Both men and women view the provision of support as a central element of close personal relationships; both value the supportive communication skills of their friends, lovers, and family members; both make similar judgments about what counts as sensitive, helpful support; and both respond quite similarly to various support efforts."

Yet, MacGeorge and her colleagues point out, we still read in textbooks that:

- "Men's and women's communication styles are startlingly dissimilar" -- *The Interpersonal Communication Reader*, edited by Joseph A. DeVito (Allyn and Bacon, 2002).
- "American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, having learned to do different things with words in a conversation" -- a chapter by Daniel N. Maltz and Ruth A. Borker in *Language and Social Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), edited by John J. Gumperz.
- "Husbands and wives, especially in Western societies, come from two different cultures with different learned behaviors and communication styles" -- a chapter by Carol J.S. Bruess and Judy C. Pearson in *Gendered Relationships* (Mayfield, 1996), edited by Julia T. Wood.

### **Gender differences in mate selection are pervasive and well established.**

Evolutionary psychologists like David M. Buss, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, tell us in such books as *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (Basic Books, 1994) that men and women differ widely with respect to the traits they look for in a potential mate. Men, such writers claim, lust after pretty, young, presumably fertile women. Pop culture revels in this notion: Men want young and beautiful mates. There is, it is presumed, a universal female type beloved by men -- young, unlined, with features that are close to those of an infant -- that signals fertility. If there *were* a universal male preference for beautiful young women, it would have to be based on a strong correlation between beauty and reproductive success. Sure, Richard Gere chose Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* because of her beauty and youth. But would those qualities have assured enhanced fertility?

The answer, according to empirical research, seems to be no. Having a pretty face as a young adult has no relationship to the number of children a woman produces or to her health across the life span. Among married women, physical attractiveness is unrelated to the number of children they produce. If beauty has little to do with reproductive success, why would nature insist that men select for it? It seems more likely that having a young

beauty on his arm indicates, instead, that a man is living up to certain cultural and social norms.

According to some who take what we call an ultra-Darwinist stance, there is no mystery about whom women prefer as a mate: The man with resources to feed and protect her future children. The combination of wealth, status, and power (which usually implies an older man) makes "an attractive package in the eyes of the average woman," as Robert Wright, a journalist and author of *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (Pantheon, 1994), sums up the argument.

But those who believe that gender roles are shaped at least as much by culture and environment as by biology point out that women's preference for older good providers fits perfectly with the rise of the industrial state. That system, which often called for a male breadwinner and a female working at home, arose in the United States in the 1830s, was dominant until the 1970s, and then declined.

If that is correct, then we should see a declining preference for older men who are good providers, particularly among women with resources. In fact, a study by Alice Eagly, a psychologist at Northwestern University, and Wendy Wood, of Duke University, suggests that as gender equality in society has increased, women have expressed less of a preference for older men with greater earning potential. The researchers have found that when women have access to their own resources, they do not look for age in mates, but prefer qualities like empathy, understanding, and the ability to bond with children. The desire for an older "provider" is evidently not in women's genes. Terri D. Fisher, a psychologist at Ohio State University, told a reporter last year that whenever she teaches her college students the ultra-Darwinian take on the power of youth and beauty, the young men smile and nod and the young women look appalled.

### **For girls, self-esteem plummets at early adolescence.**

Girls face an inevitable crisis of self-esteem as they approach adolescence. They are in danger of losing their voices, drowning, and facing a devastating dip in self-regard that boys don't experience. This is the picture that Carol Gilligan presented on the basis of her research at the Emma Willard School, a private girls' school in Troy, N.Y. While Gilligan did not refer to genes in her analysis of girls' vulnerability, she did cite both the "wall of Western culture" and deep early childhood socialization as reasons.

Her theme was echoed in 1994 by the clinical psychologist Mary Pipher's surprise best seller, *Reviving Ophelia* (Putnam, 1994), which spent three years on *The New York Times* best-seller list. Drawing on case studies rather than systematic research, Pipher observed how naturally outgoing, confident girls get worn down by sexist cultural expectations. Gilligan's and Pipher's ideas have also been supported by a widely cited study in 1990 by the American Association of University Women. That report, published in 1991, claimed that teenage girls experience a "free-fall in self-esteem from which some will never recover."

The idea that girls have low self-esteem has by now become part of the academic canon as well as fodder for the popular media. But is it true? No.

Critics have found many faults with the influential AAUW study. When children were asked about their self-confidence and academic plans, the report said 60 percent of girls and 67 percent of boys in elementary school responded, "I am happy the way I am." But by high school, the percentage of girls happy with themselves fell to 29 percent. Could it be that 71 percent of the country's teenage girls were low in self-esteem? Not necessarily. The AAUW counted as happy *only* those girls who checked "always true" to the question about happiness. Girls who said they were "sometimes" happy with themselves or "sort of" happy with themselves were counted as *unhappy*.

A sophisticated look at the self-esteem data is far more reassuring than the headlines. A new analysis of all of the AAUW data, and a meta-analysis of hundreds of studies, done by Janet Hyde, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, showed no huge gap between boys and girls. Indeed, Hyde found that the self-esteem scores of boys and girls were virtually identical. In particular there was no plunge in scores for girls during the early teen years -- the supposed basis for the idea that girls "lost their voices" in that period. Parents, understandably concerned about noxious, hypersexual media images, may gaze in horror at those images while underestimating the resilience of their daughters, who are able to thrive in spite of them.

**Boys have a mathematics gene, or at least a biological tendency to excel in math, that girls do not possess.**

Do boys have a mathematics gene -- or at least a biological tendency to excel in math -- that girls lack, as a popular stereotype has it? Suffice it to say that, despite being discouraged from pursuing math at almost every level of school, girls and women today are managing to perform in math at high levels.

Do data support arguments for hard-wired gender differences? No. In 2001 Erin Leahey and Guang Guo, then a graduate student and an assistant professor of sociology, respectively, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, looked at some 20,000 math scores of children ages 4 to 18 and found no differences of any magnitude, even in areas that are supposedly male domains, such as reasoning skills and geometry.

The bandwagon concepts that we have discussed here are strongly held and dangerous. Even though they have been seriously challenged, they continue to be taught by authority figures in the classroom. These ideas are embedded in the curricula of courses in child and adolescent development, moral development, education, moral philosophy, feminist pedagogy, evolutionary psychology, gender studies, and the psychology of women.

Few students have the ability to investigate the accuracy of the claims on their own. And since these ideas resonate with the cultural zeitgeist, students would have little reason to do so in any case. The essentialist perspective has so colored the dialogue about the sexes that there is scant room for any narrative other than difference.

Obviously the difference rhetoric can create harm for both men and women. Men are taught to believe that they are deficient in caring and empathy, while women are led to believe that they are inherently unsuited for competition, leadership, and technological professions. Given how little empirical support exists for essentialist ideas, it's crucial that professors broaden the dialogue, challenging the conventional wisdom and encouraging their students to do so as well.

*Rosalind C. Barnett is a senior scientist at Brandeis University, and Caryl Rivers is a professor of journalism at Boston University. Their book Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children, and Our Jobs has just been published by Basic Books.*

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