We hear much these days about differences between males and females. Television advertisements encourage us to purchase different vitamins for our sons and daughters based on their claims that females need skin care assistance while males need help building muscle. Manufacturers of adult undergarments assure us men and women have different undergarment needs, pointing to supposed differences in the way males and females drive their vehicles. The marketing of everything from toys to different Bibles for girls and boys suggests that even children are completely opposite in their essence. The uninform ed might be persuaded that males and females are of two different species.

Yet, research continues to bear out the vast similarities rather than differences between the genders, reminding us that we are truly of the same species and that differences long assumed to be innate might be culturally created if not entirely nonexistent. This article will look at what research indicates regarding differences (and similarities) in the areas of cognitive and socio-emotional behavior in contrast to the myths so perpetuated as truth. Application will then be made for appropriate use of these findings within the church and other areas of ministry. I am indebted to the work of Vicki S. Helgeson, whose thorough meta-analyses of research on gender differences provides the basis for this article.

**Cognitive abilities**

Traditionally, males are considered stronger in spatial and mathematical abilities, while females are typically thought to be stronger in verbal skills. These supposed differences are used to account for males’ overrepresentation in certain occupations and feed stereotypes of the talkative female and the silent male. However, an exploration of empirical research suggests that such beliefs are only partially true. For instance, while males overall tend to score higher on most spatial tasks (e.g., mental rotation), females tend to score higher in spatial location memory (i.e., object location) (106, 108). Likewise, some research indicates high school and college males score higher in mathematical problem solving, whereas, during elementary and middle school, females perform better in the area of computational ability (110-111), although differences in math abilities among the general population seem to be decreasing (111) and are minimal (110).

Whether such differences are innate or a result of social expectations and improvement with frequent practice is a subject of ongoing debate. For instance, females might be better at spatial location due to the role they often take within the home as finder of all things lost. Males’ strength in problem solving might be due to their higher self-confidence in mathematical endeavors (112). Also, while some innate differences might very well exist in spatial and mathematical skills, differences are typically not large enough to preclude women’s entry into occupations requiring these skills, nor do they guarantee a male’s success at the same.

Verbal skills are traditionally believed to be stronger in females. In fact, small gender differences in verbal skills do seem to exist (although some decrease over time), with girls talking earlier and using a larger vocabulary and better grammar than boys (113). According to Helgeson, larger, more stable gender differences exist in writing and also favor females (114).

One other factor tends to blur the distinction that traditionLogoutLink

To summarize, according to Helgeson, research indicates: (1) males’ relative strength in mental rotation and mathematical problem solving, females’ in object location and computational ability; (2) minimal differences in math and most verbal areas once the male outliers in verbal disabilities and giftedness in math are controlled for; (3) lack of clarity regarding which differences are innate and which are the product of experience; and (4) no differences large enough to suggest educational or occupational channeling on the basis of sex alone.

**Socio-emotional abilities**

*Empathy.* Tradition holds that females excel in experiencing and expressing empathy (i.e., the ability to feel what another is feeling). The fact that women comprise the vast majority of primary caregivers for young children at home and in elementary schools, preschools, church nurseries, and Sunday school classes is often assumed to be a result of this “natural” tendency.

Empirical research, however, does not support such a clear distinction. While research indicates more empathy in females, this difference is stronger when data are obtained through self-report, less when obtained through observation (120). This may be due to the inherent risk of bias in self-report; participants may tend to perceive and describe themselves in ways consistent with gender role expectations (120). Fewer gender differences are found in experimental than in correlational and naturalistic studies (120), possibly due to the more similar treatment that males and females receive in a study with more control of extraneous variables. Similar levels are also found between the genders when the recipient of empathy is a child (120). In research utilizing physiological measures (e.g., heart rate) as potential measures of empathy, males and females exhibit equal levels (120).
There does not appear to be a strong enough gender distinction in empathy to warrant the considerable overrepresentation of females, and relative scarcity of males, in occupations and activities requiring childcare. Even where differences do seem to exist, the possibility of differences being innate is counterbalanced with the possibility of gender differences reflecting cultural expectations and response to differential treatment. We should exercise caution in concluding that females are “naturally” better at empathizing.

Emotion. Tradition holds that women are “just more emotional than men,” implying that nature (rather than nurture) has endowed females with more emotion, which they display more readily. What does research say? Research seems inconclusive regarding whether females and males experience emotion in similar ways (273–275). However, differences do emerge in the expression of emotion, with females overall being more expressive regardless of data coming from self-report, observation of children as young as infancy, or more unbiased measures of physiological facial response (275–276). One exception is that men seem to express anger more than women (276). However, the fact that some research finds no gender differences in the expression of anger in a laboratory setting (in which standardized, uniform treatment of participants is paramount) suggests that different expression in the “real world” might be the result of the differential treatment that males and females receive (276).

Finally, individuals who display characteristics traditionally associated with both masculinity (e.g., ambition, assertiveness) and femininity (e.g., nurturance, cooperation) are found in some studies to be more emotionally expressive (276). The correlation of shared (traditionally called androgynous) characteristics to emotional expression again raises the possibility that gendered enculturation might account for differences in expression of emotion.

Again, to summarize, research indicates: (1) some differences in empathy, with greater differences when relying on self-report, which raises the possibility of responder bias based on gendered expectations; (2) lack of clarity regarding the degree to which differences in empathy are innate or due to cultural expectations and response to differential treatment; (3) overall more emotional expressiveness in females, with the exceptions of the emotion of anger which is found more among males, individuals with shared characteristics who seem to express a wider range of emotions, and in studies where protocol minimizes differential treatment of participants.

Application of findings to the church and ministry

The average person sitting in the pew does not pore over research on gender differences, but relies on information filtered through a variety of sources, much of it less than accurate. When those teaching and preaching within the church echo these inaccuracies, myths are often perpetuated and accepted as truth. Therefore, it is particularly important that those in ministry positions know and utilize accurate information when relating to their parishioners and encouraging them to use their gifts for God’s kingdom.

How does this information inform those working within the church? One way is for both ministers and laity to realize that males and females have far more similarities than differences. Males and females alike process information, make decisions, feel and express emotion, love, manage their schedules, have dreams, and set goals. In fact, a host of factors other than gender account for many individual differences which exist in human behavior: factors such as socioeconomic status, education level, age, marital status, ethnicity, temperament, health history, etc. Gender is but one factor among many that can account for diversity.

In areas where gender differences seem to exist, these differences typically are minimal and should be taken as generalities. Many individual males and females vary significantly from the averages for their gender. An elderly woman, for instance, who is not very nurturing, might contribute much more working on the church budget than organizing a dinner for those coping with the death of a family member. A middle-aged man might have no interest in the budget, but find a great deal of satisfaction writing devotions for a denominational publication. Getting to know individuals rather than blindly accepting stereotypes would seem to be a better way to encourage the use of gifts and talents.

And, finally, since existing gender differences cannot be conclusively classified as innate or learned, caution should be exercised in making assumptions about children and youth who are still growing into the gifts they will use in ministry. Toys and games in children’s learning areas should reflect the wealth of abilities of boys and girls, encouraging them to spend time in a variety of activities. A young female interested in mission work should not be categorically dismissed from the opportunity to serve in a task requiring spatial skills (such as a construction project) based on gender alone. A teenage boy should not be overlooked as an effective childcare worker for the nursery. Boys and girls alike should be encouraged to utilize individual talents and gifts rather than made to feel even subtle pressure to fit into a cultural expectation.

Conclusion

Living in a media-saturated culture, we are often exposed to messages about what it means to be male and female, with much of that information coming from less-than-reliable sources. When those messages are spoken loudly, repeatedly, and from those in the church, it is easy to accept them as true, particularly when empirically acquired information has not received as much attention. Drawing on the work of V. S. Helgeson, this article has sought to present such information with the hope that, as God’s people, we will work in our churches from a position of truth rather than myth in ministering to each other and to the world.

Notes

1. Vicki S. Helgeson, Psychology of Gender, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009). References to this work will be marked by page numbers within the text of the article.