

Differences in research focus by gender in the study of adult development and wisdom

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Introduction

As the senior editor and contributor to the newly published Oxford International Handbook of Adult Development and Wisdom, with Eeva Kallio,¹ I had the task of summarizing the articles in the volume. As I reviewed the chapters and the references in those chapters, I became convinced that there was a definite gender bias in research focus across the references. This article reflects the data on which I based this observation. I have included all the articles cited in the summary chapter of the handbook in the data analysis. I do not know of any other article against which I might check my observation, so I replicated the results on a section about temperament which I had written for a volume edited by myself and Jean-Pierre Isbouts.²

Like most research in human development, men dominate the first authorship in adult development. All seventy-nine of the articles I assessed focused on primarily on cognitive and emotional development rather than general theory or other areas interest to researchers in adult development. Of these 79, 64% were written by men. It would not be surprising to discover that the same gender split in most research areas in psychology and might make an interesting dissertation.

More to the point, I looked at articles on cognition, emotion, and wisdom. We can see the same split in articles on wisdom where women were first author on only seven of the articles focused on wisdom while men authored sixteen. In this work, I only looked at first authors as many of the second, third, etc. authors do not continue to work in the area where they first published. There were twenty-three articles on wisdom in total. This means that men wrote 70% of the articles, the same split as I found in the entire sample of seventy-nine articles.

However, and of primary interest here, in cognitive development, there were only seven articles first authored by women and twenty-one by men. That is, 25% of the articles could be attributed to women as first authors, while 75% boasted male first authors. On the other hand, in emotional development, there was a 50/50 split. There were twenty-eight such articles.

Method and results

Articles were chosen based on the whether the titles alluded to cognition, emotion, or wisdom. Only first authors were categorized. If I could not identify the gender of that author, the reference was excluded from the work. This might happen because the first name of the author was not clearly gendered. It could be that the name was in a language other than English, and I could find no picture or other clue to gender.

Once titles were categorized, this article reports on the percentage of articles in each area that had first authors who were men or were women. The results were narrated in the introduction and are also presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Percent of authors by gender (percentages rounded to the nearest whole number)

Cognition	Emotion	Wisdom
Males: 21 (64%)	Males: 14 (50%)	Males: 16 (70%)
Females: 7 (36%)	Females: 14 (50%)	Females: 7 (30%)
N=28	N=28	N=23

As a second check on this result, references from a second article on temperament³ were inspected, resulting in the following split (Table 2).

Table 2 Percent of authors by gender (percentages rounded to the nearest whole number)

Temperament	
Males: 7 (47%)	Females: 8 (53%)
N=7	N=8

As you can see, there were eight female first authors and only seven male authors that addressed temperament as the primary subject. This section of the article was devoted to an argument that all the important dimensions of temperament are not captured by the work of McCrea and Costa⁴ who claim to have drawn from the work on temperament in creating their popular personality assessment tool, often called the Big Five. McCrea and Costa are men and the issue of whether to count them as authors of work on temperament arose.

I decided against it since their work is primarily on personality assessment. As Garstein, Kirchoff, and Lowe⁵ point out, temperament includes both emotional and behavioral tendencies. Personality, they argue, is a broad construct that includes self-concept, coping strategies, and expectations.

Derryberry and Rothbart,⁶ both women, argue that temperament includes two large domains that are not sufficiently covered by the five-factor model. These are Effortful Control (EC) and Orienting Sensitivity (OS). EC is the ability to control one's attention, suppressing surgency and negative emotions in favor of subdominant processes. OS refers to the tendency to notice peripheral stimuli that have relevance to the situation.

Concluding thoughts

The interesting question is why there is a gender split. One of the authors on temperament suggests that women are more interested in emotion and temperament because they are more likely to be attracted

to the genetic and foundational or “dark” aspects of development and both topics emphasize genetic influences on development. It is also quite possible that, as more women achieved first author status, they did so in areas where less was published.

It may also be that, since women are considered more emotional by the culture, they were “naturally” more interested in emotion. Perhaps because they are more involved in the rearing of children, they see the influence of emotion and temperament (both of which are present at birth) on development.

It is possible that the gender split simply reflects a social bias that is created by social stereotypes. Men are thinkers. Women are more often “feeling” types. If that is the case, our understanding of cognitive and emotional development as well as temperament may also reflect this bias. Perhaps interviews with the researchers themselves might throw some light on this question. One might ask the researchers in this area why they gravitated toward the field in which they publish.

The exploration of how the gender of the researcher affects the research itself and why seems like an excellent topic for a dissertation. It is a complex question that has more than one answer. It would be interesting to know if this same split can be seen in other areas besides developmental psychology. Clinical psychology, for example, may show the same kind of split between the interest of men in more “rational” topics like theory and thinking while women are drawn to the “irrational” topics of emotion and temperament. This might also be true in social psychology.

I do not know of any research around gender bias in research. These simple observations based on just counting are a way to begin.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflicts of interest.

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