

THE GENDER GAP

RESEARCHERS EXPLORE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

STORY BY SUE SALZER • ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC WESTBROOK



©ERIC WESTBROOK/STOCKWORKS

Call it nature, call it nurture. Whatever it is, men and women just don't live in the same world. We come at life from different places, and the difference is borne out in virtually everything we do. It's there in the way we communicate, the way we treat our children, our voting habits, even in the way we tell lies.

Yes, the gender gap is alive and well. And if you're thinking that decades of feminism and other forms of behavioral conditioning have narrowed the gap, think again.

SELECTING A MATE

Lawrence Ganong, professor of nursing and of human development and family studies, is studying the factors that influence mate selection among today's youth.

"Now that we're 25 years past the peak of the feminist movement," Ganong says, "we wanted to know how this movement affected the expectations men and women have of their future marriage partners." The answer? Not much.

Ganong and colleagues discovered that the so-called marriage gradient model of mate selection—in which men marry "down" with younger women who are less educated and have less earning potential—is still with us.

Surveys of hundreds of students from MU and Lincoln University revealed that both men and women expect to be successful in school, have good jobs and make lots of money. Although female undergraduates don't identify with the feminist movement, Ganong says, they "take it as a given" that they will receive equal pay for equal work. But hard numbers say otherwise. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the nation's women earn 73 percent of what males earn. The median salary for women is about \$428 a week, compared with \$588 for men.

"It's in their expectations of future mates that the old marriage gradient reared its ugly head," Ganong says. When

asked, "Which of you will be better able to handle problems?" both sexes favored the man. A majority of college women still expect to marry older men with higher incomes. This is also true of African-American students.

ONLY SKIN DEEP?

Like Ganong, Mary-Jeanette Smythe, associate professor and chair of MU's communications department, has found feminism to have had little influence on interactions between the sexes. Women are still judged largely on the basis of

WOMEN ARE STILL JUDGED
LARGELY ON THE BASIS OF
THEIR APPEARANCE, WHILE MEN
FEEL MUCH LESS PRESSURE TO
ADHERE TO SOCIETY'S STANDARDS
OF PHYSICAL BEAUTY.

their appearance, while men feel much less pressure to adhere to society's standards of physical beauty.

"Unfortunately," she says, women even use appearance cues to evaluate other women.

"Appearance is a woman's relational currency," Smythe says. "It's used to judge her intelligence and competence. It's why we're always dieting and joining health clubs. Men use cues based on other artifacts to assess power and money-making ability. Appearance is just not that salient. It doesn't determine what will happen to them."

Perhaps for this reason, women tend to use ingratiating behaviors when communicating, designed to enhance their appeal to their listeners. Smythe's studies reveal that women smile and maintain eye con-

tact more than men do. They also use facial expressions, indicating attentiveness and responsiveness, more frequently.

Society also gives women less space to live in—Smythe calls this personal space the "body bubble"—and territory is a profound determinant of power.

Regardless of her size, a woman is not allowed to invade the bubble of others. "That's why it's so much worse if a woman gets in your face than if a man does it," Smythe says. "We encourage our boys to play outdoor, space-claiming games like football and soccer, while our girls are inside, reading and playing dolls and engaging in other inward activities."

Will it always be thus? Are these behaviors the result of nature or nurture? Social scientists argue both sides; Smythe comes down hard on the side of nurture. "These are learned behaviors," she says. "The feminists used to have a saying: 'The enemy has outposts in your mind.'"

THE BODY POLITIC

After the November election there was much said about women's support for President Bill Clinton. But the most significant female voting trend noticed by James Endersby, assistant professor of political science, is the increasing percentage of female voters who turn out each presidential election year. It hasn't always been so.

Women got the right to vote in 1920, though "there was a lot of opposition for what today seem goofy reasons," Endersby says. The prevailing one was that women lacked the intellectual ability of men and would vote frivolously.

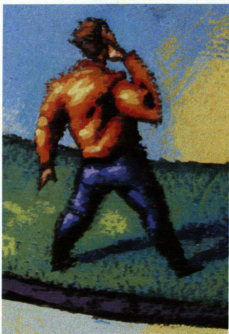
Indeed, few women participated in the presidential election of 1920. Those who did favored Warren Harding, and some election watchers that year alleged women voted for him simply because he was handsome.

Women didn't vote much until the 1950s, when the balance started shifting.

During that decade, the percentage of eligible men voting outnumbered women by about 10 percent. The gap continued to close during the '60s and, by 1968, 70 percent of the nation's eligible men voted, compared with 66 percent of its eligible women. But the watershed year was 1984, when the Democrats put a woman, Geraldine Ferraro, on the Democratic ticket. That year, 61 percent of the nation's women voted, but only 59 percent of males went to the polls.

Although official statistics aren't available yet, Endersby has seen media polls suggesting women voters may have outnumbered men by as much as 4 percent in 1996. "It appears that women now have a permanent majority in the national electorate."

STEPDADS MAY COMPLAIN ABOUT THE KIDS BEING LAZY AND SO FORTH, BUT THEY'RE LESS ACTIVE IN TRYING TO SHAPE THEIR BEHAVIORS AND THEREFORE LESS FRUSTRATED.



©EAC WERNICK/STOCKWORKS

Women weren't driven to the polls by anti-war feelings, civil rights, abortion or any other issue. "More women began entering business and politics and that, more than anything else, is what propelled them to the polls," Endersby says. "They had a larger stake in the political-economic system."

But he notes that the percentage of adults voting has declined steadily since the 1970s. Some say it's the result of disillusion with the system that started with Watergate; others suggest it's happening because voters are apathetic and generally satisfied with the status quo. Says Endersby: "I think it's a little of both."

SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES

More women are entering politics and the labor force. Consider medicine, where women now account for 44 percent of the MU School of Medicine's current enrollment. What effect is this having on sex-role stereotyping?

Several years ago, sociologist James D. Campbell conducted an experiment using nurse practitioners and family physicians as subjects. Campbell, an associate professor of family and community medicine, showed them a series of videotaped clinical encounters between a health-care provider and patient. Then he asked them whether the provider in each case was a physician or a nurse practitioner.

Although the health-care professionals on the tapes were in fact physicians and nurse practitioners of both sexes, men overwhelmingly were identified as physicians and women as nurses. And although most subjects said gender did not influence the provider's attitude toward the patient, male providers were described in masculine terms such as assertive, cocky and nonempathetic, and women were assigned opposite traits.

"Although recent studies have found adults hold less traditional norms for men and women than they did 30 years ago, the nature of gender role stereotyping hasn't changed significantly," Campbell says. "Despite the increasing number of

women entering medicine, and the less dramatic increase in men entering nursing, there is still a strong association of nursing with women and medicine with men."

MOST DIFFICULT ROLE

Why is the stepmother in folklore and fairy tales so consistently loathsome while the father, if visible at all, is benign and vanilla? Cinderella's father, for example, is no villain, even though he sat by when his daughter was made to wear rags and scrub floors. Snow White's dad? Hansel and Gretel? The list goes on.

Marilyn Coleman, professor of human development and family studies, says the stepmom gets a bad rep because her job is one of life's most difficult. It's much worse, she says, than the role of stepdad.

"The mothering role in society is so crucial, and nurturing is such an important part of being a woman," Coleman says. "Custodial stepmoms naturally want to mother their stepkids and impose their values on them." Children resent this because they already have, or had, a mother. They resist, and the result, Coleman says, is a stepmother who is unhappy with her role and children who don't like her. It's easier to be a stepfather because men have less need to rule the roost. "Stepdads may complain about the kids being lazy and so forth, but they're less active in trying to shape their behaviors and therefore less frustrated," she says.

Coleman says scientists don't know enough about these families to suggest a behavioral model for stepmothers. "I guess I'd advise them to back off and leave more of the parenting to their husbands," she says. "Men, however, appear quite willing to surrender that role."

STRESSES IN BLACK MARRIAGES

African-American men and women face extra challenges when it comes to understanding each other.

In 1970, 68 percent of black families had both husband and wife present, com-



©ERIC WITBROOK/ISTOCKWORKS

pared with 50 percent by 1990.

Aaron Thompson, assistant professor of human development and family studies and co-author of *Shattered Marriages*, a forthcoming book exploring failed marriages among the black middle class, says racism and differences in religious behavior are stressors white couples don't face to the same degree.

Thompson's study subjects were educated black men. Many had white-collar jobs and were the only African Americans in their workplace. "Many said their wives, black women who should understand and support them, were insensitive to the stress and pressure they faced at work," he says.

Differences in religious behaviors also came up between black husbands and wives. The church and religion have historically played big roles in African Americans' lives. "Many of these men felt their wives were not spiritual in the same way they were," Thompson says. "For example, it was common for them to say their wives went to church to make the social scene, not for spiritual reasons."

SHAKING UP CHOLESTEROL

Women have a lower risk of developing cardiovascular disease than men do.

WHEN WOMEN DEAL WITH OTHER WOMEN, THEY TELL MORE OF THESE ALTRUISTIC LIES INTENDED TO MAKE THE OTHER PERSON FEEL GOOD.

Scientists suspect this is related to lower total cholesterol levels in women and higher levels of HDLs, the "good" cholesterol. Tom Thomas, professor of exercise physiology in the food science and human nutrition department, wondered if these attributes were associated with a woman's ability to clear fat from her bloodstream faster than a man can.

To find out, he gave a "bolus" of fat, in the form of a super-rich milkshake, to groups of males and females. He periodically tested their blood to measure how fast they cleared triglycerides. It turns out that women actually clear fat from their blood at about the same rate—maybe even a tad slower—than men do.

"Now we know that women don't have less disease because they clear fat faster," the researcher says. "It's some-

thing that happens later."

Next, his group will measure the effect of fitness and exercise. Using trained and untrained subjects—that is, men and women who work out regularly and those who don't—they will examine what happens to triglyceride clearance scores when subjects exercise vigorously for 60 minutes several hours before a meal.

FIBBING DIFFERENCES

Can you tell when someone is lying to you? If you're a man you think you can, according to studies by MU psychology Professor Harris Cooper and colleagues here and at the University of Virginia.

In a series of five studies, men were consistently more confident than women of their ability to detect a falsehood. Despite their confidence, however, they were no more accurate.

The sexes also differ significantly in their lying behaviors. "Women tend to be neutral when they're lying," says University of Virginia psychology Professor Bella DePaulo. "They don't attempt anything extreme or flashy, whereas men will really exaggerate." Both men and women engage in more self-centered lying, fibs designed to enhance the teller, rather than altruistic, or "white" ones, with one exception.

"When women deal with other women, they tell more of these altruistic lies intended to make the other person feel good," DePaulo says. "Things like, 'I think you made the right decision,' or 'I love your hair.' Men don't do that to the same degree."

In future studies, researchers will try to learn more about cues people use to separate fact from fiction, the reliability of these cues and whether individuals—law enforcement officers for example—can be trained to spot a liar. It's not about shifty eyes or sweating upper lips.

"It's very difficult to tell when someone's lying," DePaulo says. "You really can't trust your judgment, even if you're sure you're right." Even if you're a man. ☼