



WOMEN'S HEALTH  
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## **The Social Behavior of Women and Men: Nature and Nurture Working Together November 11, 2014**

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**Overview:** The purpose of this presentation is to articulate the extent to which psychological sex differences and similarities reflect nature or nurture, communicate the magnitude and direction of sex differences by describing findings on helping behavior, describing the broad cultural themes that underlie most sex differences in social behavior, and examine whether people's ideas about women and men—that is, their gender stereotypes—match or fail to match the sex differences and similarities that have emerged in psychological research.

### **The Facts:**

- Psychologists have been studying sex differences and similarities for quite some time
- In the “difference vs. similarity” debate, three positions are advocated:
  - Similarity
  - Difference
  - Variability in difference and similarity
- The Nurture vs. Nature debate weighs in heavily on this discussion

**Summary:** All people are “gender experts” because they hold cultural understandings—shared cultural beliefs about men and women (gender rolls/stereotypes)—these beliefs tend to be accurate at a group level, but not at the individual level. For instance, as a group, women are more communal, exhibiting traits of friendliness, unselfishness, and sympathy. Men, as a group, are more agentic, exhibiting traits of assertiveness, ambition, competitiveness, and self-confidence.

Prosocial behavior includes sharing, helping, comforting, guiding, rescuing, and defending, and begs the question, “Is there a more helpful sex?” Cultural beliefs suggest prosocial behavior differs in men and women. In women, prosocial behavior is expressed with a communal focus where empathy and sympathy are shared. Prosocial behavior in men is revealed through a focus on teams/organizations and expressing one's dominance and physical strength.

Research on prosocial behavior in close relationships reveals that women provide more sensitive emotional support and, in fact, over 70% of people prefer to receive emotional support from women. Likewise, women spend twice as much time as men in caring for and helping family members, and are even more likely than men to donate a kidney when someone is in need.

However, when examining prosocial behavior in stranger relationships, men exceed women in bystander interventions to help others. Bystander intervention often involves considerable risk (potentially life-threatening) and is a voluntary act that requires quick and decisive intervention.

Over 90% of Carnegie Medals, awards for heroic acts including saving others from fires, drowning, animal attacks, and criminal assaults, are awarded to men. Offering assistance to strangers at one's own risk was also found during Holocaust rescuing. Interestingly, data gathered from the Righteous Gentiles Registry of Yad Vashem reveal that women may have taken on greater risk in this type of prosocial behavior, though gender population percentages at the time may not exactly reveal equal gender opportunities for this behavior. What it does reveal, however, is that women do display levels of risk in helping others, this is not a just behavior typically attributed to men.

Prosocial behavior at work also may reveal gender differences. Women, more than men, deliver relational organizational citizenship behavior, which is going beyond one's job description to help someone else. Similar findings are shown in physician-patient interactions, for women do more patient-centric communication, counseling, and positive talk.

**In conclusion**, the ongoing debate of Nurture vs. Nature has divided psychologists researching this difference. Evolutionary psychology suggests sexual selection and maternal investment principles are consistent with differences in men and women; this field builds on theories about roles in our ancestral past. Social role theory suggests a male-female division of labor in society and the role of gender as a social construct mediated by social regulation explains these psychological gender differences.

**More research** is needed to better understand the intersection of nature and nurture. Role theorists map changes over time as division of labor has moderated and as women view themselves more agentic than in the past and there has been a lessening of many agentic sex differences (i.e. partner preferences, sexual behavior, risk taking, career ambition).