

Are Men Just Better at Math and Science Than Women?

In early 2005, Harvard President Lawrence Summers suggested that innate differences between men and women might be responsible for under-representation of women in math and science departments at elite academic institutions.

The comment set off a firestorm and led to Summers' ouster the following year.

A few months after Summers' comments, a pair of Harvard faculty members squared off on the question. Cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, apparently unbothered by the Summers flap, agreed to debate his colleague Elizabeth Spelke, also a cognitive scientist. Spelke, speaking to the *Boston Globe*, had claimed that "not a shred of evidence" existed supporting an innate differences theory.

During the debate, Pinker presents a case that Spelke's "extreme nurture" position—that *all* relevant sex differences are the result of socialization and bias—cannot be supported. He also rejects the "extreme nature" theory, which states that men have the proper talents and temperaments necessary for science and women do not.

Pinker stakes out a position that says biological differences as well as socialization and bias explain the under-representation. He concludes with the following:

- More than "a shred of evidence" exists for sex differences relevant to statistical gender disparities in elite science departments.
- Reliable *average* differences also exist in the following areas between men and women: life priorities, interests in people vs. things, risk-seeking, spatial transformations, mathematical reasoning, and variability

- Ten kinds of evidence exist that suggest the differences are not *completely* explained by socialization and bias

I'd encourage readers to watch the entire clip. Pinker comes off as funny, articulate, and bright. But be warned: the audio is not great and the video is a bit long.

To me, the primary takeaway from the clip is that Pinker is attempting to offer a serious, thoughtful, and moderate rebuttal to a position he views as extreme. In response to Spelke's claim that "not a shred of evidence" exists to support an innate difference theory, he spends most of his 40 minutes citing evidence. (And he makes a point of saying, "The literature on this is so enormous I can only touch a fraction of it.")

Pinker jokes that Spelke's claim at least belies our stereotypical notions on gender and confidence. Then he gets to what, I think, is his primary point in the conversation:

I've taken a lot of controversial positions over the years. As a member of homo sapiens I think I'm right on all of them. On the other hand I don't think on any of them I'd say there

is not a shred of evidence for the other side...I would not say the other side can't even make a case, even if I think there case is not as good as the opposite.

Pinker's point, I think, was not to vanquish the extreme nurture theory; it was to show that Spelke's rhetoric was over the top in its certitude. On this front Pinker "won" the debate.

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