

He's Not as Smart as He Thinks

A British researcher reports that the male ego is often larger than his actual IQ. But you might be surprised by what think of men's intellect.

Are men smarter than women? No. But they sure think they are. An analysis of some 30 studies by British researcher Adrian Furnham, a professor of psychology at University College London, shows that men and women are fairly equal overall in terms of IQ. But women, it seems, underestimate their own candlepower (and that of women in general), while men overestimate theirs. Furnham talks to NEWSWEEK's Joan Raymond about his findings and why perceived IQ matters. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: Many studies show that men score slightly higher in IQ tests. Is this significant?

Adrian Furnham: Universally, men tend to score higher on certain specialized skills, such as spatial awareness. In the real world, that means they might be better at reading maps or navigating. Women score higher in terms of language development and emotional intelligence. But most experts agree there is no real, important overall difference when it comes to gender and intelligence.

But women think they aren't as smart as men?

That's the conundrum. What I study is "perceived intelligence," essentially how smart people think they are. I analyzed 30 international studies, and what I found was that women, across the world, tend to underplay their intelligence, while men overstate it.

So do most men think they're Albert Einstein?

There certainly is a greater male ego. It's what we call the male hubris and female humility effect. Men are more confident about their IQ. These studies show that on average, women underestimate their IQ scores by about five points while men overestimate their own IQs. Since these studies were international in scope, the results were essentially the same whether women were from Argentina, America, Britain, Japan or Zimbabwe. Another factor affecting perception may be distribution of IQ ... Although [men and women] are on average the same, the people at the very top and the very bottom of the IQ bell curve are more likely to be men. That is a pattern that we see in the university setting, with men either being at the very top of the class or at the bottom.

Do women tend to think that men are smarter than they are?

Surprisingly, [both] men and women perceive men being smarter across generations. Both sexes believe that their fathers are smarter than their mothers and grandfathers are more intelligent than their grandmothers.

What about the kids?

If there are children, [both] men and women think their sons are brighter than their daughters.

Did the data surprise you?

Absolutely. And it is worrying in the sense that it may mean parents send inappropriate or misleading messages to their children about their abilities. It is also surprising since school results, at least in Great Britain, indicate quite clearly that girls are doing better than boys in nearly all subjects. What was interesting was that some groups of people, both men and women, got it so wrong. Men with average to below-average intelligence think that they are quite clever. And very smart women think their intelligence is low.

Does any of this matter in the real world?

Men aren't more clever or smarter. But since they think they are, they are more confident about their abilities. These self-beliefs, however, may be highly adaptive. Who gets a job? A bright woman who doesn't think she's smart, or a not-so-bright man who believes he's capable of anything? Arrogance and hubris are not attractive qualities, but confident, self-belief may be. Certainly, underestimating abilities might hurt you. There's a good quote from one of your countrymen, Henry Ford. He says: "Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right." And that is what is troublesome. Beliefs may be more important than actual ability in certain settings.

So women have a self-esteem problem?

I'm not advocating for self-esteem training and therapy. I think that many of the self-help gurus argue incorrectly that improved self-esteem increases performance. Helping people to perform better increases their self-esteem. Giving a kind of carte blanche to self-esteem isn't a good idea in my mind. Rather, I think it should be that increased performance and feedback on the causes of that performance, ability or effort raises self-esteem. As I said, in primary and secondary schools, girls are outperforming boys. And where appropriate, their self-beliefs, hopefully, are increasing.

Do you get a lot of flack for this kind of gender research?

I study perceived intelligence. I don't research whether gender differences in intelligence are innate. That always sparks controversy. But anytime you talk about intelligence and gender, people will have strong feelings about it. Look what happened to [Larry] Summers of Harvard [the former president of the university was lambasted for suggesting that women are underrepresented in the sciences at least partly due to inherent differences in intellectual ability between the sexes]. I just let the data speak for itself. Nonetheless, sometimes I think you have to be stupid, brave or just plain naive to work in this area.