

Math and gender: Is there a link?

The performance gap is negligible, so we should encourage boys and girls to resist stereotypes

BY ARVIND GUPTA, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 1, 2009

The relationship between gender and mathematics in North American culture is a complicated thing. "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus"-style stereotypes are often unquestioned, confessing to being bad at math is socially acceptable, and unmediated math anxiety is common, particularly among women. With few exceptions, people who are good at math are portrayed in popular media as nerdy, hypercompetitive, socially inept males with pocket protectors.

My own daughters, ignoring the indisputable evidence of their parentage, point out to me that math just isn't very attractive. But, it seems that with the popularity of the TV show *Numb3rs*, and the recent success of the best-selling book *Math Doesn't Suck* by TV star and mathematician Danica McKellar, math does seem to be losing some of its stodgy image -- perhaps not soon enough to sway my daughters and their friends, but maybe for a younger generation.

Like many of their peers, my daughters are capable young women who do well in math and exhibit the kind of curiosity and intellectual drive that would make them successful mathematicians. But for some reason, they just aren't interested in pursuing it as a career.

Although we have come a long way since the days of gender-tracking students' educational options, in countries like Canada and the U.S., fewer women than expected end up pursuing advanced degrees in fields like math, engineering and computer science. While the historic gender performance gap in mathematics is now negligible, women remain under-represented in the field. The study "Culture, Gender, and Math" published in the journal *Science* last year, underscores this fact. Using data from 40 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, it shows that in societies with high levels of gender equality, "girls perform as well as boys in mathematics and much better than them in reading."

But, in another large-scale study of 44 industrialized or industrializing countries, researcher Karen Bradley observed that, "gender gaps in attitudes toward math and math careers was greater in advanced industrial societies, despite the smaller math achievement gap."

This attitude gap is what mystifies me. With competitive quantitative skills and superior reading abilities, girls, in many ways, are in a better position to succeed than boys! Categorically, boys tend to perform slightly better than girls in geometric or spatial testing, but with practice there is nothing that girls can't learn and excel at.

Yet instead of confidence, many young women seem to internalize self-doubt, and distance themselves from pursuing the quantitative knowledge that will open up dozens of highly rewarding and interesting career paths. Be it from parental attitudes, teacher cues, the media or their peers, oftentimes girls don't think they're supposed to be good at math, or, if they are, that it will make them less feminine. Some girls are still getting the message that it's okay to be smart, but just not too "math smart." What they believe about themselves is critical to their ability to succeed in math.

A fascinating study by University of B.C. researchers Ilan Dar-Nimrod and Steven J. Heine published in *Science* in 2006 showed that "women who read of genetic causes of sex differences performed worse on math tests than those who read of experiential causes."

The reason for this result, they suspected: "If individuals share the same genetic foundation at the base of the stereotype, they might feel that the stereotype applies to them ... people might react differently if the origins of the group differences were perceived to rest on the specific experiences that people's groups have had. People may reason that their own experiences are different or that they can resist the effects of their experiences."

While research into math and gender issues will continue to expand, we know enough right now to encourage our girls and our boys to resist stereotyping themselves or others, and to take interest in the many exciting places that mathematics can take them.

Next Week: Does your child love hip hop but struggle with algebra? Stay tuned for next week's article in which I'll explain how loving (or hating) a particular tune is about the math behind the music.

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