

Are Women Given Voice at Psychology Conferences? A Content Analysis of Gender of Presenter at Major Evolutionist and General Psychology Conferences

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ABSTRACT

Is there gender bias in Evolutionary Psychology? This paper examines the extent to which men and women present their research in General Psychology and Evolution-Specific Psychology conferences. Evolutionary Psychology appears to conform to the wider scholarly pattern whereby women “hide their light under a bushel,” presenting their work more often as posters and at regional conferences, while men are more likely to be first authors on presentations and to do so at more prestigious conferences.

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KEYWORDS

Gender; inequality; academia

INTRODUCTION

For most of its history, the university has been a male-dominated institution. In the United States, women were admitted to the first institution of higher education two centuries after Harvard opened its doors (Chamberlain, 1991, 3). In recent decades, females have been hired and promoted as faculty. In psychology in the 1970s, men made up three quarters of graduates; by 2008, the ratio was reversed, with women earning 76% of doctorates awarded. Yet men still constitute the majority of faculty in psychology departments, a pattern that is more pronounced at the senior levels (Fouad, et al, 2000; Willyard, 2011). In short, despite women's rapid progress, substantial gender differences remain.

To what extent does gender shape the research within evolutionary psychology? This question arose at the 2013 meeting of the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society (FEPS). A sub-group of researchers decided to see if women were as likely as men to be first authors on presentations and posters. An analysis was conducted of the papers and oral presentations at four professional organizations: Human Behavior and Evolutionary Science (HBES), North Eastern Evolutionary Psychological Society (NEEPS), Association for Psychological Science (APS), and Western Psychological Association (WPA). This research is a necessary step in understanding the role of sex and gender within the ranks of evolutionists.

This work complements research that has been conducted in other fields or within psychology at earlier points in time. A group of researchers, led by Jevin D. West and Jennifer Jacquet, has compiled the most comprehensive survey of publishing. Their database includes several million publications, dating back to 1665, which shows that men are more likely than women to publish, although the gap between the male and female rate of publication has been narrowing for two decades. There is substantial variation within individual disciplines. In the field of history, for instance, women are 30.8% of authors in the period from 1991 to 2010. They are more likely to publish books and articles on feminist history (57.9%) than on West Indian slavery (13%). This data does not reveal how prevalent women are in a profession. For instance, as of 2007, women make up 42% of Ph.D.s and 35% of faculty (Townsend, 2010). Within the field of evolution and ecology, women make up 22.8% of authors from 1991 to 2010. Women are more likely to author papers on plant ecology (24.9%) than paleontology (16.6%).

West and Jacquet's data do not include psychology publications, although in 2000 a group within the American Psychological Association analyzed publication data. The Task Force on Women in Academe, led by Nadya Fouad, found that in the late 1990s, women made up 34.4% of all faculty at doctoral programs, and 38.7% of faculty at master's programs

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(Fouad, et al., 2000, pp. 16-17). Fouad et al. analyzed publications at eight journals between 1970 and 1990. They showed that female first authors increased substantially over time and that there was considerable variation between subfields. For instance, women made up 27% of the authors in *Developmental Psychology* in 1970, and 53% in 1990. The comparable figures for *Psychophysiology* were 18% in 1970 and 27% in 1990 (Fouad, et al., 2000, p. 29).

METHODS

An analysis of gender of first authorship of presenters was conducted to examine possible gender differences at conferences of the four aforementioned academic organizations. These organizations (NEEPS, HBES, WPA, and APS) represent two evolution-based organizations (NEEPS and HBES) as well as two general psychology organizations (WPA and HBES). Further, these organizations were chosen as they differentially reflect regional (NEEPS and WPA) versus international (HBES and APS) organizations. This constellation of organizations was selected so as to represent the dimensions of evolutionist/generalist and regional/international, respectively.

Up to 60 presentations of each type (oral and poster) were examined based on a random selection process (in cases where fewer than 60 existed of a type at a conference, the full number of presentations was included). Further, to increase the generality of the data, the most recent three years' worth of conferences (2011, 2012, and 2013) were included – except for HBES, which, due to the information provided online for their archived conferences, needed to include 2009, 2011, and 2013 to reflect the three most recent updated conferences.

RESULTS

For each type of presentation for each organization, aggregated data were collected across the three years in percentage format (See Table 1). Chi Square analyses were computed to determine if the percentage of female first authors varied as a function of presentation type (poster versus oral), conference type (regional versus international and evolutionist versus general), and across the specific conferences, regardless of type of organization. None of these analyses emerged as significant, suggesting that none of these independent variables significantly affected the proportion of presentations given by females at these conferences.

That said, it is noteworthy that Chi Square Goodness of Fit analyses are known for being conservative in cases with relatively small numbers of categories. As such, an examination of the raw data found in Table 1 is still useful. A few interesting patterns are clear. First, the mean percentage of female first authors for posters across the organizations is 56% (more women than men are first authors of posters – across all the conferences),

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while the mean percentage of female first authors of oral presentations across the conferences is 45%. Across all these kinds of conferences, women are more likely to give poster presentations while men are more likely to give oral presentations. This is consistent with comparable research done on other disciplines, or earlier analyses of psychology papers (Fouad, et al, 2012; Wilson, 2012).

Further, the mean proportion of female first authors at evolutionist conferences, regardless of type of presentation, is 46%, while it is 55% at general conferences. Are evolutionist psychology societies guilty of gender bias? These data are suggestive. Further, the percentage of female first-authored presentations at regional conferences (regardless of the type of conference) is 53% while the corresponding percentage for international conferences is 48%. Although this difference is not enormous, it still clearly leads in a suggestive direction – at relatively prestigious, international conferences, males seem more likely to dominate the spotlight. As we have seen, these findings are consistent with research from other fields.

Table 1: Percentage of presentations with female first-authors from two evolution-based psychology societies and two general psychology societies

Organization	Organization Type	Presentation Type	Percentage of Presentations First-Authored by Females
NEEPS ¹	Regional/Evolutionary	Poster	52%
NEEPS ¹	Regional/Evolutionary	Oral	40%
HBES ²	International/Evolutionary	Poster	51%
HBES ²	International/Evolutionary	Oral	42%
WPA ³	Regional/General	Poster	62%
WPA ³	Regional/General	Oral	58%
APS ⁴	International/General	Poster	58%
APS ⁴	International/General	Oral	40%

¹NorthEastern Evolutionary Psychology Society – data aggregated across conferences from 2011, 2012, and 2013;

²Human Behavior and Evolution Society – data aggregated across conferences from 2009, 2011, and 2013;

³Western Psychological Association – data aggregated across conferences from 2011, 2012, and 2013;

⁴Association for Psychological Science– data aggregated across conferences from 2011, 2012, and 2013;

DISCUSSION

It is likely that there are sex differences in terms of what research areas psychologists choose and how and where they present their work. As in other disciplines, men appear more likely to be the first author on presentations and to do so at higher-status conferences.

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Women seem less likely to present work in evolutionary psychology than in the discipline as a whole. In this regard, psychology and evolutionary psychology apparently conform to the wider pattern of other scientific fields, such as biology and evolutionary biology, where this phenomenon has been more comprehensively documented.

It is possible that regional conferences attract more undergraduates and graduate students (three quarters of whom are female), whereas international conferences attract a larger proportion of faculty (more than half of whom are male). What looks like gender bias might be the result of sorting of undergraduates and graduate students from faculty. Here issues of economics (the cost of travel to the conference), status, and subtle gender bias could all play a role. It is too early to say for sure what the strongest factor is.

It is likely that gender disparities are less pronounced in the present than they were in the past. At any rate, that is what one would expect if evolutionary psychology held to the pattern established by the team led by Davis and Jacuquet. That is also what the research by Fouad et al would suggest. Assuming that psychologists are not immune from the wider pattern operating within academia, it is possible that a disproportionate number of men would present research on certain issues within evolutionary psychology such as violence and mate guarding, while a disproportionate number of women would do so for other areas such as cooperation and child rearing. Of course this is speculative, and more research is needed to reveal if that is indeed the case.

None of what has been presented here tells us whether patterns are the result of bias by gate keepers or self-sorting by scholars, but it helps to lay the groundwork for necessary work in the future.

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