

A Review of the Recent Literature on the Psychology of Sex

Helen Thompson Woolley (1910)

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Although the past few years have witnessed the appearance of a number of comprehensive and even encyclopedic works on various aspects of the problem of sex, there has been comparatively little advance in knowledge of the mental characteristics of sex. The few positive contributions in the literature of anatomy and experimental psychology I will review first, and will then deal briefly with the more pretentious treatises which are summaries and theoretical discussions.

The most important single contribution to our knowledge of the facts of the case is to be found in Dr. Franklin P. Mall's paper 'On Several Anatomical Characters of the Human Brain Said to Vary According to Race and Sex, with Especial Reference to the Weight of the Frontal Lobe' (*Am. J. of Anat.*, IX., p. 1, 1909). Dr. Mall's general conclusion is that there is as yet no reliable evidence for the variation of anatomical characters with either race or sex. The belief that the brains of females differ from those of males has been widely accepted, and has been thought to be conclusive evidence of the permanent inferiority of the female mind. The points in which the female brain has been said to be inferior to the male are: (1) total weight; (2) proportionate weight of the frontal lobe indicated by (a) actual weighings, and (b) determinations of the position of the central sulcus; (3) the area of the corpus callosum; (4) the complexity of gyri and sulci; (5) the conformation of gyri and sulci; and (6) the rate of development of the cortex in the foetus. Dr. Mall's paper gives a critical review of the literature of the subject to date, and adds important new data.

It is now a generally accepted belief that the smaller gross weight of the female brain has no significance other than that of the smaller average size of the female. With regard to the other anatomical characters enumerated, Dr. Mall shows that those observers who have found differences characteristic of sex have been guilty of serious errors in scientific procedure. They have based conclusions on too small a series of observations, have used methods too crude to make anything but large and constant differences (which they did not obtain) significant, have made their determinations *with a knowledge of the sex of* [p. 336] *the brain under consideration*, and have even, in some cases, drawn conclusions not justified by their own data. Those observers who have avoided these errors have found no differences characteristic of sex. Dr.

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Mall himself finds none, and is inclined to believe that they do not exist. The only exception to this statement is that he finds some evidence of a greater tendency of the male brain to vary from the normal conformation of gyri and sulci.

Waldeyer in his paper 'Ueber Gehirne menschlicher Zwillings- und Drillingsfrüschte verschiedenen Geschlechts' (*Zeit. f. Ethnol.*, 1908, Bd. 40, S. 262-272) agrees with Dr. Mall that it is by no means a general law that the male brain in twin foetuses of different sex is further advanced in the formation of convolutions than the female. The male foetus is frequently, though not always, larger than the female; and in case it is larger, usually has a more developed cortex.

Experimental psychology has yielded a few scattered researches bearing on the psychology of sex. They deal with (1) motor functions, (2) sensory processes, and (3) intellectual processes. Wells, 'Sex Differences in the Tapping Test' (*Amer. J. of Psychol.*, 1909, pp. 354-363) carried out a series of experiments in tapping on a telegraph key, in which he used ten men and ten women, attendants in an insane asylum, as subjects. He found the men somewhat superior to the women in the rate of tapping, but detected no difference, between them in fatigue -- a fact probably explained by the very slight amount of fatigue involved. (See Thompson, *Mental Traits of Sex*, p. 14, where the test involved much more intense fatigue.) He found a greater difference in the efficiency of the two hands in women than in men. (Compare below, Schuyten.) The women Wells found on the whole more variable than the men -- a heresy which he attributes to their greater affectability. Schuyten, 'Bijdrage tot de Kennis der Rechts- en Linkshandigheid van de onderste ledematen' (*Paedologisch. Jaarboek*, 10, S. 42-51, 1908), found that in both sexes the left leg preponderates over the right in length and in development, but the difference is greater in men than in women, greater in women than in children. Miss Downey, 'Judgments on the Sex of Handwriting' (*PSYCHOL. REV.*, XVII., p. 205, 1910), investigated sex differences in the complicated function of handwriting. Her method was to collect 200 envelopes addressed by educated men and women, 100 by each sex. These were sorted according to sex by thirteen people. The percentage of right judgments was about the same as in Binet's tests. It ranged from 60 to 77 per cent. If only those judgments are recorded of which the observer felt certain, the [p. 337] percentage is raised materially. The characteristics of handwriting on which judgments of sex were based were that the typical feminine hand is colorless, conventional, neat, and small, and frequently shows signs of unaccustomedness; while the typical male hand is 'bold, or careless, or experienced, above all individual.' In the case of ten men and seventeen women there was an inversion of the sex signs, leading to constant false judgments. Of the ten men, at least two had done very little writing, and four others were teachers -- a profession which fosters a conventional hand. Of the seventeen women, at least half had been accustomed to more than a usual amount of writing. Miss Downey concludes that the sex signs of handwriting are of social rather than psychophysiological origin. They are largely determined by (1) the amount of writing done, (2) age and (3) professional requirements.

The only contribution I have been able to find dealing with any phase of sensory processes in relation to sex is the article by Winch on 'Colour Preferences of School Children' (*British J. of Psychol.*, III, p. 42, 1909). His method was to ask each of 2,000 school children to write the four primary colors, black and white in the order of preference. The results were then tabulated according to age, sex and position in school. Winch found constant differences correlated with sex which he considers characteristic, but he makes no attempt to interpret them. An examination of his tables shows that the like points between the two sexes are far more striking than their differences. In both cases blue ranks first and red second, while black is last. The sexual differences are that very young boys sometimes rank red first, while girls never do. White is somewhat more popular with girls than with boys, while green and yellow are a trifle more popular with boys than with girls. It is at least a very plausible guess that white gains its greater popularity among the girls by virtue of white dresses, their gala attire. The trifling displacements of green and yellow in the girls' records as compared with the boys may easily be explained by the higher rank of white. To speak of genuine sexual differences in color preference on the basis of these tests seems far-fetched.

In the realm of intellectual processes recent experimentation has dealt only with association. Of the two studies of association, I will deal first with the more detailed, though it was published later. Wrenschner, 'Die Reproduktion und Association von Vorstellungen' (*Zeit. f. Psychol., Erganzb. III, 1907-1909*) makes elaborate comparisons between men and women, the cultured and the uncultured, [p. 338] and children and adults -- all on results obtained from twenty-two individuals. He examined two children, two servant maids, three working men, five educated women, and ten educated men. Although generalizations based on such an exceedingly small number of subjects, and frequently on trifling differences in the data, seem of very doubtful value, I will state briefly his conclusions with regard to sex. He found that men have a shorter reaction time for association than women. There are, as far as I know, no other tests made by the reaction time method. Tests made by requiring the subject to write a series of associations to a given word (see Thompson, *l. c.*, p. 131) have yielded contradictory results. With regard to qualitative differences in association, he makes the following statements. Men preponderate in the number of symmetrical reactions, mediate associations, multiple associations, associations by content, tendency to visualize, experience of emotional coloring, tendency to use previous stimulus words in reacting, number of unintended answers, and reduction with practice of the tendency to repeat the stimulus word. Women preponderate in the number of formal associations, the number of long reaction words, the variety of answers to a given stimulus word, the number of failures to react, the number of mistakes in the apprehension of the stimulus, the tendency to individualize, to reject answers because of emotional coloring, and to experience a rivalry in answers. From these characteristics Wrenschner draws the following formidable set of conclusions with regard to the process of association in the sexes. Women as compared with men show abnormality of reaction, meager presentations, a less active flow of ideas, less variety in ideas, a greater frequency of formal associations, imperfect adaptation to the conditions of the experiment, a more concrete form of response, a more subjective attitude, more indecision, and a less active attitude toward the experiment. It would be a simple matter to take Wrenschner's own data and derive quite a different set of generalizations which would have at least as much value as those he has drawn. Emma Fürst, 'Statistische Untersuchungen über Wortassoziationen und über familiäre Übereinstimmungen im Reactionstypus bei Ungebildeten' (*J. f. Psychol. und Neurol., IX., S. 243, 1907*), carried out association tests on 100 individuals, men, women, and children, with the purpose of examining family likenesses in the type of association. She, like several previous observers, found that women have a greater tendency than men to the predicative type of association -- a statement with which Wrenschner does not agree. She found men more given to outer and women to inner associations, and that men preponderate [p. 339] in the definition type of association. Like Wrenschner, she detects a more personal attitude in the women. She found more uniformity among the ideas of related women than among those of related men. If her table of results is formulated according to formal associations and associations by content, the result accords with Wrenschner's statement, though the difference between the sexes is too slight to be really significant. The two sets of results agree, then, in finding formal associations more frequent among women, and associations by content among men, and in detecting a more personal attitude on the part of women. With regard to the other topics discussed, either they disagree, or the two sets of results are not comparable.

Though there is no very recent experimentation on memory as correlated with sex, Max Offner, in his book *Das Gedächtnis* (Berlin, 1909), devotes a brief section to a summary of the experimental material. For the sake of the value of the book as a whole, one hopes that his account of experimentation on other phases of the memory problem is more accurate than that of this section. By means of omissions and misrepresentations he gives quite a wrong impression of the general trend of experimentation on the subject. He seems to have singled out the few cases in which males were shown to excel in some phase of memory, and ignored many of the cases in which the reverse was true. In quoting Lobsien's results he states the fact that boys were slightly more accurate in reproducing the exact order of a series, and omits to mention the fact that the general range of memory was shown to be decidedly better in girls. He also misrepresents Miss Thompson's results. She found memory distinctly better in women for both visual and auditory material, instead of a *geringe Ueberlegenheit der Mädchen auf visuellem Gebiete*, and is entirely innocent of the *stärkeres Abschweifen der Reproduktion vom Gegenstand* on the part of the women with which she is credited.

In an article in the *American Journal of Psychology* (XXI., p. 114, 1910) on 'Spontaneous Constructions and Primitive Activities of Children Analogous to those of Primitive Man,' Acher draws some comparisons between the activities of boys and girls, based on the answers to a questionnaire. He says that boys are more interested than girls in points and edges because of their use of knives and sticking instruments; both sexes collect string, but they use it for different purposes -- boys to tie hard knots, fish, and fly kites; girls to tie decorative knots, crochet, and make ornaments; girls are more apt than boys to attempt to modify bodily form; boys show a much greater interest than girls in the use of the whip and in throwing. The in- [p. 340] terpretation of such observations is obviously sociological rather than psychological.

The most important of the comprehensive discussions of the question of sex are those of Iwan Bloch, *The Sexual Life of our Times; its Relation to Modern Civilization* (London: Rebman, 1909), and the work entitled *Mann und Weib. Ihre Beziehung zu einander und zum Kulturleben der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Union, 1908) edited by R. Kossmann and J. Weiss, and written by a dozen or more authors. Havelock Ellis makes another contribution to the field in the volume called *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. VI., Sex in Relation to Society* (Philadelphia: Davis, 1910). None of these works are to be considered important from the point of view of psychology, except for the fact that they and similar works contain the only psychological accounts of the sexual impulse itself which we possess. Such material is difficult to obtain and difficult to evaluate, and it will probably be a long time before it has much scientific value. The chief point of agreement among these writers is that the sexual impulse is much less intense in women than in men. Aside from this discussion, these works contain no original psychological data. Although it is impossible to discuss the problems of sexual physiology and hygiene, sexual ethics, the theory and practice of marriage, and prostitution, without at times adopting the psychological point of view, it is not the dominant one in any of these books. They belong rather in the field of sociology. The work of Kisch, *The Sexual Life of Women* (New York: Rebman, 1910), and of Mertens, *Das sexuelle Problem und seine moderne Krise* (München: Kupferschmid, 1910), are written exclusively from the physiological standpoint. They deal with problems of sexual hygiene, sexual disease, and, as a corollary, sexual education. It is well worth while in passing to remark that all of the group of books under discussion advocate more instruction for children in matters of sex. Most of them agree that such instruction should begin not later than the sixth year. There is a difference of opinion as to whether it should form part of the curriculum of the public schools. In addition to these larger works, there is the usual crop of magazine articles on various phases of the psychology of sex.

The general impression produced by a survey of this motley mass of material is first, that the literature of the subject is improving in tone. There is perhaps no field aspiring to be scientific where flagrant personal bias, logic martyred in the cause of supporting a prejudice, unfounded assertions, and even sentimental rot and drivel, have run riot to such an extent as here. It is very significant to note the im- [p. 341] portance ascribed by Dr. Mall to the personal equation in so tangible and definite a problem as that of comparing the anatomical characters of the brains of the sexes. The outcome of problems where personal opinion has a still larger scope should be received with far more critical caution than heretofore. The signs in the literature of greater moderation in tone and more respect for evidence are in the direction of a much needed reform.

As to content, there seems to be a general trend toward the opinion that mind is probably not a secondary sexual character -- in other words that there are probably few if any psychological differences of sex which are of biological origin -- a statement which I think holds true in spite of the continued popularity of such books as Möbius' *Physiologischer Schwachsinn des Weibes* and Weininger's *Geschlecht und Character*. The tendency to minimize sexual differences is most marked with regard to intellectual processes, the field where most of the experimental work has been done, and in which the practical educational tests have been made. Even the time-honored belief that men are more capable of independent and creative work is beginning to give way in view of the successful competition of women in graduate work and in obtaining the doctorate (see Marion Talbot's *The Education of Women*, p. 21). The fundamental importance of sexual differences in affective processes and in standards of conduct still commands a larger measure of credence. The world at large is quite agreed that women are to a greater extent than men dominated by emotions, though the only direct experimental evidence does not support this view (see Thompson, *i. c.*, p. 137), and it is hard to reconcile

with the attributes of patience, self-control, and power to endure pain, and with the much smaller share in the grand passion which are also ascribed to women.

The belief that there are fundamental differences in standards of conduct is less wide spread, and shows no such unanimity. It seems to part of the world quite certain that women have ethical disabilities consisting chiefly in an innate tendency to lie (Havelock Ellis, Weininger. See a refutation of the latter's arguments by M. Jörges, 'Geschlecht und Character,' *Zeitschr. f. Philos. u. philos. Kritik*, Bd. 135, S. 200, which takes them more seriously than they deserve), while to a long series of equally competent observers it seems quite certain that women are ethically superior to men, and that they may be counted upon to raise the moral tone of society! (For a recent exponent of this view see Wells, 'Some Questions Concerning the Higher Education of Women,' *Amer. J. of Sociol.*, 1909, p. 731).

Finally, one might characterize the drift of recent discussion as a [p. 342] shift of emphasis from a biological to a sociological interpretation of the mental characteristics of sex. The very small amount of difference between the sexes in those functions open to experimentation, the contradictory results obtained from different series of investigations, and the nature of the differences which prove to be most constant, have led to the belief that the psychological differences of sex are of sociological rather than of biological origin. (See Densmore, *Sex Equality*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1907; Alsberg, 'Die geistige Leistungsfähigkeit des Weibes im Lichte der neueren Forschung,' *Arch. f. Rassen- u. Gesell. Biol.*, IV., p. 476, 1907; Pelletier, 'La prétendue infériorité psychologique des femmes,' *Rev. socialiste*, XXIV., p. 45, 1908.)

Those who feel opposed to allowing women full opportunity of mental development have accordingly shifted the stress of their argument from the personal to the social standpoint. The cry is no longer that woman will injure herself by the mental and physical over-strain involved in the higher intellectual training, but that she will injure society by reducing her own reproductive activity (later marriages, fewer marriages, fewer children, opposition between intellectual and sexual functions), and thus lessen the chances of the best element to perpetuate itself (Alsberg, Wells, *l. c.*). The conclusion seems to be that it is the highest duty of women to refrain voluntarily from developing her own intellectual capacities for fear of injuring society -- a form of asceticism to which it is hard to subscribe. It seems possible that the higher education of women is being saddled with sins which belong by right to other phases of modern society, though this is not the place to discuss so complicated and difficult a problem.

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