

Gifted Men and Women Define Success Differently, 40-Year Study Shows

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Researchers spent four decades studying a group of mathematically talented adolescents, finding that by mid-life they were extraordinarily accomplished and enjoyed a high level of life satisfaction. Gender, however, played a significant role in how they pursued — and defined — career, family, and success.

This conclusion comes from the most recent round of results from the largest [scientific study](#) of the profoundly gifted to date, recently published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#). The Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth is a longitudinal research project conducted at Vanderbilt Peabody College of education and human development.



“For men and women alike, we found that those who were identified as talented at this early age have gone on to generate creative contributions, become leaders in their professions, earn high incomes and be pleased with the quality of their lives,” said David Lubinski, professor of psychology and human development.

Lubinski and Camilla Benbow, Patricia and Rodes Hart Dean of Education and Human Development, co-authored the study.

Participants (1,037 males, 613 females) were identified in the early 1970s as gifted — in the top 1% of mathematical reasoning ability — at around age 13. The two groups, now ages 53 and 48, are well established in their careers and personal lives.

Thirty percent of the first group and 39% of the second group earned doctorates, compared to less than 2% of the U.S. population. More than 4% had earned tenure at a major research university, 2.3% were top executives at “name brand” or Fortune 500 companies, and 2.4% were attorneys at major law firms or organizations. Collectively they had published 85 books and 7,572 peer-reviewed academic articles

and had secured 681 patents and \$358 million in grants.

Both men and women had universally high scores on measures of emotional well-being, life satisfaction, personal and career direction, and satisfaction with their relationships, but gender differences emerged when the researchers compared their career paths.

Men in the study were more likely to be CEOs or to be employed in information technology or fields associated with science, technology, engineering or mathematics (so-called STEM fields). Women were more often employed in general business, elementary and secondary education, and health care — or were homemakers. Women and men were about equally represented in fields like finance, medicine and law.

Roughly 90% of the men worked full time compared to 65% of the women, and men were more highly compensated than women, with median incomes of about \$140,000 compared to \$80,000 for women.

When asked about how they allocated their time, men almost overwhelmingly prioritized cultivating high-impact careers that require 50 or more hours per week, while the women defined success more broadly to include family and community investment.

This gender difference was also reflected in participants' stated values. Men, on average, were more concerned with being successful in their work and felt that society should invest in them and their ideas, while women took a more communal approach to living and working. Men were more focused on advancing society through knowledge or the creation of concrete products, whereas women were more interested in keeping society vibrant and healthy.

Both men and women overwhelmingly agreed that family was the most important factor required for a meaningful life, citing family as the aspect of their lives of which they were most proud. However, men tended to invest in their families by focusing on making tangible contributions, while women more highly prioritized investing their time and emotional energy.

“What is most interesting about these latest findings,” said Benbow, “is the number of variables at play. Men and women valued career choices, community and family somewhat differently in constructing lives that were satisfying, yet both were equally happy with their outcomes. Both genders used their intellectual abilities to create resources for themselves, and with those resources come choice and the ability to exercise preferences.

“It will be interesting, as time goes on, to observe whether these differences are continued in subsequent generations. We are already seeing, for example, that the academy has become more welcoming for women who wish to pursue careers in math-intensive sciences or engineering. Even the cohorts in our study had more career and life choices available to them than did their parents' generation,” she said.

Study authors include Lubinski, Benbow, and Harrison J. Kell.

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