Women's Brains

STEPHENVJAY GOULD

Paleontologist and evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould (1941–2002) was a professor of geology and zoology at Harvard University from 1967 until his death. His major scientific work was the theory of punctuated equilibrium, a theory of evolutionary biology that builds on the work of Charles Darwin by suggesting that evolution occurs sporadically, rather than gradually over a long period of time. Gould is the author of numerous scientific texts, including The Mismeasure of Man (1981); Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History (1989); his magnum opus, The Structure of Evolutionary Theory (2002); and The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap between Science and the Humanities (2003). Gould also wrote for a more general audience in his column in Natural History, where the following essay originally appeared.

In the Prelude to Middlemarch, George Eliot lamented the unfulfilled lives of talented women:

Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefinite-ness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude.

Eliot goes on to discount the idea of innate limitation, but while she wrote in 1872, the leaders of European anthropometry were trying to measure “with scientific certitude” the inferiority of women. Anthropometry, or measurement of the human body, is not so fashionable a field these days, but it dominated the human sciences for much of the nineteenth century and remained popular until intelligence testing replaced skull measurement as a favored device for making invidious comparisons among races, classes, and sexes. Craniometry, or measurement of the skull, commanded the most attention and respect. Its unquestioned leader, Paul Broca (1824–80), professor of clinical surgery at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, gathered a school of disciples and imitators around himself. Their work, so meticulous and apparently irrefutable, exerted great influence and won high esteem as a jewel of nineteenth-century science.

Broca's work seemed particularly invulnerable to refutation. Had he not measured with the most scrupulous care and accuracy? (Indeed, he had. I have the greatest respect for Broca's meticulous procedure. His numbers are sound. But science is an inferential exercise, not a catalog of facts. Numbers, by themselves, specify nothing. All depends upon what you do with them.) Broca depicted
himself as an apostle of objectivity, a man who bowed before facts and cast aside superstition and sentimentality. He declared that “there is no faith, however respectable, no interest, however legitimate, which must not accommodate itself to the progress of human knowledge and bend before truth.” Women, like it or not, had smaller brains than men and, therefore, could not equal them in intelligence. This fact, Broca argued, may reinforce a common prejudice in male society, but it is also a scientific truth. L. Manouvrier, a black sheep in Broca’s fold, rejected the inferiority of women and wrote with feeling about the burden imposed upon them by Broca’s numbers:

Women displayed their talents and their diplomas. They also invoked philosophical authorities. But they were opposed by numbers unknown to Condorcet or to John Stuart Mill. These numbers fell upon poor women like a sledge hammer, and they were accompanied by commentaries and sarcasms more ferocious than the most misogynist imprecations of certain church fathers. The theologians had asked if women had a soul. Several centuries later, some scientists were ready to refuse them a human intelligence.

Broca’s argument rested upon two sets of data: the larger brains of men in modern societies, and a supposed increase in male superiority through time. His most extensive data came from autopsies performed personally in four Parisian hospitals. For 292 male brains, he calculated an average weight of 1,325 grams; 140 female brains averaged 1,144 grams for a difference of 181 grams, or 14 percent of the male weight. Broca understood, of course, that part of this difference could be attributed to the greater height of males. Yet he made no attempt to measure the effect of size alone and actually stated that it cannot account for the entire difference because we know, a priori, that women are not as intelligent as men (a premise that the data were supposed to test, not rest upon):

We might ask if the small size of the female brain depends exclusively upon the small size of her body. Tiedemann has proposed this explanation. But we must not forget that women are, on the average, a little less intelligent than men, a difference which we should not exaggerate but which is, nonetheless, real. We are therefore permitted to suppose that the relatively small size of the female brain depends in part upon her physical inferiority and in part upon her intellectual inferiority.

In 1873, the year after Eliot published *Middlemarch*, Broca measured the cranial capacities of prehistoric skulls from L’Homme Mort cave. Here he found a difference of only 99.5 cubic centimeters between males and females, while modern populations range from 129.5 to 220.7. Topinard, Broca’s chief disciple, explained the increasing discrepancy through time as a result of differing evolutionary pressures upon dominant men and passive women:

The man who fights for two or more in the struggle for existence, who has all the responsibility and the cares of tomorrow, who is constantly active in combating
the environment and human rivals, needs more brain than the woman whom he
must protect and nourish, the sedentary woman, lacking any interior occupa-
tions, whose role is to raise children, love, and be passive.

In 1879, Gustave Le Bon, chief misogynist of Broca’s school, used these data
to publish what must be the most vicious attack upon women in modern sci-
cific literature (no one can top Aristotle). I do not claim his views were represen-
tative of Broca’s school, but they were published in France’s most respected
anthropological journal. Le Bon concluded:

In the most intelligent races, as among the Parisians, there are a large number of
women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most de-
veloped male brains. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for
a moment; only its degree is worth discussion. All psychologists who have stud-
ied the intelligence of women, as well as poets and novelists, recognize today
that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they
are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man. They excel in
fickleness, inconstancy, absence of thought and logic, and incapacity to reason.
Without doubt there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the aver-
age man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for
example, of a gorilla with two heads; consequently, we may neglect them entirely.

Nor did Le Bon shrink from the social implications of his views. He was hor-
rified by the proposal of some American reformers to grant women higher educa-
tion on the same basis as men:

A desire to give them the same education, and, as a consequence, to propose the
same goals for them, is a dangerous chimera. . . . The day when, misunderstanding
the inferior occupations which nature has given her, women leave the home
and take part in our battles; on this day a social revolution will begin, and every-
thing that maintains the sacred ties of the family will disappear.

Sound familiar?1

I have reexamined Broca’s data, the basis for all this derivative pronoun-
ment, and I find his numbers sound but his interpretation ill-founded, to say the
least. The data supporting his claim for increased difference through time can be
easily dismissed. Broca based his contention on the samples from L’Homme Mort
alone — only seven male and six female skulls in all. Never have so little data
yielded such far-ranging conclusions.

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1 When I wrote this essay, I assumed that Le Bon was a marginal, if colorful, figure. I have since
learned that he was a leading scientist, one of the founders of social psychology, and best
known for a seminal study on crowd behavior, still cited today (La psychologie des foules, 1895),
and for his work on unconscious motivation.
In 1888, Topinard published Broca's more extensive data on the Parisian hospitals. Since Broca recorded height and age as well as brain size, we may use modern statistics to remove their effect. Brain weight decreases with age, and Broca's women were, on average, considerably older than his men. Brain weight increases with height, and his average man was almost half a foot taller than his average woman. I used multiple regression, a technique that allowed me to assess simultaneously the influence of height and age upon brain size. In an analysis of the data for women, I found that, at average male height and age, a woman's brain would weigh 1,212 grams. Correction for height and age reduces Broca's measured difference of 181 grams by more than a third, to 113 grams.

I don't know what to make of this remaining difference because I cannot assess other factors known to influence brain size in a major way. Cause of death has an important effect: degenerative disease often entails a substantial diminution of brain size. (This effect is separate from the decrease attributed to age alone.) Eugene Schreider, also working with Broca's data, found that men killed in accidents had brains weighing, on average, 60 grams more than men dying of infectious diseases. The best modern data I can find (from American hospitals) records a full 100-gram difference between death by degenerative arteriosclerosis and by violence or accident. Since so many of Broca's subjects were very elderly women, we may assume that lengthy degenerative disease was more common among them than among the men.

More importantly, modern students of brain size still have not agreed on a proper measure for eliminating the powerful effect of body size. Height is partly adequate, but men and women of the same height do not share the same body build. Weight is even worse than height, because most of its variation reflects nutrition rather than intrinsic size—fat versus skinny exerts little influence upon the brain. Manouvrier took up this subject in the 1880s and argued that muscular mass and force should be used. He tried to measure this elusive property in various ways and found a marked difference in favor of men, even in men and women of the same height. When he corrected for what he called "sexual mass," women actually came out slightly ahead in brain size.

Thus, the corrected 113-gram difference is surely too large; the true figure is probably close to zero and may as well favor women as men. And 113 grams, by the way, is exactly the average difference between a 5 foot 4 inch and a 6 foot 4 inch male in Broca's data. We would not (especially us short folks) want to ascribe greater intelligence to tall men. In short, who knows what to do with Broca's data? They certainly don't permit any confident claim that men have bigger brains than women.

To appreciate the social role of Broca and his school, we must recognize that his statements about the brains of women do not reflect an isolated prejudice toward a single disadvantaged group. They must be weighed in the context of a general theory that supported contemporary social distinctions as biologically ordained. Women, blacks, and poor people suffered the same disparagement, but women bore the brunt of Broca's argument because he had easier access to data on
women's brains. Women were singularly denigrated but they also stood as surrogates for other disenfranchised groups. As one of Broca's disciples wrote in 1881: "Men of the black races have a brain scarcely heavier than that of white women." This juxtaposition extended into many other realms of anthropological argument, particularly to claims that, anatomically and emotionally, both women and blacks were like white children — and that white children, by the theory of recapitulation, represented an ancestral (primitive) adult stage of human evolution. I do not regard as empty rhetoric the claim that women's battles are for all of us.

Maria Montessori did not confine her activities to educational reform for young children. She lectured on anthropology for several years at the University of Rome, and wrote an influential book entitled Pedagogical Anthropology (English edition, 1913). Montessori was no egalitarian. She supported most of Broca's work and the theory of innate criminality proposed by her compatriot Cesare Lombroso. She measured the circumference of children's heads in her schools and inferred that the best prospects had bigger brains. But she had no use for Broca's conclusions about women. She discussed Manouvrier's work at length and made much of his tentative claim that women, after proper correction of the data, had slightly larger brains than men. Women, she concluded, were intellectually superior, but men had prevailed heretofore by dint of physical force. Since technology has abolished force as an instrument of power, the era of women may soon be upon us: "In such an epoch there will really be superior human beings, there will really be men strong in morality and in sentiment. Perhaps in this way the reign of women is approaching, when the enigma of her anthropological superiority will be deciphered. Woman was always the custodian of human sentiment, morality and honor."

This represents one possible antidote to "scientific" claims for the constitutional inferiority of certain groups. One may affirm the validity of biological distinctions but argue that the data have been misinterpreted by prejudiced men with a stake in the outcome, and that disadvantaged groups are truly superior. In recent years, Elaine Morgan has followed this strategy in her Descent of Woman, a speculative reconstruction of human prehistory from the woman's point of view — and as farcical as more famous tall tales by and for men.

I prefer another strategy. Montessori and Morgan followed Broca's philosophy to reach a more congenial conclusion. I would rather label the whole enterprise of setting a biological value upon groups for what it is: irrelevant and highly injurious. George Eliot well appreciated the special tragedy that biological labeling imposed upon members of disadvantaged groups. She expressed it for people like herself — women of extraordinary talent. I would apply it more widely — not only to those whose dreams are flouted but also to those who never realize that they may dream — but I cannot match her prose. In conclusion, then, the rest of Eliot's prelude to Middlemarch:

The limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favorite love stories in prose and verse.
Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heartbeats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed.

Questions for Discussion

1. Stephen Jay Gould’s argument focuses on research about women’s brain size, but — more importantly — what does he say about the nature of scientific inquiry — that is, about how scientists think?

2. What does Gould mean when he says, “Women were singularly denigrated but they also stood as surrogates for other disenfranchised groups” (para. 13)?

3. Why does Gould say, “I do not regard as empty rhetoric the claim that women’s battles are for all of us” (para. 13)? Is he being patronizing? Does such a personal comment undermine his scientific credibility? Explain.

4. Gould’s essay was published in 1980, and it centers on research conducted a century before that. What case can you make that Gould’s true subject was not women, but assumptions about the abilities of certain groups?

5. Would individuals accustomed to science texts have an easier time reading this essay? Why or why not? How do your experience and prior knowledge of a topic affect your reading process?

Questions on Rhetoric and Style

1. What purposes do the quotations in this essay from George Eliot’s novel Middlemarch serve? Why does Gould, when introducing the quotation from Broca in paragraph 5, refer to Eliot? Why are quotations from Eliot, whose real name was Mary Anne Evans, especially appropriate for Gould’s essay?

2. In paragraph 3, Gould states, “I have the greatest respect for Broca’s meticulous procedure. His numbers are sound.” Despite this praise, Gould goes on to refute Broca’s findings. What vulnerability does Gould find in Broca’s conclusions? Does Gould’s praise of Broca strengthen or weaken his own argument? Explain.

3. Gould builds two parallel arguments, one on scientific method, another on speculative conclusions. In which passages does he question the scientific method(s) rather than the findings themselves? How does Gould weave these sources together in order to make his own point?

4. How does each of the individuals Gould cites — Paul Broca, Gustave Le Bon, L. Manouvrier, and Maria Montessori — contribute to the development of his argument? Does each make a separate point, or do they reinforce one another? Could Gould have eliminated any of them without damaging his argument? Explain your reasoning.
5. At the end of paragraph 7, Gould adds a footnote reassessing an earlier point. Does this admission add or detract from his credibility?

6. Paragraphs 9 through 12 work as a unit to develop a single point that is integral to the overall essay. What is this point? How do paragraphs 9–12 develop the point?

7. In paragraph 13, Gould shows how Broca and his colleagues extended their conclusions to other groups. What is Gould’s purpose in developing this point as elaborately as he does?

8. Why is questioning Maria Montessori’s research and conclusions an effective strategy? What criticism might Gould be guarding against in doing so?

9. In the final two paragraphs, how does Gould bring together both of his arguments — that is, his argument against the actual scientific research and his argument about the conclusions drawn from that research?

10. This essay has a strong appeal to logos, as would be expected of a scientific argument. How does Gould also appeal to pathos? How does that appeal add to the persuasiveness of his argument?

11. Most of the time Gould writes in the third person, but he uses first person occasionally. Explain why you think this shift strengthens or weakens the essay.

12. How would you characterize the audience for whom Gould is writing? Do you think fellow scientists are among them? Explain why or why not.

**Suggestions for Writing**

1. In paragraph 3, Gould asserts that “science is an inferential exercise, not a catalog of facts. Numbers, by themselves, specify nothing. All depends upon what you do with them.” Support, challenge, or qualify Gould’s assertion by referring to statistics used in science, politics, economics, sports, or another applicable field.

2. Find an essay written for a specialized audience (for example, an essay about technology in a scientific journal or a computer magazine). Rewrite it for a more general audience.

3. Gould refers to “a general theory that supported contemporary social distinctions as biologically ordained” in the late nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century, many continue to argue for nature over nurture — that is, for biology rather than socialization — as the causal agent for skills and talents of specific groups of people. Write an essay explaining whether you believe heredity or environment is the principal determinant of human characteristics. You may use yourself as an example and may cite Gould’s essay, but you should also do research in other sources to explore how the nature-nurture debate has fared in particular historical contexts.

4. Write an essay using scientific data to develop an argument that has ethical or social implications. For example, use statistical data to make (a) a case about the impact of global warming or (b) a proposal to address what is being called the obesity epidemic in the United States. Frame the essay with a quotation (as Gould does), a description, or an anecdote.