



Barbara A. Spellmann

aka Bobbie

Barbara A. Spellmann, [website](#), Professor of Law, joined the University of Virginia School of Law in the psychology department in 1997 and became half-time in the law school in 2008. She teaches evidence and various courses on the intersection of psychology and law.

Barbara A. Spellmann has published in both psychology journals and law reviews. But she has also published articles in the Bridge Bulletin of the American Contract Bridge League:

1. Bridge and Memory: Some Surprising Insights, the issue of April 1994, pages 54-56.
2. Sex Differences in Bridge, the issue of July 1996, pages 81-82.

The latter article is contained in the following pages in .pdf file format for future reference and it is intended that these words are preserved and archived for the future bridge player.

For many beginning bridge players it is practically impossible to imagine that the game itself was socially separating and therefore separated in various ways. Since the official beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s of the game and especially how it was played these various separations seem, in light of the modern times of today, antiquated, outmoded, outdated, even unimaginable and inconceivable since the concept of the game has been so forcibly altered over time.

The reasons, causes, even the justifications for such separations between the sexes when planning tournaments, domestically and globally, consciously or even subconsciously, were in fact only a sign of the time and the concept, even perhaps moral confidence, and belief that the female mind was fundamentally different, dissimilar, divergent.

Barbara A. Spellmann takes this issue and dissects it in her article, which is presented in full below. May the reader take note that the truth, the facts, even the reality will always rise above the present opinion to correct the falseness, the misconception, and that the insubstantiality of such arguments will always be defeated.

Sex Differences in Bridge

Another year, another *Barry Crane Top 500* list, another *Player of the Year* list, - both dominated by men. Once again the questions: Why?

Are men simply better bridge players than women? It would be foolish to ignore the evidence - men win more points and more major open events than women.

For a moment, let's ignore the objections that so easily pop to mind. For example, perhaps more men travel to more tournaments and they play more often in high-point paying events. And consider the question: If it is true that men are more likely to become top players than women, why might this be so? The answer could come from biology or culture-nature or nurture, so to speak.

Biological differences in cognitive abilities between men and women are becoming well-documented. Men are better at some spatial tasks - for example, imagining how an object would appear when rotated in space. Men are also better at mathematical reasoning.

Women have greater perceptual speed, that is, the ability to rapidly identify matching items. They also are better at mathematical calculations. There are three interesting things of note, however, about these findings.

First, the differences between the sexes are quite small. The variation within each sex is much greater than the small difference between the two sexes. What the mens is that if you randomly pick one and one woman out of the entire population, it is more likely, but only very slightly more likely, that the man will be better on spatial tasks.

Second, these differences are not due directly to a person's chromosomal configuration - rather, the level of different hormones is a better predictor of performance on some of the tasks.

For example, women perform better on spatial tasks during the time of month when their testosterone levels are highest. Men perform better on those same tasks in the spring when their testosterone levels are lowest.

Third, even though these findings are true for the general population, they are not necessarily true for the population of bridge players. Bridge players are not a random sample of the general population.

Perhaps whatever qualities we have that made us want to play bridge co-vary with other qualities we have, for example, being good at both mathematical calculations and mathematical reasoning. Certainly, we all think that bridge players (except maybe our partners) have higher I.Q.s than the general population.

To illustrate how self-selection can lead to an elimination of differences in a sub-population, consider the following plausible example. Although women, in general, like children more than men do, it is not true that women who are elementary school teachers like children more than men who are elementary school teachers do. Similarly, such sex differences that exist in the general population might not exist in the select population of people who play bridge.

All that said, however, we are still left with two questions. First, is it really clear that an advantage in any of the skills noted above would lead to an advantage in playing bridge? Second, even if, for example, being better at spatial tasks or mathematical reasoning made men better bridge players, and even if the population of bridge players reflected the sex differences found in the general population, would such small differences actually lead to the large differences in the lists?

The second possible explanation for the differences in the lists comes from culture. Are men and women, and boys and girls, treated differently with respect to qualities that might allow them to become better bridge players? The answer here, of course, is a resounding yes for all the reasons our society has been discussing for years.

It seems that our culture, in general is more supportive of men in ways that would foster bridge expertise. Boys are encouraged to pursue solitary intellectual pursuits - girls are not. Girls get less analytic training in mathematical and scientific reasoning. Girls of 10 are not allowed to stay out as late or travel as much on their own as adults. Women tend to take on more child-raising responsibilities so have less time to play. Men have more higher-paying jobs, so they can afford to travel to tournaments. Men play with and mentor other men. And so forth.

But just because there are large cultural differences in treatment that could explain the sex differences on the list, that doesn't mean these cultural differences explain the sex differences on the list. How could we ever know the difference is biological or cultural?

When I ask this question of my class on psychological statistics and experimental design, the students come up with two answers. The first is what you would want to do to get valid results but is impossible - to run a controlled experiment. Find a planet (town/city/country) where people of different sexes are treated the same on every dimension that could effect their bridge playing. All children are equally encouraged to pursue intellectual games and classes. All are equally allowed to stay out late and travel. All are equally mentored by experts, etc. If men still outperform women, then we are left with a biological explanation.

Given that such an experiment is impossible, there is a second alternative. It is a statistical technique called "matching." Matching involves finding individuals from the different groups of interest who are equal ("matched") on all of the factors that might influence the variable we are interested in.

For bridge, then, to eliminate cultural biases, we would want to find men and women who are matched on factors such as number of years played, number of tournaments entered per year, etc., and see whether those matched sets differ in masterpoints or tournaments won.

Ascertaining exactly which dimension people should be matched on can be tricky. Those mentioned above are important, as with foreign languages, the age at which it is learned might be important.

Note that the chosen factors should be able to predict differences in performing within each sex as well as between the sexes. As you can tell, figuring out why one group performs better than another group on any task, be it the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), or I.Q. tests (as the debate on the book *The Bell Curve* revealed) or playing bridge, is difficult. As particularly complex when experimental techniques are not available and when the groups are not randomly selected.

Yes, men win more points and more major events than women; I'm just not convinced that any of us yet knows why.

Doreen Kimura's article, "Sex Differences in the Brain" in *Scientific American*, September 1992, is a good review of research on sex differences in cognition.

Footnote: At the time of authoring this article for the Bridge Bulletin for the ACBL Bobbie Spellmann is a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin.

Footnote: Presently, 2016 or twenty years later, Barbara A. Spellmann is a Professor of Psychology and Professor of Law and works in the Department of Psychology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.