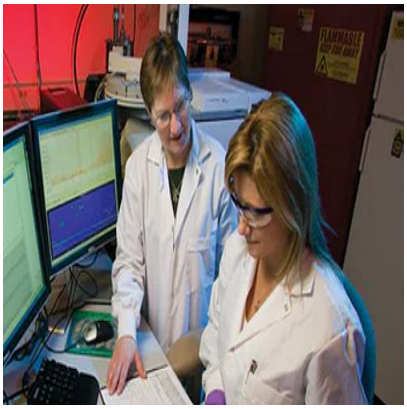


Are women more prone to error?

Description

Are women more prone to (sin) error? Gender and ethical decision-making

Until the second half of the twentieth century, theologians were agreed that women are more prone to sin, error and deception than men, and this was considered a reason to bar them from teaching and leadership in the world as well as the church and the home. This was how the passage in 1 Timothy 2: 14 was interpreted, â€œAnd Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and became a transgressorâ€• which of course follows on from Paul saying â€œI permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a manâ€•

default watermark

eg Chrysostom (347-407 â€œ*the sex is weak and fickle, collectively*â€•.

Augustine (354-430): *â€œSatan first tried his assault upon the woman, making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance, that he might gradually gain the whole,, and not supposing that the man would readily give ear to him, or be deceivedâ€•*

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274): *â€œSuch is the subjection in which woman is by nature subordinate to man, because the power of rational discernment is by nature stronger in man â€¦ generally speaking women are not perfected in wisdom so as to be fit to be entrusted with public teachingâ€•*

Erasmus (1466-1536): *â€œthe man could not have been taken in either by the serpentâ€™s promises or by the allure of the fruit; only love for his wife drew him into a ruinous complianceâ€•* (Note woman as deceiver/temptress).

Martin Luther (1484-1546): *â€œthe serpent did not attack Adam but rather attacked the weaker vessel.. just as he does todayâ€•*

John Knox (1514-1572): *â€œ the empire of a woman is a thing repugnant to natureâ€¦ for who can deny but it is repugnant.. that the blind shall be appointed lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick and impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole strong, and finally, that the foolish, mad and frantic shall govern the discrete.. and such be all women, compared to man in bearing of authorityâ€¦. weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolishâ€•* (**The First blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women).**

John Wesley (1703-1791): â€œ*(A woman) ought not to teach (because) she is more easily deceived, and more easily deceivesâ€•.*

Matthew Henry (1662-1714): â€œ*It was the devilâ€™s subtlety to attack the weaker with his temptations.. We may suppose her inferior to Adam in knowledge and strength and presence of mind.â€•*

As late as 1957 Guthrie could write: *â€œPaul has in mind the greater aptitude of the weaker sex to be led astrayâ€•*.[1]

So, the traditional view was that women are more easily deceived than men because of their lesser intellectual and critical thinking capacity – and perhaps various other moral failings as well, weakness, impatience.

default watermark

Today, at least in the West, in the face of overwhelming evidence of the equality of women in relation to rationality, intelligence and critical thinking skills, even complementarian commentators repudiate the notion that women are intrinsically intellectually inferior, although they continue to believe that women are unsuited to lead in the church and to teach men. What else could they do in face of women as leaders in the fields of science, medicine, law, philosophy, even theology? And they mostly also have abandoned the view that women are more easily deceived than men (though not all of them, as weâ€™ll see).

Itâ€™s difficult to maintain the traditional view that women are more easily deceived and so prone to error, in light of the research findings. Many studies have analysed factors that make someone more vulnerable to deception, and in general gender is not considered a significant factor. Factors that are significant are age, experience, socialization, experience, intelligence, knowledge and education. No detectable difference has been found in â€œdeceivabilityâ€• between boys and girls in studies of children. An occasional study on adults has found that males are more likely to detect deception, but the majority have found no difference, or a marginal advantage for females. (Romance is a factor commonly believed to lessen oneâ€™s ability to detect deceit, but even in such situations, women are better at knowing when theyâ€™re being deceived than men). [2]

When we think about women throughout history, and perhaps in partial defence of those theologians of the past, several of the factors that make people more deceivable would have been operating for them: limited experience, socialization and knowledge, and usually no education. So perhaps they were more gullible, more prone to deception and error. But does this really excuse such a view? Or is it a case of patriarchy reinforcing itself? Women are inferior, so itâ€™s not worth educating them, they should be confined to domestic sphere and roles in the first century church, and see, they are more gullible-which proves the point that they are unsuited for public life or teaching – a circular argument. Certainly it wouldnâ€™t be surprising if at least some, perhaps most women of Paulâ€™s day, whom he has in

mind when he forbids women to teach men in the Ephesian church, were more prone to deception. Paul more than hints at this when in his second letter to Timothy he has harsh words for a group of people in the church, people of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith who oppose the truth, and among whom are â€œthose who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by sins and captivated by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3: 1-7). Itâ€™s not surprising that such women were more easily taken in by the false teaching that was circulating in Ephesus. So Paul warns them against being like Eve, who was also deceived and then went on to deceive. But this was a particular problem in that church at that time, there is no reason to think that women are more easily deceived today and so more liable to lead others astray with heretical teaching.

I said that complementarians have mostly abandoned the view that women are more prone to deception. However, I should note that there has been recently a resurgence of the idea that women are more easily deceived, both among biblical scholars and at a popular level. *Mark Driscoll exemplifies the popular level:*

â€œWithout blushing, Paul is simply stating that when it comes to leading in the church, women are unfit because they are more gullible and easier to deceive than men. While many irate women have disagreed with his assessment through the years, it does appear from this that such women who fail to trust his instruction and follow his teaching are much like their mother Eve and are well-intended but ill-informed. . . Before you get all emotional like a woman in hearing this, please consider the content of the womenâ€™s magazines at your local grocery store that encourages liberated women in our day to watch porno with their boyfriends, master oral sex for men who have no intention of marrying them, pay for their own dates in the name of equality, spend an average of three-fourths of their childbearing years having sex but trying not to get pregnant, and abort 1/3 of all babies â€“ and ask yourself if it doesnâ€™t look like the Serpent is still trolling the garden and that the daughters of Eve arenâ€™t gullible in pronouncing progress, liberation, and equality (p. 43).[3]

default watermark

Yet in practice, Driscoll allows women to teach men at Mars Hill, though he does not allow them to be chief pastors or elders. This has brought some criticism of Driscoll by his fellow complementarians:

â€œWhy would one allow a person from the “gullible” and “easier to deceive” sex to lead and to teach God’s people? How could such a person possibly be qualified to teach and to lead when they are so easily brought under the spell of error? We are not ready to concede Driscoll’s interpretaÂtion of Paul on this point. Yet even if we were to grant his interpretation, we believe that his praxis is hardly a legitiÂmate implication of his exegesisâ€[4]

A more academic and nuanced version of the return to the traditional view that women are more gullible or easily deceived and so prone to error is expressed by complementarian (patriarchalist) scholars Thomas Schreiner and Daniel Doriani. However they depart from the traditional view in the reasons they give for this. Whereas traditionally the reason for womenâ€™s gullibility was understood to be their inferior rational or intellectual capacity, Schreiner argues that women are more easily deceived â€œbecause of the different inclinations present in Adam and Eve. Generally speaking, women are more relational and nurturing and men are more given to rational analysis and objectivity. Women are less prone than men to see the importance of doctrinal formulations, especially when it comes to the issue of identifying heresy and making a stand for the truth. Appointing women to the teaching office is prohibited because they are less likely to draw a line on doctrinal non-negotiables,

and thus deception and false teaching will more easily enter the church. This is not to say women are intellectually deficient or inferior to men. If women were intellectually inferior, Paul would not allow them to teach women and children. What concerns him are the consequences of allowing women in the authoritative teaching office, for their gentler and kinder nature inhibits them from excluding people for doctrinal error. There is the danger of stereotyping here, for obviously some women are more inclined to objectivity and are â€œtougherâ€• and less nurturing than other women. But as a general rule women are more relational and caring than men. This explains why most women have many more close friends than men. The different inclinations of women (and men!) do not imply that they are inferior or superior to men. It simply demonstrates that men and women are profoundly different. Women have some strengths that men do not have, and men have some strengths that are generally lacking in womenâ€•.[5]

Now what do you make of this? Is it plausible? Is there any evidence this actually happens or is it speculative? Is it based on a stereotype? (Is it possible nurturing inclination to relationships could be a strength rather than a weakness in relation to Christian teaching and leadership?)

It seems some complementarians need a reason for the prohibition of women teaching, to back up the â€œheadshipâ€• argument. Because â€œheadshipâ€• is not linked here (itâ€™s not even mentioned in the passage or the letter) or anywhere in the New Testament with a prohibition of women teaching or being in authority. So the reason that is postulated is womenâ€™s preference for relationships over analysis.

default watermark

And they may, at least at first glance, receive some support from research by psychologists on moral development. Lawrence Kohlberg developed a model of six stages of moral development, an adaptation from a theory originally developed by Piaget. Each stage represents a more adequate way of responding to moral dilemmas than the previous one, and ideally by adulthood a person moves and reaches stage Six. For Kohlberg, the process of moral development is mainly concerned with the development of an understanding of justice. [6]

Level 1 (Pre-Conventional)

The pre-conventional level of moral reasoning is especially common in children, although adults may also exhibit it. The morality of an action is judged by its direct consequences.

In **Stage one** (obedience and punishment driven), the focus is on the direct consequences for oneself. For example, an action is perceived as morally wrong because the perpetrator is punished. “The last time I did that I got spanked so I will not do it again.” The worse the punishment for the act is, the more “bad” the act is perceived to be.

Stage two (self-interest driven) or “what’s in it for me” position, defines right behaviour as whatever serves the individual’s needs or interests. The needs of others are only considered to the extent that they might further the individual’s own interests: the “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours” mentality.

Conventional

This is typical of adolescents and adults. Morality is determined by society’s views and expectations. An individual obeys rules and follows society’s norms even when there are no consequences for

obedience or disobedience. Adherence is somewhat rigid as the rules are seldom questioned.

In **Stage three** , the self enters society by filling social roles. Individuals try to be “goodâ€• by living up to societyâ€™s expectations of these roles. The morality of an action may also be judged by evaluating its consequences in terms of a person’s relationships, which include things like respect and gratitude. Intentions also play a more significant role in reasoning at this stage.

In **Stage four** , it is important to obey laws and follow social conventions because of their importance in maintaining a functioning society. There is an obligation and a duty to uphold laws and rules. Many people remain at stage four, where the source of authority for morality is outside the individual.

Post-Conventional

The post-conventional or principled level, consists of stages five and six. There is a growing realization that individuals are separate entities from society, and that the individualâ€™s own perspective may take precedence over societyâ€™s view; they may disobey rules inconsistent with their own principles. These people live by their own abstract principles about right and wrongâ€”for example human rights or justice. Rules are seen as useful but not absolute. Many people may never reach this level of abstract moral reasoning.

default watermark

In **Stage five** , laws are regarded as social contracts rather than absolute; they may be critiqued and changed to meet â€œthe greatest good for the greatest number of peopleâ€•? (note the similarity to utilitarianism) Democracy is ostensibly based on stage five reasoning.

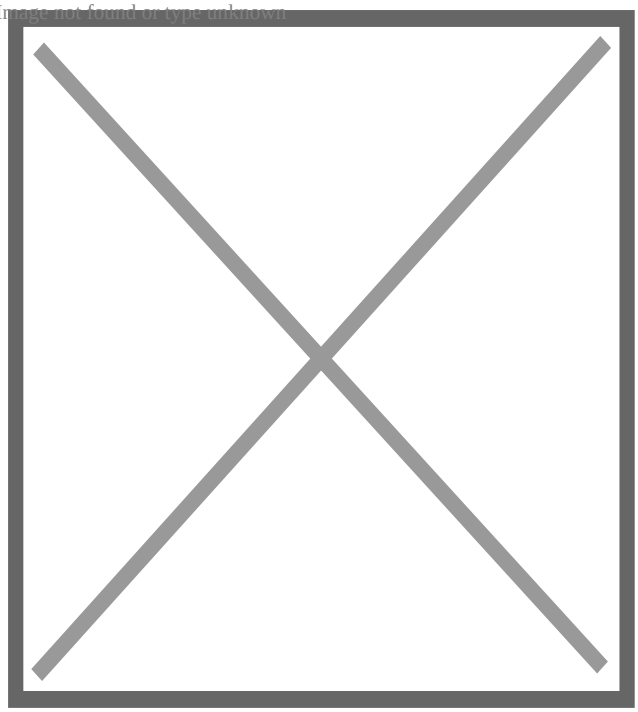
In **Stage six**, moral reasoning is based on abstract reasoning using universal ethical principles. Laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice. Decisions are reached categorically in an absolute way, as in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The individual acts because it is right, and not because it is instrumental, expected, legal, or previously agreed upon. Few if any adults actually reach this level.

Formal elements

Kohlberg moral stages vop.gif

Image not found or type unknown

Image not found or type unknown



default watermark

Kohlberg moral stages
When Kohlberg studied womenâ€™s moral reasoning using his six stage scale, he found them to be consistently deficient. They seemed to be stuck at the third stage, characterised by interpersonal relationships, recognition of the expectations and responsibilities entailed in various roles, and helping and pleasing others. Kohlberg postulated that only if and when women moved out of the home and into male domains would they â€œprogress like men towards the higher stages where relationships are subordinated to rules (stage IV) and then to universal principles of justice. But what is really interesting, what you need to know, is that Kohlbergâ€™s model was developed entirely by interviewing males-84 boys in his original study. This is one many examples where â€•normsâ€• have been established on the basis of male patterns and female behaviour is hence a deviation, different, and often regarded as inferior. One writer who has argued strongly that the feminine style of moral or ethical decision-making is distinctive but by no means inferior is Carol Gilligan in her book In a Different Voice. [7]

From her own study of male and female children at various stages of development Gilligan identified a number of distinctive features of each genderâ€™s moral reasoning.

Male	**Female**
Abstract	Contextual
Impartial	Particular
Rules, principles	Relationships
Rights	Responsibilities

Linear reason Emotional nuance

Justice Care

Gilligan postulated that these differences emerge from differences in early formation of the self. Her account of the process is that every infant initially identifies with the mother, and only gradually differentiates to become a separate self. The male child must sharply differentiate himself from this caretaking mother to establish his male identity, strongly repressing â€˜maternalâ€™ qualities, such as tenderness, emotion, empathy and identification with others. Having achieved a highly individualised self, he adopts a rational, individualistic, impartial and abstract thinking style. Baby girls, by contrast, â€™do not have to repress their feminine identification with the nurturing mother in order to become a female self.â€™ They do not have to make a severe break or sever their nurturing connections with others, so the female self is less differentiated, individualised and bounded than the male self.

Gilliganâ€™s work has been developed by Nel Noddings into an â€˜ethic of careâ€™, which she claims is a distinctively feminine approach to ethics, in contrast to the masculine â€˜ethic of justiceâ€™. Interestingly, the female dominated professions of nursing and social work have enthusiastically adopted this ethic of care as better suited to their practices than conventional principle based or utilitarian ethics.

default watermark

Now whether or not you accept Gilliganâ€™s theory, and it has certainly come in for criticism, including criticism from feminists, what I want us to notice is the similarity in the argument from Kohlberg and from the biblical scholars Schreiner and Doriani. Letâ€™s leave aside for the moment that this is a generalisation which is not always true but in each case, because women are perceived as more relational, caring and nurturing than men who are into abstract principles and doctrinal formulations, this is seen, in the one case as a deficiency in moral reasoning, and in the other as a reason to bar them from teaching men in church. The argument is that women â€œare more prone to introduce deception into the church since they are more nurturing and relational than men. It is not that they do not have the capacity to teach doctrine or the ability to understand it. Women are less likely to perceive the need to take a stand on doctrinal non-negotiable since they prize harmonious relationships more than men doâ€•.[8]

One problem with Schreiner and Dorianiâ€™s reasoning has been noted by Gary Nebeker, himself a complementarian scholar. He points out the very modern nature of the words and concepts employed: â€œI wonder if the terms â€œrelationalâ€• and â€œnurturingâ€• and the ideas those words convey would have been as familiar to Paul (as a first-century Jewish male from Tarsus of Cilicia) as they are to us today? … (D)escriptions of the fundamental inclinations of women as â€œrelationalâ€• and â€œnurturingâ€• have been the conclusions arrived at by secular psychological research… and even anecdotal evidence. This has become a part of an American vocabulary and a â€œsocial construction of realityâ€• for describing the differences between men and women. … I think that at best Schreinerâ€™s explanation for why Paul prohibits women from teaching men is a postulation, a postulation that is informed to an extent by contemporary psychological categoriesâ€•.[9]

But I think the really big problem with this kind of reasoning comes down to the question: who said that being oriented to relationships rather than analysis is a less advanced form of moral decision making, or a less appropriate way to teach or exercise leadership?

Letâ€™s look at these characteristics of moral reasoning described by Gilligan again:

Male	**Female**
Abstract	Contextual
Impartial	Particular
Rules, principles	Relationships
Rights	Responsibilities
Linear reason	Emotional nuance
Justice	Care

Is it obvious to you that one approach rather than the other is ethically more advanced? Or more in accord with the scriptures? Or more consistent with the character of God?

Iâ€™d like to look at this from a theological perspective first, and then from an ethical perspective. Even a complementarian writer, Nebeker whom I quoted before, can see the problem with Doriani and Schreinerâ€™s reasoning. He points out that, since â€œnurtureâ€• usually means â€œto promote and sustain the growth and development of,â€•biblically this is not exclusively associated with the female or feminine . Paul tells husbands to nurture their wives in Ephesians 5:28-30: â€œ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of His bodyâ€• (NRSV). So nurturing is not just for women! Indeed it is modelled on Christ. Paul and his co-workers were nurturers: â€œBut we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to usâ€• (1 Thess. 2:7, 8) (NRSV). And â€œNurtureâ€• is part of the job description of an elder: â€œif someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he *take care of* Godâ€™s church?â€• (1 Tim. 3:5).

default watermark

Jesus himself, on whom surely, biblical leadership should be based, described himself as the Good Shepherd. The one who cares for the sheep. Who nurtures them. Who knows them by name. He is concerned with relationships.

So again, I ask why would an inclination to nurturing and relationships and caring disqualify women for leadership or teaching, biblically?

Turning now to moral decision making, Kohlbergâ€™s view that stage V (utilitarian) and VI (Kantian) reasoning are more advanced has been seriously critiqued in ethics, both secular and Christian, and I would argue, largely discredited today in Christian ethics. That is because the dominant way of doing ethics among Protestants, divine command theory, has been complemented by and in some cases replaced by a virtue ethic approach. This is not a new approach: it was the dominant way of doing ethics in the classical Greek era and persisted as a major stream (alongside natural law) in Western moral philosophy up to the so called Enlightenment. It re-emerged in the late 1950’s with Elizabeth

Anscombe's 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy", which crystallised the increasing dissatisfaction with the forms of deontology (principle or rules based ethics) and utilitarianism which were then dominant. She pointed out that both these approaches paid no attention to what many people think is most important in morality: the virtues or qualities of character that make a person good, motives, moral education, wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationships, the role of the emotions in our moral life and the fundamentally important questions of â€œWhat sort of person I should be?â€• as opposed to simply â€œWhat should I do?â€•. In Christian ethics, revival of the virtue approach was associated with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas.

There is a fascinating correspondence between the male and female features of moral reasoning identified by Gilligan and a comparison between principle based and utilitarian ethics on the one hand and virtue ethics on the other.

Deontological/utilitarian	Virtue
Abstract	Contextual
Impartial	Particular
Rules, principles	Relationships
Rights (deontological only)	Responsibilities
Linear reason	Emotional nuance
Justice (deontological only)	Care

default watermark

And we could add:

Individual	Community
Propositions	Narrative

We donâ€™t have time to explore virtue ethics or justify it biblically. What I find fascinating is that most Christian ethics now understand that we need both approaches for a complete Christian ethic. We need divine command (the biblical form of deontological ethics) And we need virtue. They are not opposite and contradictory approaches that we have to make a choice between. They are, complementary.

â€œI propose therefore that we regard the morality of duty and principles and the morality of virtues and traits of character not as rival kinds of morality between which we must choose, but as two complementary aspects of the same morality. Then, for every principle there will be a morally good trait, often going by the same name, consisting of a disposition or tendency to act according to it; and for every morally good trait there will be a principle defining the kind of action in which it is to express itself. To parody a famous dictum of Kantâ€™s, I am inclined to think that *principles without traits are impotent and traits without principles are blind*â€• **[10]**

Women can only be regarded as more prone to deception, error and sin, and as inferior in their moral decision making if we assume that masculine ways of thinking are the norm and that deviation from

that norm, being different, makes women inferior, â€œweakâ€•, unsuitable or unfit for certain roles or offices in the church. A truly complementarian understanding would recognise that different approaches are the very reason why we need both men and women in these roles and offices. We really are better together.

---

[1] All quotations taken from Appendix B, William Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downerâ€™s Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2001) 263-268.

[2] See Appendix C in Webb, 269-273

[3] Mark Driscoll, *On Church Leadership* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008).

[4]Denny Burk and James Hamilton Jr., â€œYounger Evangelicals and Women in Ministry: A Sketch of the Spectrum of Opinionâ€•*Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 12 (2) Fall 2007

[5] Thomas Schreiner, â€œAn interpretation of 1 Timothy 2: 9-15: A dialogue with scholarshipâ€• in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2: 9-15* Eds. Andreas Kostenberger, Thomas R Schreiner and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker Book Houser, 1995) 145-6.

[6] Lawrence Kohlberg, â€œThe Development of Modes of Thinking and Choices in Years 10 to 16â€• Ph. D Diss., University of Chicago, 1958.

default watermark

[7] Carol Gilligan *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Womenâ€™s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982)

[8] Schreiner, 153

[9] *. Gary Nebeker,* â€œâ€˜Who packed your bags?â€™ Factors that influence our pre-understandingsâ€•, 2004http://bible.org/article/%E2%80%9Cwho-packed-your-bags%E2%80%9D-factors-influence-our-preunderstandings

[10] W K Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1963, p.65.

Date Created
15.06.2010
Author
cappleby