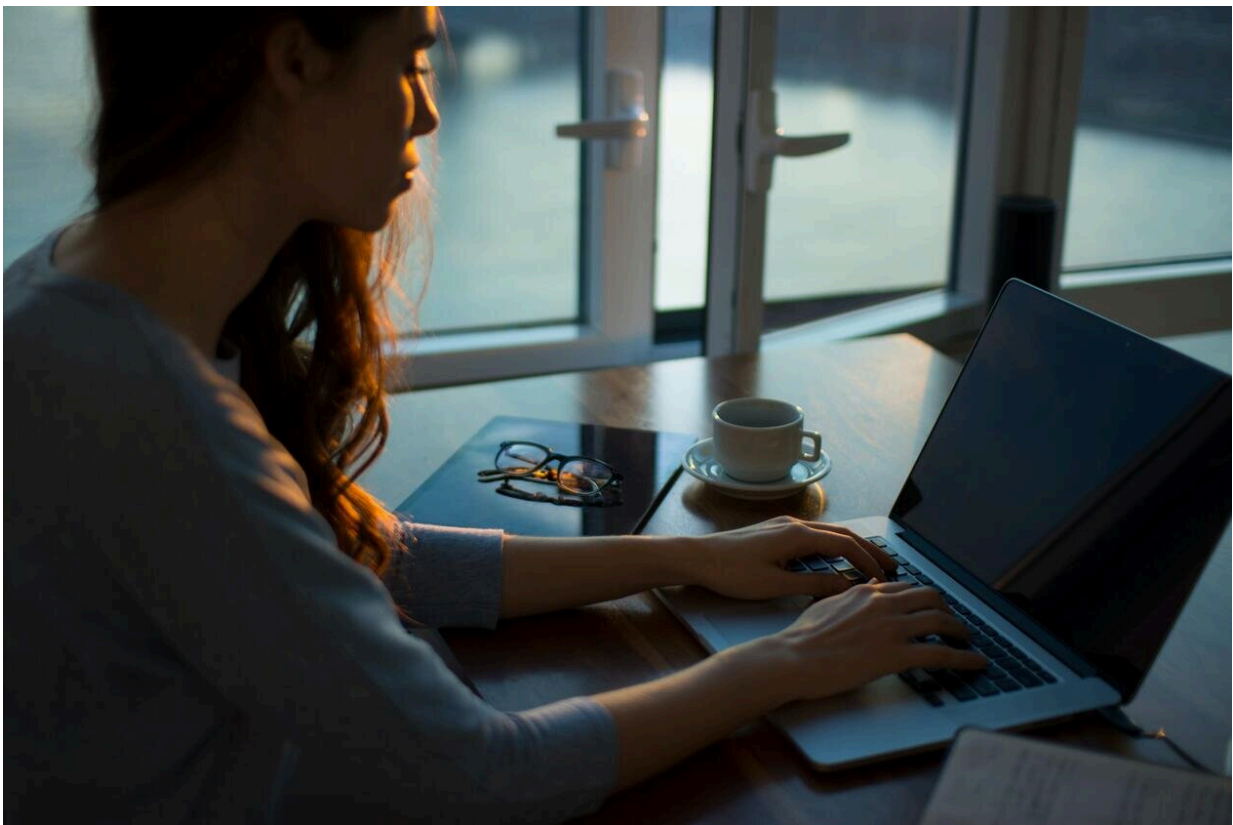


Are women really better at finding and remembering words than men? Large study settles score

October 13 2022, by Margareth Barndon



Credit: Unsplash

Textbooks and popular science books claim with certainty that women are better at finding words and remembering words, but is this really a

fact?

"Women are better. The female advantage is consistent across time and [life span](#), but it is also relatively small," says Marco Hirnstein, professor at The University of Bergen, Norway.

Hirnstein is interested in how biological, psychological, and [social factors](#) contribute to sex/[gender differences](#) in [cognitive abilities](#) and what the underlying brain mechanisms are.

Will the results finally settle public debates on who's better?

"So far, the focus has mostly been on abilities, in which men excel. However, in recent years the focus has shifted more towards women," says Hirnstein.

The origin of these sex/gender differences; nature versus nurture—and the potential consequences of these differences have been the subject of big societal debates. As in do men and women have different talents for different professions?

Textbooks and popular science books take it for granted that women are better at finding words. For example, when naming words that begin with the letter "F," or words that belong to a certain category like animals or fruits. It has also been considered "fact" that women are better at remembering words.

Yet, the actual findings are much more inconsistent than [textbooks](#) imply: Some studies find a female advantage, some find a male advantage, some do not find any advantage.

"Most intellectual skills show no or negligible differences in average performance between men and women. However, women excel in some

tasks, while men excel in others on average."

This might sound like stating the obvious, but Hirnstein and his colleagues point out how their findings can be useful in diagnosis and in health care.

Critical relevance for the diagnosis of dementia

The results are relevant in at least two ways. First, they help to clarify whether the female advantage is real. Second, knowing about this sex/gender difference is important for interpreting the results of diagnostic assessments, in which those abilities are frequently tested.

For example, to determine whether somebody has dementia. Knowing that women are generally better in those tasks is critical to prevent that women are under-diagnosed, due to their better average, baseline performance. And for men: That they are over-diagnosed, due to their lower average baseline performance.

Currently, many but not all assessments take sex/gender into account.

The method is meta

Hirnstein and his colleagues conducted a so-called "[meta-analysis](#)," where they analyzed the combined data of all Ph.D. theses, master theses, and studies published in [scientific journals](#) they could find. This meta-analysis encompassed more than 500 measures from more than 350,000 participants.

The researchers found that [women](#) are indeed better. The advantage is small but consistent across the last 50 years and across an individual's lifespan.

Moreover, they found that the female advantage depends on the sex/[gender](#) of the leading scientist: Female scientists report a larger female advantage, male scientists report a smaller female advantage.

The study is published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

More information: Marco Hirnstein et al, Sex/Gender Differences in Verbal Fluency and Verbal-Episodic Memory: A Meta-Analysis, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/17456916221082116](#)

Provided by University of Bergen

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