

Gender trumps politics in determining people's ability to read others' minds, study finds

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Political parties regularly claim to have their finger on the pulse and be

able to read the public mood. Yet a new study challenges the idea that being political makes you good at understanding others: it shows gender, not politics, is a far more important factor in determining people's social skills.

Analysis of a sample of 4,000 people from across the U.K., compiled by a team of psychologists at the University of Bath, highlights that being female and educated are the biggest determinants of whether you can understand or read others' minds.

For their study the psychologists looked at qualities associated with understanding others such as agreeableness, picking up on subtle clues and self-reflection. In psychology, this is known as "theory of mind," which is the capacity to understand other people by ascribing mental states to them.

The team stress these results represent averages, but they say their study is an important reminder about the drivers of agreement and disagreement in public life. Their findings are published today (Wednesday 24 May) in the journal *PLOS One*.

Age was only associated with understanding others in later life: on average, [older people](#) had poorer ability to understand other people.

Dr. Punit Shah, senior author, associate professor and leading expert on social cognitive processing at the University of Bath explains, "In a world where it seems increasingly difficult to hold and express different points of view, it is crucial that we understand the barriers to connecting with other people.

"Political views are often thought of as such a barrier, but our research actually shows that a person's politics is not, in fact, linked to how well they understand others.

"Importantly, we didn't just find an absence of evidence for a political link in the study. The analyses also provided evidence of absence for this link. This is a socially important finding that might help to break down some artificially constructed barriers between people and ultimately improve understanding between different people in our society."

Shah argues that the link between being educated and female and better understanding other perspectives is also important.

He adds, "Historically male perspectives have been prioritized in society. We are of course seeing this narrative diminish over time, and research like ours adds extra evidence to highlight the important role of education and being female for social understanding and cohesion in society—far more so than politics."

To conduct the research, the team asked members of the public to provide details about their socio-demographic background, as well as to score their [political beliefs](#) (ranging from 1 = very liberal, to 7 = very conservative). They also used a 'mindreading test' to ascertain how well participants understood what other people are thinking.

This test—[developed by the same team in 2021](#)—asks a series of simple statements, such as: "I can usually understand another person's viewpoint, even if it differs from my own"; and "I find it easy to put myself in somebody else's shoes."

Lead researcher Dr. Rachel Clutterbuck emphasized that these findings could improve the understanding of social differences between people. "The reasons for why some people are better at understanding others are not well understood, but this research provides a glimpse into some [individual differences](#), such as gender, which may help to explain these social differences.

"Our results are new because the study considered so many factors—like gender, education, age, and politics—in tandem, rather than looking at them separately as often happens. When we do this, it is clear to see that gender is, by far, most strongly linked to how well others are understood. This finding highlights the complexity of social life and reminds us to consider the various factors that may contribute to understanding and getting on with someone."

More information: Socio-demographic and Political Predictors of Theory of Mind in Adulthood, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0284960](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284960)

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