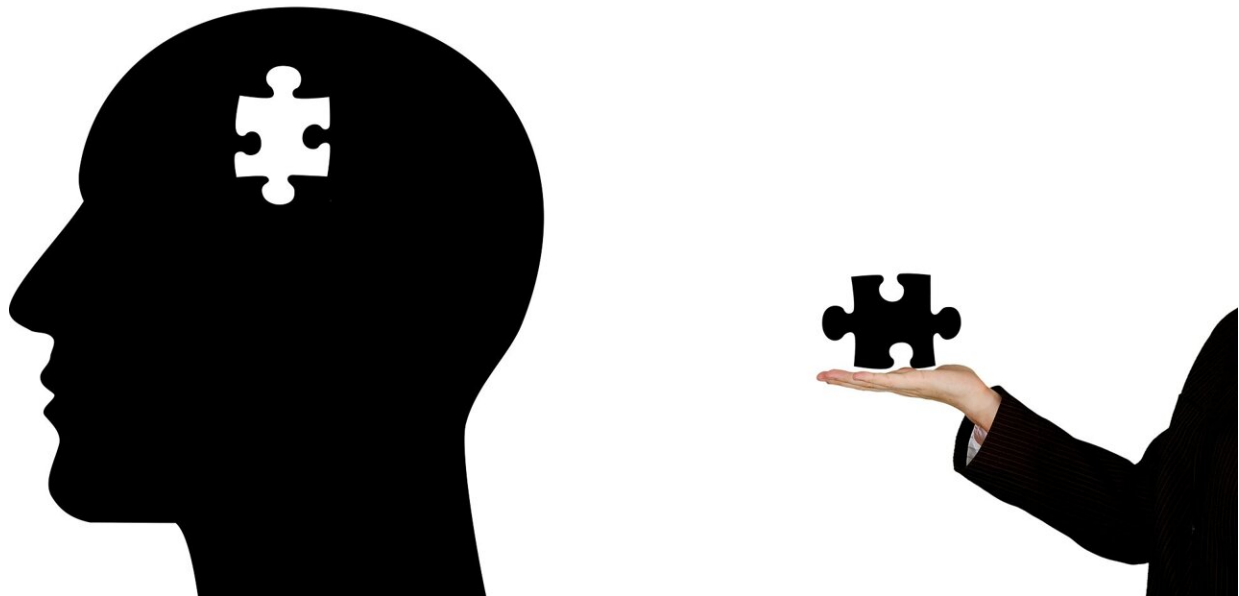


Researcher uncovers how stereotypes about brilliance shape women's decisions to study psychology or philosophy

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Even though women in high school and college tend to outperform men academically, they still internalize the stereotype that brilliance is more linked to men. This belief affects their choice of major and perpetuates gender gaps in academic fields, according to a new study by a Florida

State University researcher.

Heather M. Maranges, a research fellow in the Department of Human Development and Family Science, compared the fields of philosophy and [psychology](#) to explore factors that contribute to these disparities. This [study](#) is published in the journal *Sex Roles*.

Philosophy and psychology share historical and topical overlap and have long been known for their inverse gender gaps. More men than women study philosophy, while more women opt to study psychology. These gaps begin to develop at the undergraduate level, after introductory classes before majors are chosen, and perpetuate through [graduate school](#) and into academic careers.

Past research on gender gaps has focused on comparing STEM fields, which are perceived as requiring high brilliance and where women are underrepresented, to humanities and education, which are perceived to require less brilliance and where women are overrepresented, Maranges said.

"Missing from prior research was the ability to isolate the most important factors contributing to [gender gaps](#) by comparing fields that are more similar, such as philosophy and psychology," she said. "Our objective was to consider how stereotypes about brilliance versus mindsets about intelligence might differently affect men and women's decisions about what to study."

Maranges conducted the research with an interdisciplinary team at Concordia University in Montreal. The team surveyed 467 [undergraduate students](#) studying philosophy and psychology in universities across the United States and Canada.

The study found that brilliance beliefs about oneself—beliefs that a

person has especially high levels of innate intelligence—played a crucial role in shaping students' academic choices.

Specifically, women who believed they were not as brilliant as men tended to major in psychology, which people perceived as requiring less brilliance than philosophy, regardless of their own [gender](#). But men's major choices were not strongly influenced by their self-perceptions of brilliance.

Surprisingly, intelligence mindsets did not play a significant role. Whether people believed that intelligence could be grown through hard work and effort (growth mindset) or that it was unmalleable and innate (fixed mindset) did not contribute to their choice of what to study.

"This is striking, given that women come into university with objective markers of academic ability, such as higher GPAs, and that academic psychology requires the similar types of thinking as [philosophy](#) but also statistical abilities," Maranges said.

The findings suggest internalized beliefs about the gendered nature of brilliance are crucial in understanding why men and women tend to pursue different academic fields, she said.

"By addressing brilliance beliefs, we can open doors for capable and interested individuals of all genders and other unrepresented groups by allowing actual abilities and interests to play out, reducing disparities across academic fields," she said.

More information: Heather M. Maranges et al, Brilliance Beliefs, Not Mindsets, Explain Inverse Gender Gaps in Psychology and Philosophy, *Sex Roles* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-023-01406-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-023-01406-5)

Provided by Florida State University

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