

Washington University in St. Louis

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Volume 12

Washington University
Undergraduate Research Digest

Spring 2017

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Sarah Chiang

Washington University in St. Louis

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Recommended Citation

Chiang, Sarah, "A Man's Game: Analysis of the Gender Divide in Chess" (2017). *Volume 12*. 32.
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol12/32

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A MAN'S GAME: ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER DIVIDE IN CHESS

Sarah Chiang

Mentor: Eileen G'Sell

Chess is a mental game, not a physical sport, yet men seem to dominate the chess arena just as they do in athletic competitions. Does this mean men are smarter than women? Or are there other social influences that might explain why female chess players generally are not as strong? To gather insight as to what might account for the gender rating divide in chess, I distributed a survey to 17 male and 14 female chess players (most of whom are in the top 99th percentile) asking various questions such as how many hours they studied, their comfort level while playing against the opposite sex, why they believed so few females play chess, and other similar questions. An anomaly surfaced when players ranked their comfort level competing against males and females of the same strength. Females reported feeling more comfortable (~13% increase) playing against either gender. A possible explanation for why men feel less comfortable is because they are more competitive and therefore experience more pressure to win which might be one explanation for why men have higher chess ratings. The survey also showed that both males and females were aware of gender stereotypes in chess which shows that stereotype threat is present during chess tournaments. Aside from examining the effects of stereotype threat on female chess performance, I also explored other potential causes for poorer results such as identity separation and the lack of female role models. The answer to why females generally have lower chess ratings is not simply because men are "hard-wired" for chess. It's far more complicated than that. Stereotype threat, identity separation, lack of female role models, competitiveness, and separate girl's sections all may explain the gender rating divide.