

Psychology 11-02 Final Paper

After our first midterm, we will spend two class sessions discussing the nature/nurture debate with respect to intelligence and gender. Your final paper is an opportunity to engage with how this debate has played out and continues to play out with respect to another topic of interest to you.

Your first task is to select your topic (=domain of behavior). A good candidate is a domain that:

- a) is characterized or defined by specific observable behaviors
- b) is not trivial: it's a domain that people care about – e.g., one that inspires ongoing policy debates
- c) historically has had (more or less) plausible arguments on both the nature and the nurture sides, though we may now have converged upon a social agreement that the relative influence of one side is minimal

You should e-mail me a few sentences about your topic by **October 25** so that I can point you toward any resources I am aware of and confirm that your topic provides enough scope for a final paper.

Your final paper should have two broad aims:

- 1) Taking a stance about the relative contributions of “nature” and “nurture” in this domain.
- 2) Grappling with how the scientific literature both reflects and contributes to relevant policy debates.

Toward the first aim, after identifying your topic, sit down and ask yourself: what factors arguably constitute the influence of “nature” in this behavioral domain, and what factors arguably constitute the influence of “nurture”? There will likely be a variety of possible factors, and which evidentiary side they fall on may not always be entirely clear. Then turn to the literature to see what arguments have been made about your domain and about each of the factors you listed. (Have your intuitions about these factors been reflected in others' thinking?) You should review the evidence available to support each of these factors and attempt to draw some conclusions based on the current state of the scientific literature.

Toward the second aim, consider the way the nature/nurture debate about this topic has played out and continues to play out in the current sociopolitical arena. How is it portrayed in the media and what kinds of rhetoric do people tend to invoke when talking about it? Is this rhetoric responsive to what the scientific literature seems to be saying? Why or why not, and with what consequences (e.g., for personal attitudes, or for public policy)?

What I'm ultimately looking for in your final paper is a thoughtful consideration of how science and society interact – a paper that tries to grapple as honestly (and critically) as possible with the state of the literature, while also contextualizing the politicized role of that literature within society.

We will use part of class on **November 4** as a peer-review workshop. You should bring in a “prospectus” consisting of a cogent statement of your argument (thesis), outline, and an annotated list of references (total 2-3 pages).

Your final draft of 10-12 pages (including references) is due in my department mailbox on **November 29**.