

The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain

Simon Baron-Cohen

(On Amazon - "Disappointing" - 3 stars)

The idea was prevalent at one time that children enter the world as *tabula rasa*, ready to be moulded to either gender by dint of their upbringing. Any book which helps dispel this thoroughly discredited myth is to be welcomed. So I recommend this book on those grounds. It presents the scientific basis for believing in innate gender dispositions at birth, and it does so well. Moreover it comes from one of the world's foremost experts in the field, and is an easy read to boot. So why only 3 stars?

It is clear from the tone of the book that the author is desperately concerned about upsetting the feminist thought-police (the feminist view being that gender is entirely a social construct). The author did seem to find it impossible to refer to any of his female researchers without stating how wonderful and brilliant they were. Such personal comments are just not done in scientific literature, and they came over as crawling.

As a consequence there is a tendency in the book to present the male-female differences in a manner which is more favourable to the latter. An example of this is early in the book when discussing the different strategies girls and boys adopt in seeking dominance within their peer groups. Of course the empathic approach of girls will naturally appear more laudable than the apparently brutal physicality of boys. But this just isn't the whole story, is it? I am not knowledgeable in this field, but I know how boys establish their hierarchy from experience. It is true that some boys will use the strategy Baron-Cohen describes, namely aggressing against a weaker boy to establish his tough-guy credentials. I remember the type. But what is not said is that this type of boy does not usually end up as the No.1. You see, boys are not stupid. They see through the strategy and don't want a thug-type as No.1. What happens is the pretender to the throne gets challenged in some way. And, whatever the nature of the ensuing contest, it becomes apparent to all that the challenger is favoured by the crowd. It acts like an organic form of voting.

And the whole male hierarchy, all the way down, is more nuanced and less dominated by physicality than described by Baron-Cohen. These discussions tend to be dominated by studies of pre-pubescent boys. I suspect the male hierarchy becomes increasingly less determined by crude physicality thereafter. In fact there are many achievements which score on the male hierarchy. Their only common feature is that they all involve the ability to *do* something. This contrasts with a hierarchy based on appearance or verbal communication. There is ample scope for a book which treats the male hierarchy in a more balanced and less pejorative manner.

I find it curious that systematising is given a neutral flavour (probably rightly) whereas empathy is presented as entirely positive. I wonder if this is quite right. One could also interpret the understanding of others as a tool with which to control them, a rather less positive slant on the feminine attribute. I have no doubt that the basic empathy-systematising model is a sound guide, if not the whole truth. But I was expecting to see the science underlying the empathy-systematising model - the experiments and the data. There was indeed some allusion to this but mostly I found the book to be theorising and surmise. Hence my disappointment. I had hoped for more solid empirical evidence. (I know, how very systematising of me). At the trivial level it did annoy me that he persisted in using "disinterested" when he meant "uninterested" (sorry, my pernickety male brain again).

Overall, better to have read it than not read it.