

Difference Incarnate

Sex-typical variation – men’s focus
and women’s connectedness

Many claim that sex difference is not as profound as it seems. It’s one of those often-said supposed truisms that the range of differences between individuals of either sex exceeds the range of differences across the sexes. This is of course true of some things, but in regard to what is important it isn’t true, and in many cases where it might seem to be true, it’s fundamentally misleading.

Men’s competitive status-seeking and women’s personal networking appear to be chalk and cheese – profoundly different motivated behaviours that underlie most of what people do. These are related to, or the product of, the different mating strategies of the sexes: males being sexually selected by females for status and parental reliability, in complete contrast to the sexual selection of females by males simply for their fertility. This is in turn rooted in the female being the ‘limiting factor’ in reproduction, and the male functioning as ‘genetic filter’ (see chapter two, above).

The effort males make in trying to climb the status hierarchy, given the potential pay-off in prodigious reproduction, is well worth the risk – even though, as will be the case for most male individuals, it turns out to be futile. Bear in mind that prior to institutionally monogamous societies, most males ended up consigned to reproductive oblivion in what was much more like a winner-takes-all scenario. All men retain the mentality that has evolved to cope with that, and all kinds of seemingly blind-alley behaviour that can often be the most distinguishing feature of men’s lives is explained by this, including lots of actual or apparent foolhardiness.

Not only are men and women intrinsically chalk and cheese in how they behave, but how they are treated by others is an even more dichotomous distinction. No matter how unusual nor even how many sex-typically *female* traits he may exhibit, a man will always be treated as a man; and vice versa. There is no grey area in how we treat others: they are either men or women. This mutually reinforces intrinsic sex difference, ensuring that the behaviour that marks out the sexes always polarises and never converges.

How sex and offspring invariably impact differently on males and females of all animal species led to profound sex differences in the course of evolution. These have been further elaborated in the hominid line, so that now there are big differences distinguishing the behaviour of men from those of women, but not all of these may be obvious on the surface. There is an enormous second-order impact on other aspects of life which drives men and women still further apart, to produce all kinds of specific sex differences in abilities (Geary, 1998; Mealey, 2000). Many of these cannot be measured directly, being inevitably confounded with other characteristics, so that they are apparent as statistical rather than 'black and white' differences. Then there are differences that are indeed statistical – the sexes differing merely by degree – that are evident only because of the distinctly male motivation to compete. This makes for a characteristic spread of all kinds of attributes that is quite different in males to what it is in females. So even when attributes are shared by the sexes, the way that they are distributed amongst the individuals of one sex is itself a sex-specific signature.

It's this way in which the global male–female dichotomy cuts across just about any attribute you could think of, that I want to focus on here. The upshot is that both pre-eminence and abject failure are typically male territories, whilst mediocrity tends to be the female lot (with exceptions, of course: nurturance certainly being one). This difference cuts across everything and is rooted in male–male competition. This *motivational* divide is the greatest sex difference of all (Baumeister, 2007); the most direct manifestation of the fact that the female is the 'limiting factor' in reproduction. Interestingly, looking at the range of sex differences and their sex-typical spread, leads to various but related takes on what is the general distinction in orientation between the sexes: to what is the 'essential difference', as Simon Baron-Cohen would characterise it. In his book of that title, Baron-Cohen's central point is that male and female are distinguished by a general approach to life that he sums up as respectively 'systemising' and 'empathising' (Baron-Cohen, 2003). I will outline this and how it complements other takes on global distinctions between the sexes later on.

Encapsulating what the sexes are about by contrasting their general attitudes and ways of behaving inevitably leads us to the contrast between male status-seeking and female personal networking.

Sex-typical spread

Because men compete with each other for sex indirectly through status, then anything that can translate into status will be contested by men in a different way to women. Few things cannot be so translated. This transforms and amplifies what would otherwise be less significant differences between men and women. The amplification is at both extremes, because