

THE ORIGINS OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN REQUIRE FURTHER RESEARCH

The course on "Women studies in the Arab World" offered by IWSAW at BUC (Beirut University College) held a panel discussion, 16 March 1979, on the topic: "Understanding Women". Three professors from AUB (American University of Beirut) and BUC presented papers on the biological and the psychological differences between the sexes. The following paragraphs try to summarize the material presented respectively by Dr. David King and Dr. Aimée Yaqtin on the psychological aspects of Womanhood.

According to Dr. King, there are three fundamental kinds of differences between males and females: the first kind is the obvious physical and morphological difference, including the uniquely female characteristics of menstrual functions and child-birth functions.

A second category of differences are those subtle and diffuse differences, also inherited, of potentialities and predispositions which seem to be manifested at the level of the nervous system and endocrine system. Thus we find sexual differences in the rate of body growth and maturation, language development and sensitivity to pain; in infancy, girls have less muscle tissue than boys and a higher proportion of fat to water; girls exhibit greater stability in physical and intellectual growth than boys; the latter show higher and more vigorous activity levels than girls; and so on.

The third category of differences, that of environmentally conditioned and/or culturally learned behaviors, is most important. It even plays a role in determining the direction of differentiation caused by genetic or innate factors. But here we should remember that there is no adequate body of scientific literature which allows us to sort out what behaviors are due to the nature of being "female" from those that are the result of "being made feminine". It is possible to mention a large number of behaviors and character traits that are considered "feminine". Many writers and researchers assume that women are more passive than men, more romantic than realistic, or more inclined to housework than to intellectual activities. But can we prove that these peculiarities are inherent to them and not caused by the different treatment they receive? Anthropologists and sociologists claim that the above mentioned traits are for the most part a product of culture and environmental influences.

What recent studies have shown

Dr. Yaqtin, the other lecturer on the same topic, stated that most studies conducted recently on young infants found a remarkable degree of similarity between the two sexes in the basic intellectual processes of perception, learning and memory.

In studies reviewed by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) regarding the development of verbal abilities, whenever there was a difference, girls obtained higher scores.

Studies concerning level of performance in conversation, seriation and enumeration show a remarkable consistence in the performance of the two sexes. In a study on a group of 100 male and female A.U.B. students, mean age 20, conducted by Mrs. Yaqtin in 1979, results showed no difference in concept formation and reasoning between the sexes. In another study on a group of males and females from the lower socioeconomic class, males consistently scored higher than females.

In certain studies which have shown boys' superiority in math in high school years, the commentators attribute it to boys' greater interest in science, probably based on greater expectations that they will need to use math in their future careers.

On verbal tests of creative ability, no sex differences were found in the preschool and earliest school years. From about the age of 7, girls show an advantage in a majority of studies. In summary, research on the development of intellectual and cognitive faculties has found that the main sex differences are in 1) the verbal areas, girls showing superiority over boys in this field, and 2) in spatial and mathematical skills, boys obtaining higher scores.

Personality Characteristics

Studies indicate that the two sexes are similar in their achievement motivation throughout the high school years. However after finishing their formal schooling, girls' achievement seems to drop off sharply in all spheres except the domestic one (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). Takla (A.U.B. research team) has found (1978) that Lebanese high school girls whose mothers have a professional job are more interested in continuing their studies, and eventually working, than those whose mothers have a non-skilled occupation.

Investigation regarding self-concept, or self-rating among boys and girls, reveal that girls and women have at least as much self-esteem as boys and men. Regarding confidence in task performance, women appear to have less confidence than men in their ability to perform well on a variety of tasks.

In anxiety, fear, and timidity, some observational studies do not show any sex difference. Other studies however indicate that girls are more timid and anxious than boys. It seems, according to comments made by researchers, that boys are less willing to admit to fear or anxious feelings, as they have higher scores on lie and defensiveness scales.

There is a strong evidence that males are the more physically aggressive sex while females tend to be less aggressive. It has been argued that the male, for biological reasons, is in a greater readiness to learn and to display aggressive behavior, at least partly due to the relationship between sex hormones and aggression (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974).

Conclusion

Dr. King and Dr. Yaqtin tried to survey the recent literature related to sex differences and found very few between the two sexes in terms of potentialities and personality characteristics. The question that should be raised in this respect is: Why then are women victims of discrimination in the fields of education, occupation, social activities, social rights and so on?

Dr. Yaqtin answers that the cause lies in the high proportion of illiteracy and ignorance prevailing among women, more particularly among those of the third world. Jacqueline Chabaud in an article (1970) declares that, given the right education and facilities, women can be on an equal footing with men. Takla (A.U.B.) demonstrated (1978) that, in Lebanon, the higher the level of education of the mother, the less traditional the sex attitude of her daughter. Dodd has also found (1968) that the level of education and positive attitudes toward women's emancipation are closely related.

In conclusion, Dr. Yaqtin asked: What, if anything, are women going to do to remedy the situation?