
Psychological Differences Between Men and Women

In discussing differences between males and females, people are generally inclined to consider the existing physical differences as the chief source of their divergence in character and in social behavior. In this respect, scientists are divided into two groups: the first, headed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), affirms the existence of a strong relationship between the biological and the psychological differences, making the latter a direct result of the former; while another group insists on denying that relationship and considers the differences in character as a result of non-biological factors.

Freud explains the differences in the following ways: the behavior of male and female children reveals no divergence until the age of 5. The boy develops the Oedipus complex which means a subconscious desire, inherited from primitive ages, to possess his mother and kill his father, his rival in this desire. But he soon succeeds in getting rid of this complex, when he feels afraid of being castrated by the father and thus identifies with him. His success forms the first step of his positive evolution toward the development of his higher self; while the girl remains dominated by the complex of jealousy, resulting from her lacking the penis, which is the exclusive possession of the male. Her jealousy takes the form of a subconscious desire to emulate her mother in the love of her father and a strong wish to have a male child. Her wish is satisfied through marriage followed by giving birth to a male child who will compensate for

the absence of the penis. Thus the influence of sex, according to Freud, is different in each of them. The girl, unlike the boy, is unable to fight her complex and get rid of it. She fails to develop the strength and independence which her brother acquires from fighting and overcoming his complexes. The jealous attitude which overrules a woman prevents her from achieving a high degree of humanitarian feeling and cultural development. Moreover, her sexual evolution passes through two stages, one of frigidity, another of warmth, awakened by contact with a man. Hence her need for him is stronger than his need for her.

Freud's ideas affirm the domination of sex over a woman's life and the important role it plays in dwarfing her personality. A fair amount of thinking and experience regarding this question will show that what he says depends more on imagination than on fact. His aberration is probably due to the limited information he obtained from experimenting with a group of idle, wealthy women dominated by superstitious beliefs and suffering from nervous disorders.

Freud's proposals were an object of doubt among other researchers but they gained popularity among common people who are ready to accept sensational ideas without questioning, yet many were those who refuted Freudian theories by showing their contradiction, as, for example, when he says that the absence of jealousy in a woman proves that she has sublimated it

into some humanitarian activity. This contradicts his former affirmation that a woman is unable to free herself from jealousy without the marriage bond.

Among Freud's contesters was a scientist called Eric Erickson who said that the biological influence in woman's psychology is due to her physiological constitution which fits her for pregnancy and the other arduous tasks resulting from it. This does not mean, Erickson says, that she is a masochist who finds pleasure in suffering but that she is physically prepared to accept it as an inherited, psychological phenomenon. He concluded by saying that a woman is dominated by her physiology which compels her to seek motherhood. To prove his argument, Erickson resorted to an experiment by which he asked a group of 150 girls and 150 boys, before whom he placed a collection of varied objects, to use them for building or creating anything they liked. The result was that the girls started making household articles while the boys were occupied with other kinds of work. Erickson here committed the same error as Freud when he drew his conclusions from an inadequate or unconvincing experiment. It is a well-known fact that a girl, as soon as she is born, receives a different treatment and orientation from that of a boy, just as the idle women treated by Freud lived in a milieu that favored the development of nervous troubles. The capacities of each sex are never limited to one type of activity. It is the environment which imposes on each of them a different way of life. On the other hand, it has been found by anthropologists like Margaret Mead who carried out research work among the tribes of New Guinea (North of Australia), that in tribes which do not differentiate between males and females in orientation and socialization, women do not show any difference from men in character and behaviour. In her study of the Chambolee tribe, she discovered that the kind of training given to women developed in them the masculine traits of authoritarianism and administrative ability while their men formed the passive and less responsible group.

Society is responsible.

Women are generally considered by society as more negative and less self-reliant than men. The latter are believed to be more capable of logical thinking and more ready for aggression and retaliation. But the most recent studies have proved, as we have just mentioned,

that society is primarily responsible for creating the difference. As long as boys receive a different orientation and treatment from that given to girls, it is impossible to make a final conclusion regarding the existing differences. We all agree that the influence of environment on people in general is tremendous. We know that encouragement and support can transform a coward into a hero, an average person into a capable individual. We also know, on the other hand, that unjust and harsh treatment may turn a talented person into a retarded one, an honest individual into a crook and an eccentric into a fool. We equally notice that a woman may act stupidly and feign softness and dependence because these traits are supposed to be the marks of femininity.

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Reference: "Readings in the Psychology of Women", New York, 1972.
