Gender Differences

Research Paper
“We do not want women to be bad imitations of men; we neither deny nor minimise the differences between men and women. The claim of women to representation depends to a large extent on those differences. Women bring something to the service of the state different from that which can be brought by men. Let this fact be frankly recognised and let due weight be given to it in the representative system of the country”. These words of Millicent Fawcett accurately reflect the right position on the issue over gender differences. Although such a social differentiation certainly highlights the contrast between masculine and feminine, it should never become the basis for prejudice and exclusion. Leaving aside the purely physical aspects of the distinction between men and women, which do occasionally support a preferential treatment in favour of the former, claims that question the equality between the two groups in a social context are deprived of any reasonable grounding. Gender differences imply different approaches to problems in order to render any attempt for a conclusive comparison between men and women impossible. Hence it is absurd to argue that women are less suited to assume roles of leadership than men. An opposite claim will surely bear the same degree of fallacy simply because such a parallel cannot be drawn.

Although it is oftentimes mistakenly blurred, the distinction between sex and gender remains a most fundamental principle in psychology. While sex denotes the biological basis for the bifurcation of a species into males and females, the concept of gender extends this binary orientation to the opposition between masculine and feminine within a social context. This way the discussion steps upon the purely physiological mark to define culturally constructed roles, the result of an individual’s relation to those around him. Jean Piaget’s Water Level Test (Halpern, 107) is just one of the many designed to test the hypothesis that there is a significant real sex difference in cognitive ability. Interestingly, they all push towards the conclusion that overall, men are better than women in tasks involving the spatial rotation of objects while other experiments support the claim that women are generally superior at tests involving visual recognition. Similarly, various investigations confirm the dichotomy in verbal skills where women generally outperform men and fluid reasoning, as in the area of maths and sciences, where the opposite pattern takes place (Martin, Carlson and Buskist, 470). As far as leadership is concerned and usually understood as the ability to influence others, poignant
expression does appear as a much more valuable asset and therefore counters directly the assertion that positions of leadership are more distant to women. There isn’t a clear answer to the question of what accounts for this curious discrepancy. Nevertheless, two theories targeted at explaining this phenomenon reveal the antagonism of psychosocial precepts on one side and biological justification on the other. The first advances the assertion that sex-role stereotypes which are essentially a function of gender also give reason to these particular sex differences. As boys are encouraged to engage in activities requiring the manipulation of objects in space they consequently develop better skills. The scope is certainly not limited to parental interaction only. On the contrary, children brought up in environments considered as neither ‘feminine’ nor ‘masculine’ exhibit the same tendency. Hence they seem to appear in contradiction to the theory without however shattering its pillars. The speculation that it is peer interaction rather than parental guidance that predisposes further development takes place instead. It is important to notice that both cases are subordinate to the process of sex typing understood as the different treatment of individuals according to their gender bringing to the foreground the conspicuous suggestion that it is prejudice void of any rationale that represents men as more suited to leadership.

On the contrary, the biological basis for cognitive ability is far different in its approach to the problem. It eliminates the role of gender and endorses sex differences as the true cause. Society plays role no longer because it is replaced entirely by innate characteristics such as natural anatomical differences in brain structure and hormonal operations. Nonetheless improvements brought about by training rest beyond the reach of this theory. Physical development seems to exemplify only one aspect of the complex multifarious composition of sexual development. It is the necessary platform on which all later social segments accumulate. In this stream of thoughts, sexual identity which is the first phase and refers to the choice of an individual to link his identity with a specific group – either a male or a female, is independent of sex as viewed through a mere biological perspective. Everything that happens from this point onwards is the outcome of social interaction expressed through the existence of sex roles and stereotypes. The first relate to the cultural expectations of gender differentiation, of how men and women should behave while the second term captures the idea of a
difference in the abilities, behaviours and personality traits of each category. Both however become factors for the formation of further ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ gender contrasts. Research has found that generally speaking, males are more aggressive than females while other widely held convictions such as girls being more social than boys or boys having higher self-esteem are simply refuted as fictitious myths and accordingly denied scientific validity proving however social bias with regards to genders. Once again, at the base of these differences stand both biological processes like hormonal activity combined with a peculiar neuroanatomical constitution and social adjustment reflected in fitting existing stereotypes or playing the expected social roles. Thus aggression could be also a consequence of the boys’ typical association with aggressive behaviour as opposed to girls who are usually brought up in virtue of compliance. It is frequently these types of differences that trigger different responds to the same problem. Sometimes the image of a nurturing woman who can “show warmth that a man can’t” and whose presence nurtures friendly relationships is more appropriate to leadership that that of a despotic man who demands absolute obedience – an often repulsive character (Eagly, A. and B. Johnson, 233-256).

While psychological factors such as the active involvement of society in an individual’s life certainly account for the division of feminine and masculine, the primary sex differences implanted in the physiological differences between men and women should be also taken under critical scrutiny for the two are integral parts mingling into sexual development as a whole. Gender difference is to a great extent a controversial issue but also one that should be kept away from becoming a basis for debates leading to the deceptive perception of a nonexistent superiority. It is difficult to develop a research study to support or refute the argument that women are less suited to lead because such would insensitively submerge unique subjective traits under a common denominator which would in turn be persistently attacked by numerous cases that will make the attempt futile.
Bibliography:

