

Sex differences: nature, nurture or a complex interaction between the two?

Nature or nurture?

Although legislation exists to ensure equality of the sexes, some argue that sexual inequalities are more deeply rooted than any laws that govern society. The point is made that these inequalities – or differences – are part of our biological and evolutionary heritage. This would imply that certain behavioural differences between the sexes would be highly resistant – even impossible – to change. Others argue that biological differences between males and females are frankly inadequate to explain or justify the inequalities between the sexes. The effect of nurture and how it can influence certain gendered traits is underestimated.

The debate of how far our biological and evolutionary (sexual) heritage constrains our development as men and women is familiar to most of us. However, recent studies have been undertaken that contribute to this debate.

Sex differences and research

A group of studies have been carried out in an attempt to discover if there are basic behavioural differences between males and females that cannot be attributed to the effects of social/cultural influences. Researchers hypothesised that if sex differences were observed in non-human primates (in this instance, chimpanzees and monkeys) it would lend weight to the argument that certain behaviours are hard wired (nature), rather than created by cultural/social influences and beliefs (nurture).

It has been observed world-wide that male children tend to spend more time, and roam further away from their mothers than female children. This is also observed in chimps. 40 chimps were studied from birth to five years. Researchers found that male chimps were moving away from their mothers earlier (at the age of 3) and at greater distances than female chimps. The reason for this difference could suggest an early tendency in males toward greater risk taking.

Sex differences in play are one of the most conspicuous and reliable contrasts found between human girls and boys. For example, girls are observed to spend more time playing with or nurturing dolls or similar toys, while boys are described as arming themselves with 'weapons' and playing fighting games. It has been argued that this is due to the different ways that girls and boys have been raised. However, similar sex related differences in play has been observed in a number of



non-human primates (monkeys and baboons), with males engaged in more fighting play than females.

It is claimed that compared to human boys, girls appear to be more interested in babies. Again, this is reflected in non-human primates, with young females spending significantly more time with infant monkeys when compared to their male counterparts. It has been suggested that this focus on young infants may be important for the development of maternal skills in young female monkeys.

Findings from these and similar studies are considered to be part of an accumulating body of research which consistently reports sex differences in non-human primates. The studies suggest that these differences are rooted in our biological and evolutionary heritage and operate independently from the influences of modern sex-biased parental behaviour and gender socialisation. However, much of the research acknowledges that in human primates, gender socialisation plays a significant role in increasing the differences between young girls and boys. Taking this last point, a piece of research is briefly described below that demonstrates some of the ways in which people underestimate the role of nurture.

What are the implications of everyday gendering?

The researchers argued that treating males and females differently is culturally ingrained. Most of us are unaware of the harm caused by extreme, everyday gendering. To test what happens when gender stereotypes are removed from children's lives, they implemented a range of interventions in one primary school class over a six-week period. Parents and teachers were asked to refrain from using gendered language and to remove gendered toys. In addition, the children were presented with alternative, non-conforming roles such as a male ballet dancer and a female mechanic. At the end of the six-week trial, researchers were able to demonstrate – in comparison to the control group – a significant change in the way the children thought about themselves. There was a corresponding change in the way they behaved and what they achieved. For example, self-esteem in the girls was raised, and they had higher expectations of what they might achieve in the future. The boys were able to express a wider range of emotions, which was thought to account for the 57% decrease in their disruptive behaviours.

The researchers of this study admit there will always be differences between males and females, but argue that we need to change how we treat people based on these differences. They claim that gender stereotypes create inequalities that are limiting and harmful to us all. They also discuss positive 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits and behaviours that should not be discarded but should rather be encouraged in all individuals. In a similar way, those who are exploring and debating the biological roots of sex differences say that the work should not be used to create negative stereotypes or to unfairly discriminate, but rather used to develop understanding about human nature. This includes the part that sex differences play in significant areas of our lives, including relationships, diversity, crime, education and mental health. Taking this attitude may help us come closer

to becoming a society in which there is less discrimination and greater equality for everyone.

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