

A SURVEY OF THE RESEARCH

by Cullen Murphy

God fashioned Eve from Adam's rib, the Bible says, but scholars these days would turn the metaphor on its head. As psychologist June Machover Reinisch has put it, nature "imposes masculinity against the basic feminine trend of the body." That may be part of the reason why there is a 500 percent greater incidence of dyslexia in boys than in girls and why girls have more stamina. Then again, it may not. The scholars keep at it.

Stacked on a library table, the literature on sex differences in behavior and physiology published in scholarly journals during the 1970s by chemists, sociologists, physicians, and other researchers would stand about six feet high. That does not include a dozen or so reputable books, such as Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin's *Psychology of Sex Differences* and John Money's *Love and Love Sickness*.

As they peel the onion of sex, scholars have scrutinized males and females in the workplace, in the army, in the schools, and in the uterus. They have contemplated "deviance" as a clue to "normality" and drawn lessons from the experience of wallabies and coral-reef fish. Where the specialists have been less successful is in imposing theoretical order on our expanding body of knowledge. That men and women *do* differ, biologically, cognitively, and behaviorally, no one disputes—although such differences, it must be stressed, are usually not absolute but apparent only as averages when groups of men and women are compared. Yet, as psychologist Jeanette McGlone writes, "Questions such as 'Why?' and 'Does it matter?' remain unanswered."

Those two questions, of course, are what the fuss is all about. The staunchest believer in equal opportunities for both sexes will, if he or she is honest, concede that the real world is not Plato's cave. Rightly or wrongly, men and women have long assumed—and still assume—that differences in expectations and behavior exist between the sexes; over time, through countless adjustments and accommodations, they learned to live with what they thought those differences were, constructed their societies accordingly, came to depend on one another in different ways, to behave in one way when with one's own sex and another in mixed company.

During the past decade, scientists have probably quadru-

pled what is "known" about *biological* differences between the sexes. Men's and women's brains seem to be dissimilar in certain respects, but the human brain remains a mystery, and drawing inferences is like writing on sand. In some ways, social scientists are more helpful, at least in limning the broader implications of the way men and women behave. One fact that does emerge clearly—and here the research merely ratifies common sense—is that, regardless of their origin, gender-linked traits appear, and acquire significance, at varying ages for men and women.

Males, the Vulnerable Sex

It begins at fertilization. Men and women will never again be so much alike as they are during the first seven or eight weeks after conception. Until then, although the male possesses a "Y" chromosome in addition to an "X" (the female has a pair of Xs), male and female embryos appear identical. Scientists debated for years whether it was the distinctive Y or the extra X that prompted sexual divergence. It turns out to be primarily the Y.

The mechanics of this process are still not entirely clear. In essence, though, midway through the first trimester, the male embryo secretes a hormone that incites his previously undifferentiated gonads to develop into testes. These produce another hormone, testosterone, which in turn programs further development of male sex organs. If an XY embryo cannot produce testosterone, or cannot metabolize it, it is in for trouble and will develop, however quirkily, along a pre-programmed female line. In a sense, then, all human beings are female until something acts to make some of them male.

The likelihood of error in male development is extraordinary. About 140 boys are conceived for every 100 girls, but various defects cause most of those extra boys to succumb before birth. A differential remains even then (about 106 boys are born for every 100 girls), but males are more susceptible to childhood diseases. Boys are also more likely to stutter and to be colorblind. Males may be, as Henry Higgins put it, a "marvelous sex," but they are also exceedingly vulnerable.

The first connection between hormones and behavior was made long ago, in 1849, by the German scientist Arnold Berthold. Berthold discovered that castrated roosters stopped fighting and lost their interest in hens. Research into hormones and their effects intensified during the 1970s. In some nonmam-

Cullen Murphy, 29, is senior editor of The Wilson Quarterly.



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"Once upon a time, before everything got screwed up . . ." was the caption of this mid-1970s William Hamilton cartoon, as divorce rates grew.

mals, researchers discovered, the injection of male hormones (androgens) before birth can change a female into a male. Certain mature fish can change their sex when confronted with new environmental conditions. Nothing so extreme has been demonstrated in mammals, but female offspring of rhesus monkeys that have been heavily dosed with androgens do exhibit "male" behavior—"rough and tumble" play, for example, and the mounting of other females.

For ethical reasons, scientists do not conduct experiments on humans. Here, they have had to glean information from "experiments of nature"—e.g., children with brain damage, hermaphrodites—or by pondering the unexpected side effects of hormones administered to avoid toxemia of pregnancy. John Money of Johns Hopkins and Anke Ehrhardt at Columbia have studied girls with adrenal hyperplasia, an enzyme defect resulting in production of massive amounts of androgens. These girls, they found, became extreme "tomboys," were very athletic, and rarely played with dolls. Most studies confirm that boys, on the average, are more aggressive than girls, and most

studies indicate that testosterone probably has something to do with it. Hormones may not make certain types of behavior inevitable but merely, as John Money puts it, "lower the threshold so that it takes less of a push to switch you on to some behavior."*

Reading, Writing, 'Rithmetic

The male and female timetables continue to vary after birth. As neurologist Richard Restak has noted, girls at the age of four months are far more attentive than boys to "social contexts": faces, speech patterns, and tones of voice. Girls begin to talk sooner. Boys, on average, are the first on their feet; they have better total body coordination throughout their lives but somewhat less stamina. They are more curious, more active, and more mechanically inclined.

No one knows how much (if any) of this to attribute to chemistry, how much to child rearing. Parents treat boys and girls differently, and that difference rubs off. For example, if girls learn to talk earlier, it may be due primarily to the fact that most mothers spend more time chatting to their infant girls than to their baby boys. Hormones do leave an imprint on men's and women's livers, kidneys, and the nerve endings in their brains. They differentiate the hypothalamus into a male and female type. What scientists cannot establish is whether hormones account for the many observed differences in the way male and female brains work.

The most striking difference is in brain "lateralization." In right-handed people, the left hemisphere of the brain is primarily responsible for verbal skills, the right hemisphere for spatial-perceptual skills. But this lateralization is less pronounced in girls than in boys—so much so that in girls, one side of the brain seems to be able to make up for deficiencies in the other. Thus, girls have a lower incidence of dyslexia, aphasia, and infantile autism. Thanks to her neural "insurance," an adult woman will recover faster, and more completely, from a stroke.

As they progress through school, girls, on the whole, are superior in tests for verbal competence while boys do far better on spatial-perceptual tasks. Girls learn to read faster and are better at picking up foreign languages. Boys are far more proficient at, say, left-right discrimination, map-reading, and the manipulation of objects in space. Some scientists argue that male superiority in these areas may result simply from the way they are

*The study of the possible behavioral effects of sex hormones is complicated by the fact that there are three categories of them—*androgen*, *estrogen*, and *progesterin*—and all three are found in varying degrees in men and women.

brought up: Outdoor activity, sports, and so on would all contribute to a "sense of place." Other researchers, reviewing the evidence from "experiments of nature" and other endocrine anomalies, detect a direct biological cause.

Male superiority in mathematics—demonstrated in study after study—remains a puzzle. Newsmagazines talk loosely about a male "math gene." Until the release of a Johns Hopkins study of 10,000 students earlier this year, most specialists were inclined toward a cultural explanation: Girls fared poorly in math because they were never encouraged, by parents or teachers, to do well. Some 71 percent of boys elect to take math in high school. Only 63 percent of girls do.

While "socialization" is clearly a major factor, the Johns Hopkins study found that the male-female difference in mathematical aptitude was greatest among the boys and girls who were *best* at math. When the mathematical portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test was administered to eighth graders with equivalent math preparation, half of the boys but not one of the girls scored above 600. It is possible that boys' math proficiency is related to their spatial-perceptual acuity, but again, whether this trait is biologically "primed" is a matter of debate.

Different Creatures?

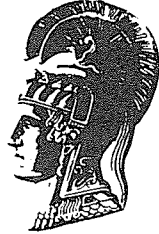
Women are far more sensitive than men to odors, tastes, and touch, as well as to extremes of light and sound. For example, they can detect Exaltolide (a musk-like odorant) when it is dispersed in quantities as low as one part per billion; the male threshold is 1,000 times higher. "It may be," conclude June Reinisch, Ronald Gandelman, and Frances Spiegel, "that males and females are essentially quite different creatures, whose perceptions of the world differ markedly even when confronted with similar physical environments."

It is not necessary to understand the origins of these differences in order to glimpse some of their down-to-earth implications, particularly for boys and girls starting elementary school. As some scientists and educators are beginning to point out, throwing both sexes together in a classroom and teaching them in the same way may be doing each sex an injustice.

Because of boys' greater spatial-perceptual skills and girls' superior verbal ability, it may be better to use the "look-say" method of teaching reading with the former and the "phonics" method with the latter. Schoolboys tend to be far more "hyperactive" than girls (95 percent of all clinically hyperactive children are male). One reason could be that the classroom envi-

THE PENTAGON'S BOLD EXPERIMENT

No other nation in history has moved so far so fast to *integrate* women into the military, traditionally a male precinct. Since 1972, the Pentagon has abolished the separate WACs, the WAVES, the Women Marines. It has admitted women into West Point and Annapolis (1976), ordered women to duty with the 82nd Airborne Division, sent them to sea (aboard non-combatant ships), and given them Air Force flight training. More often, women have been assigned to truck companies, logistics units, and Hawk missile crews. They are barred by statute or policy only from front-line combat, not from battle zones.



Why? Feminist lawsuits and congressional pressures followed the demise of the draft in 1972. The Army, in particular, found it hard to attract enough qualified, or even semi-qualified, male volunteers despite high monthly pay (now \$551). Restoring the draft was political suicide. Under Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter, Pentagon civilians saw using more women as a way to fill the gap. And today, 158,000 servicewomen account for roughly nine percent of total Army strength, 11 percent of the Air Force, seven percent of the Navy, four percent of the Marine Corps. Under Carter, the overall goal was 250,000 women, or 12 percent of all service personnel, by 1985.

Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists have flocked to study this radical—but not total—shift toward a “gender-neutral” military force. Statistics piled up. A 1977 Brookings Institution study suggested that, in theory, women could fill close to one-third of all Army jobs and 94 percent of all Air Force jobs. Not to move further in this direction, said the authors, would deny American women “equal opportunities for social and financial betterment.”

As the studies went on, Army field commanders reported that the women were diligent, better educated, and better disciplined than were the males. However, they also discovered that women have babies; indeed, over the course of a year, Army women have a 14 percent pregnancy rate. Before 1975, pregnancy was cause for a woman's automatic discharge from the service. Now it is officially regarded only as a “temporary medical disability.”

ronment is oriented more aurally/verbally than visually. Opportunities for rambunctious young males to work off steam are few. In the early grades, at least, school is geared to skills that come naturally to girls. Ninety percent of the time, the teacher is also a woman. In later grades, when certain subjects with a

What this meant was that, in the field, unit leaders now had to ponder their women soldiers' pregnancy status and child-care problems when scheduling training or overseas deployment. In 1979, Jimmy Carter's Army Secretary, Clifford Alexander, warned U.S. commanders in Europe that, in case of Soviet attack, they would have to evacuate an estimated 1,700 pregnant Army soldiers from the war zone at once (along with more than 200,000 U.S. military dependents).

Army studies showed that pregnancy helped boost the 1979 attrition rate of first-enlistment women soldiers to 40 percent versus 31 percent for their male counterparts—exacerbating an already high overall dropout rate under the all-volunteer system.

Contrary to the expectations of feminists and Pentagon civilians, women enlistees showed little interest in signing up for Army specialties long reserved for males, such as truck-driving or tending missiles. When assigned to such "nontraditional" tasks, they re-enlisted at far lower rates than those women assigned to "traditional" women's work—in administrative, clerical, and health-care jobs—which could be pursued more easily later, in civilian life. (Indeed, men assigned to traditional women's tasks showed the same reluctance to stay on.)

Other matters were less susceptible to social scientists' statistical analysis. Congressional committees last year heard much testimony: about "fraternization," destructive of unit discipline, between senior males and junior females; instances of male GIs chivalrously doing the women's work in heavy-duty units—or harassing them; complaints that the presence of 300 women (among 4,000 male midshipmen) at Annapolis, long an incubator for male combat leaders, had led to a general "softening" and dual standards, resented by many men, of leadership, discipline, physical fitness. (The Marines segregate recruit training and much of officer training—and report high morale among both sexes.) Meanwhile, researchers argued that thousands of able-bodied men remained in rear-echelon office jobs where women could easily be substituted.

Last spring, under the Reagan administration, the Pentagon ordered a "pause" in the bold advance toward a largely "gender-neutral" Army, pending a major review of how well the new "non-traditional" use of women fitted the basic Army mission: readiness for combat.

heavy spatial-perceptual content are introduced—math and the sciences, for example—girls tend to lose their advantage. In these courses, too, the teacher is most often a man.

A radical overhaul of the educational system would cause more problems than it would solve. But some tinkering may be

in order. "The nerves that feed the brain," Virginia Woolf speculated in 1928, "would seem to differ in men and women, and if you are going to make them work their best and hardest, you must find out what treatment suits them."

The onset of puberty generally coincides with the three years of junior high school, but again the male-female timetable differs. In most girls, estrogen begins to build up in the body between the ages of 10 and 12; boys get their hormonal burst on average two years later. In both sexes, one result is a period of rapid physical growth, lasting for two to four years in girls and for six years or longer in boys—on into college.

Puberty is the second time in male and female lives that hormones exert a sudden, decisive, and unquestionable impact. In women, they control the onset of menstruation and regulate it thereafter until menopause. They determine the shape of the female pelvis and the level of body fat. (About 25 percent of the body weight of mature women is fat, compared to 14 percent for men.) Hormones spur sexual maturity in men and promote the growth of body and facial hair. The males' bones grow longer, their shoulders broader; they acquire 10 percent more heart and lung capacity than do females.*

Mirroring Society

During adolescence, the difference in verbal skills between men and women begins to narrow, but the gap in spatial-perceptual skills does not. Boys start getting better grades than girls do. Certain patterns in behavior and expectations continue to firm up. A window on these years is provided by the U.S. Department of Education's comprehensive *High School and Beyond* (1980), a survey of 58,000 secondary school students.

Not surprisingly, boys and girls in high school mirror the larger society. Already, the males have taken after-school jobs and entered the labor force in greater numbers than have the females; they are working longer at their part-time jobs (22.5 hours a week versus 18.6) and making more money (\$3.38 per hour versus \$2.99). By a margin of 64 to 41 percent, the boys are more likely to participate in school athletics; they have far more disciplinary problems. Girls are the mainstay of extracurricular activities other than sports. They spend more time reading (unless the reading matter is a newspaper) and talking on the

*All of this will give men an advantage in most sports—one that can be only partly offset by a woman's use of anabolic steroids (male hormones). In some sports, women excel. Their superior "fine motor" coordination makes them better shots at the target range. Women dominate long-distance swimming, thanks to their body fat (which gives them greater buoyancy and a layer of insulation) and their narrow shoulders (which lessen water resistance).

phone. (According to Ma Bell, the girls will, as adults, initiate 60 percent of all nonbusiness telephone conversations.)

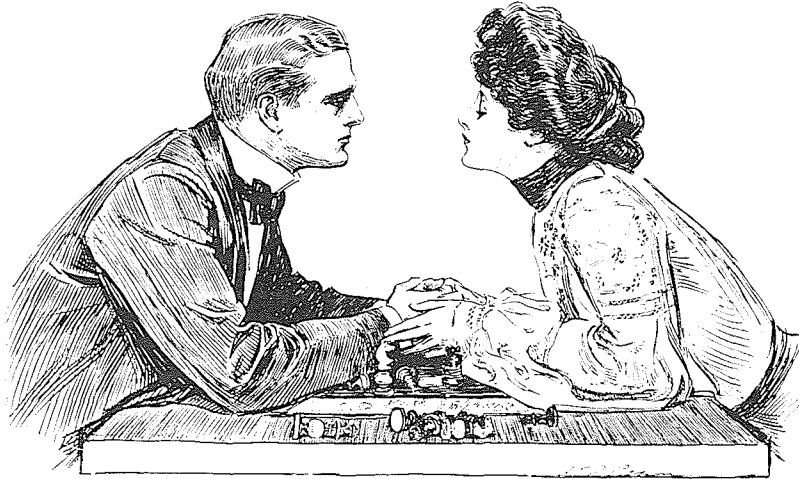
What about the future? Both sexes see themselves taking "traditional" jobs—the girls lean toward teaching and clerical work, for example; the boys indicate a taste for managerial and blue-collar jobs. High school girls are more concerned than boys about "finding the right person to marry," high school boys are more apt to envision "having lots of money." More boys than girls look forward to having no children at all; more girls than boys hope to have "four or more."

Who Drives the Car?

Scholars trying to account for such persistent contrasts do not, typically, invoke the Y chromosome. The numerous biological differences between the sexes are, admittedly, suggestive. It is hard to deny that, somehow, they flavor the way men and women think and act, if only by ensuring that the sexes are attracted to each other physically—a matter of no little consequence. It is harder, however, to perceive a significant link between biological differences and the proportion of high school boys behind the counter at McDonald's. The fact is, sex-role "stereotyping" leaves an indelible mark on males and females. Cultures where this does not occur can readily be found only in science fiction.

Human beings, generation after generation, have had no trouble encouraging boys to "act like boys" and girls to "act like girls." This continues to happen even as sociologists relentlessly track down, isolate, and "weight" all the variables that contribute to the process. How important is it that little boys play with toy soldiers and little girls with dolls, how much do parents have to do with it, and what long-term effects does it have? In school, boys are typically criticized by teachers for behavior problems; girls for deficiencies in their academic work. What special difference does this make? No one really knows.

Cultural pressure obviously has a cumulative impact over the years. Combined, perhaps, with genetic factors, it leaves women, on average, less assertive than men, more sensitive emotionally, more disposed to tackle some academic subjects than others. Occupationally, it often channels men and women into different kinds of jobs and puts far heavier pressure on men to win social status and self-esteem in the workplace. Our culture's "reinforcement" conditions males and females in subtler ways: in their interactions with one another (who asks for a date, who drives the car); in their relative outspokenness when



Drawing by Charles Dana Gibson.

The Greatest Game in the World—His Move, by Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944). It is still the male who asks for a woman's hand, still the female who allows him to believe the decision was entirely his.

members of the other sex are present; in the tensions and satisfactions they may experience on the job; in the way they deal, as consumers, with salesmen, merchants, repairmen.

For good or ill, both men and women respond more favorably to a male "voice of authority," whether it belongs to a traffic cop or a corporate executive. The way they read newspaper articles is conditioned, too, with certain types of stories—crime, fashion, foreign affairs—variously gaining enhanced credibility according to whether the by-line is a man's or a woman's. Advertisers, aided by psychologists, aim most of their TV commercials at the female psyche, not only because women still do most of America's shopping but also because they watch more television—nine hours and 29 minutes more per week in the 35-to-54 age bracket. Male and female political behaviors continue to differ, although the difference is not as pronounced as it once was.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the actions and attitudes of adult men and women have not been studied as systematically as those of children and adolescents. Up through high school, boys and girls share certain common experiences. They are sequestered for large parts of their lives in public institu-

tions. The federal government has long sponsored sophisticated studies of children's social and educational development. And childhood learning and medical disabilities—often a clue to sex differences—have always been a focus of attention.

The Coeducation Paradox

Adults are a more diverse lot, their lives more complex. We have plenty of general statistics about men's and women's jobs and education. But in-depth research necessarily focuses on smaller, more cohesive groups of individuals. Here, the availability of funding and the "relevance" of the subject tend to favor some groups over others: men and women at "elite" universities rather than those at community colleges; women executives "climbing the corporate ladder" rather than women on the assembly line (and most people on assembly lines are women). Especially since the rise of the women's movement, researchers have been more interested in females than in males—a propensity that is less pronounced when boys and girls are the object of study.

That said, the existing studies do raise some intriguing questions.

One example involves higher education. By 1970, the historic education gap between men and women had virtually been eliminated. On average, both sexes finished high school and about half a year of college. At the same time, however, many of the nation's elite schools—ranging from small colleges such as Haverford to universities such as Princeton—remained "male bastions." Angry voices were raised, and, during the 1970s, despite alumni grumbling, all of the elite all-male institutions that had not already done so opened their doors to women.

A decade later, scholars have begun to assess the impact. So far, at any rate, it appears that equality of opportunity is not necessarily the surest path to similarity of outcome.

The most comprehensive study of the effects of coeducation was sponsored by Brown University and published in 1980. It was based on a survey of 3,300 men and women at Barnard, Brown, Dartmouth, Princeton, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and Wellesley. One major finding was that women at coed schools tended, in effect, to lose much of their worldly ambition. They majored in fields where women had always done well—the humanities, the arts, the social sciences. While men and women aspired to graduate school in equal numbers, in practice the women aspirants experienced significant attrition. They seemed, in sum, "to be adjusting their plans

downward" to a greater extent than were men students.

Shortly after release of the Brown study, the Women's College Coalition, a Washington-based association, reported that America's 118 women's colleges had recovered from a brief slump and recorded a net enrollment increase of 15 percent since 1970. Up to 30 percent of the women at many of these schools were majoring in math and science. The report's message, though never bluntly stated, was that women's colleges were still uniquely equipped to motivate women to excel in the courtroom, the operating room, the boardroom.

Nothing to Fear but Success

Why has this been the case? The most obvious explanation is that coeducation, while it erases the sexual differential statistically, enhances it in practice. Researchers have long known that boys and girls are most likely to make "cross-sex" curricular choices when they are educated separately. Studies in Britain have demonstrated, rather common-sensically, that boys in secondary school can become rather taken with French, fine arts, and even cooking—given the reinforcement of 30 other males in the class. Similarly, girls in British single-sex boarding schools show an unusual affinity for math, physics, and athletics when the only other men around are "the school chaplain, two gardeners, the boilerman . . . the part-time tennis coach, and the headmistress's male dachshund."

Matina Horner, the president of Radcliffe College, has observed in many women a "motive to avoid success," rooted in a belief that femininity and intellectual achievement are "desired but mutually exclusive goals." From grade school on, the women who do best academically tend to be more assertive and aggressive than their female peers, while just the opposite is the case with boys: Margaret Mead versus Mr. Chips. Coeducation injects sexual tensions into that equation. Women are competing against men but also *for* men. And coed schools are often suffused with "hidden" inequalities; the proportion of female faculty is invariably lower than it is at women's colleges (where 51 percent of the tenured faculty are women).*

Whether they are attending single-sex or coeducational schools, most college women *say* they are willing to put their careers above marriage and children. Indeed, a 1980 *Change* mag-

*What does coeducation do for *men*? Comprehensive studies have not been done. Anecdotal evidence suggests only that males, in general, spend more time and energy on social life at mixed-sex institutions. That single-sex education still appeals to some men is attested to by the existence of 111 all-male colleges.

azine survey found that college women are more likely than men (87 to 82 percent) to consider a career "crucial" to their happiness. The entry of large numbers of women into the labor force beginning in the late 1960s—whether in search of a "career" or just a "job"—is among the most significant phenomena of the postwar era. As Peter Drucker has written: "We are busily unmaking one of the proudest social achievements of the 19th century, which was to take married women *out* of the work force so they could devote themselves to family and children."

About 39 million adult women, including 55 percent of all mothers, now hold full- or part-time jobs. While half of them are still employed in "traditionally female" jobs—those like stenography or teaching elementary school, where more than 80 percent of all workers are female—women have made extraordinary gains in virtually every occupation. One-third of all accountants today are female (versus one-sixth in 1960); one-half of all tailors and bus drivers are women, as are 33.5 percent of law school students (compared to 3.6 percent in 1963). While women physicians (10 percent of all M.D.s) still tend to shun careers in aerospace medicine or orthopedics, they are coming to dominate other medical specialties, such as obstetrics-gynecology.

Dropping Out

The impact of all this on American society has been immense. One reason that the unemployment rate is so high—7.5 percent in September 1981—is not because women are taking jobs that would otherwise go to men but because 1.8 million women are out "looking for work," which is the U.S. Labor Department's threshold for inclusion in the labor force. For a full-time working mother, raising a family can become a severe challenge. No survey shows that menfolk do their full share of the housework. Of course, there may be compensations. Few intact families where both the husband and wife work are below the poverty line. (Some 51 percent of all married couples are "dual-earner" families.) But 21 percent of all working mothers are without husbands, and 44 percent of these are living below the poverty level.

The income of women who work full-time is only 59 percent that of men—relatively less than it was in 1955. But it is by no means clear how much sex discrimination or, more important, the concentration of most women in low-paying occupations (e.g., nursing) can account for the earnings gap. France, West Germany, and Sweden are all experimenting with programs that would diversify women's employment and thereby elimi-

U.S. MEN AND WOMEN: SOME COMPARISONS

Health Women have a marked advantage in longevity over men—77.1 versus 69.3 years in the United States. In any given year, twice as many men as women die of heart disease, 50 percent more die of cancer. However, the average American woman pays two more visits to the doctor than a man does every year, and, as a group, females undergo 5 million more operations annually than do males. Throughout the industrial world, women evidence a far higher recorded incidence of depressive psychoses and psychoneuroses. But most alcoholics are men, and males have a 290 percent higher suicide rate than females.

Education There are currently more women than men in college (5.9 versus 5.7 million) but somewhat more men than women in graduate or professional school (862,000 versus 709,000). While women stay numerically abreast of men through the master's degree level, males earn about 70 percent of all Ph.Ds. Fewer than 13 percent of doctoral degrees awarded in 1980 in mathematics or the physical sciences were granted to women.

Crime For all races, ages, and income levels, men are far more likely to commit a criminal act than are women (except for prostitution); only one out of five serious crimes—murder, robbery, arson—are committed by women. In 1979, some eight million arrests were made for various offenses; women accounted for 1.3 million of them. But women's arrest rates are growing in virtually all nonviolent categories and, overall, are rising faster than men's. Some of women's gains reflect increased employment opportunities—e.g., the 24 percent increase in embezzlement by females in 1979.

Employment Of 98.8 million working Americans, 38.9 million are women. Men and women are represented in every occupational category, but the percentages vary. Only one percent of the nation's 48,000 kindergarten teachers are men; only 0.01 percent of the 554,000 auto mechanics are women. Contrary to popular belief, the earnings gap between men and women is greatest in traditionally male jobs (law, medicine), smallest in traditionally female jobs (teaching, nursing).

Politics Men were more likely to go to the polls than women until the 1980 election, when women cast slightly more than their share of the 86.5 million votes for President. On balance, women lean more toward the Democratic Party than do men and are more likely to consider themselves liberals. The margin, however, is slight. Whether a political candidate is a woman does not seem to affect the way men or women cast their ballots. This was not always so. Through the 1950s and '60s, women tended, disproportionately, to shun candidates of their own sex, for reasons that remain unclear.

nate the "parallel labor market." But such experiments fail to address a central problem: Female labor force participation slumps deeply between the ages of 25 and 35 as women bear and rear their children. As economist Lester C. Thurow observes, "If there is any one decade when it pays to work hard and be consistently in the labor force it is the decade between 25 and 35." This is when lawyers become partners, academics get tenure, blue-collar workers become supervisors or acquire new skills, and businessmen move onto a "fast track." "For those who succeed," Thurow says, "earnings will rise rapidly. For those who fail, earnings will remain flat for the rest of their lives."*

The XYZ Affair

All of women's gains during the past decade have not erased this basic fact. Nor has the advent of effective contraception, which made *regular* employment possible for many women, dampened the urge to bear children. Increasing numbers of women, who entered the labor force five or 10 years ago telling pollsters and reporters that the most important thing to them was proving themselves on the job, can now be found proudly showing off their new babies in the maternity wards.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported recently on firms that were being disrupted by a wave of pregnancy leaves at the managerial level. Between 1972 and 1980, the number of women in their 30s having children grew from 57,000 to 104,000. The mean age of mothers at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital is now 33. Many women-executives-turned-mothers drop out of the labor force until their children have grown up; of those who return to work right away, a large proportion opt for a "slower track."

The phenomenon is not confined to the executive suite. In 1980, Carl Hoffman and John Shelton Reed reported on the strange case of the XYZ Corporation. XYZ (the pseudonym for a "Fortune 500" company) had been charged by several female employees with sex discrimination and taken to court. It seemed to be an open and shut case: While 82 percent of entry-level clerical jobs in the company were held by women at XYZ, their promotion rates lagged far behind men's.

Hoffman and Reed found, however, that the female clerks were far more likely than the males to be content with their present jobs. When asked if they would like a promotion, only 43

*Part of the current earnings gap—an unquantifiable part—is a statistical artifact resulting from women's recent *gains* in the labor force. Because millions of young women are just starting out—often in jobs traditionally held by young men—their wages and salaries reflect entry-level status. Young women account for 13.5 percent of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences but hold only 3.3 percent of the 356 tenured chairs—so far.

percent of the women (versus 74 percent of the men) said yes. The tendency was most pronounced among women who were married. Fearing that enhanced responsibility would cut into the time they could spend with their families, only 12 percent of them ever sought a promotion. They rarely worked overtime.

Theory vs. Reality

“Even after all discrimination, blatant and subtle, is eliminated,” the authors conclude, “‘imbalances’ will persist as a result of the tendencies of men and women to make different choices, even when given the same range of alternatives to choose from.” In Sweden, women are far more likely than men to pick jobs with shorter workdays when given the choice. In America, some 75 percent of all part-time jobs are held by women, and 29 percent of all working women work part-time.*

This raises some thorny questions about “affirmative action.” Viewed in the aggregate, men and women demonstrate different attitudes toward work. If only because their careers are not interrupted by pregnancy, men, as a group, advance faster than women, as a group. And, again as groups, men and women variously favor some occupations and shun others; not in our children’s lifetime will half of all physicists be women. In light of all this, how realistic are numerical hiring and promotion goals for corporations, factories, universities? As some scholars note, it may be that the chief problem now is at the level not of aggregates but of individuals: ensuring true equal opportunity for those women whose ambitions *do not* conform to the norms of their sex; who are determined, whatever the cost, to compete with men in occupations that may always be dominated by men.

Over time, at least two choices that working women must make have far more ramifications than the same choices when faced by men: whether to get married; whether to have children. It is probably no coincidence that a 1976 Harvard University survey of its junior faculty revealed that 61 percent of the institution’s married women professors had no children compared to only 32 percent of their male peers. It is perhaps no coincidence, either, that virtually every male chief executive officer of a major American company is currently married, while 54 percent of the female CEOs are divorced or never married.

*This difference in motivation—or in priorities—also shows up when men enter “traditionally female” jobs. It is a little noticed phenomenon, but between 1972 and 1978, the number of male secretaries rose by 24 percent, telephone operators by 38 percent, and nurses by 94 percent. (Their total numbers are still small, however.) According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the men in these jobs are often getting promoted faster than the women.

Home, by
James Thurber
(1894–1961). Do
women still rule the
roost? Possibly. But
in only 33 percent of
married couples does
the husband go off to
a job while his wife
stays at home.

Copyright 1942 James Thurber; copyright
1968 Helen W. Thurber and Rosemary
T. Sowers, from *Men, Women and Dogs*.
Published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.



There are, perhaps, other kinds of tradeoffs. A recent study of 123 women who graduated from business schools in 1977 and 1978 found that they were “paying a price” for success. They demonstrated significantly more stress than their male colleagues, much of it due to worry about how things were going at home. (Other studies, however, suggest that holding a job may improve a woman’s mental health.) Although it is impossible to say whether more employment has anything to do with it, women’s overall *physical* health has deteriorated relative to men’s during the past 30 years. They are suffering from more ulcers and respiratory ailments than ever before. They have not been as quick as men to quit smoking. “Adult women,” writes the University of Michigan’s Lois M. Verbrugge, “are adopting lifestyles which bode ill for their longevity.” They are, in short, behaving more like men.

We do not live in an ideal world and rarely agree on what an ideal world would be. Even when we do agree on some incremental “improvement,” it is generally difficult to bring about. For example, every bit of poll data indicates much rethinking by employers, employees, and ordinary citizens about the relative capabilities of men and women. The old notion that “a woman’s place is in the home” finds a dwindling number of adherents. If the Gallup Poll’s measure of people’s ideals were an accurate reflection of their behavior, the National Organization for Women might have disbanded long ago for lack of new fields to conquer. In fact, as everyone knows, human beings take a more personal, less abstract approach to their own lives. “Give me chastity,” St. Augustine prayed, “but not yet.”

At a time when many popular attitudes are slowly, unevenly changing, when legal and social barriers to women's autonomy and advancement are falling, and when American society is patiently absorbing the resultant aftershocks, it is sometimes easy to overlook the things that never change. Men and women still manage to fall in love, still seem to draw some special comfort from one another that they don't get from their own sex. They still get married and have children, and enjoy their little boys and girls in different ways. Having both a mother and a father at home is still the best way for a child to grow up; single-parent households are, statistically, candidates for trouble and, collectively, a troublesome burden on the larger society. Biology aside, despite the misunderstandings and injustices they have imposed, differences between the sexes contribute something vital to our lives and essential to our civilization. For most people, in the end, being male or female is not a circumstance to be overcome but one to be savored, and the odds are good that this useful sentiment will long survive.

A NOTE ON SOURCES: This essay has been drawn from more than 100 studies published in scholarly journals during the past decade, as well as from numerous books (treated in the Background Books essay), and from reports appearing in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The most useful studies for the general reader include the following: nine articles in a special issue of *Science* (Mar. 20, 1981) on the current understanding of sex differences with respect to ontogeny, phenotype, and hormone-sensitive actions; Gini Bara Kolata, "Sex Hormones and Brain Development," *Science*, Sept. 7, 1979; June Machover Reinisch, "Influence of Early Exposure to Steroid Hormones on Behavioral Development," paper delivered to the Postgraduate Assembly of the Endocrine Society, New York, N.Y., Oct. 1980; Eleanor E. Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin, "Sex Differences in Aggression: A Rejoinder," *Child Development*, no. 51, 1980; Camilla Persson Benbow and Julian C. Stanley, "Sex Differences in Mathematical Reasoning Ability: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study," The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md. (1980); Sandra F. Witelson, "Sex Differences in the Neurology of Cognition: Psychological, Social, Educational, and Clinical Implications," in E. Sullerot, ed., *The Feminine Situation* (1981); U.S. Dept. of Education, *High School and Beyond: A Capsule Description of High School Students* (1980); Brown University, *Men and Women Learning Together* (1980); Women's College Coalition, *A Study of the Learning Environment at Women's Colleges* (1981); Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller, and Edward J. Schneider, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952-78* (1980); Carl Hoffman and John Shelton Reed, "Sex Discrimination?—the XYZ Affair," *The Public Interest*, Winter 1981; Laraine T. Zappert and Harvey M. Weinstein, "Sex Differences in Adaptation to Work," paper delivered to a meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, 1981; Kathleen V. Shea, "Psychological Health of High-Achieving Women Executives," Northwestern University (1979); Ronald C. Kessler and James A. McRae, Jr., "Trends in the Relationship Between Sex and Psychological Distress: 1957-1976," *American Sociological Review*, Aug. 1981; Lois M. Verbrugge, "Recent Trends in Sex Mortality Differentials in the United States," *Women and Health*, Fall 1980. All statistical data on employment and education are from the U.S. Department of Labor and the U. S. Department of Education.
