

## REVIEW

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**Taking Sex Differences Seriously**, by Steven E. Rhoads. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004, 374 pp., \$27.95 hardbound, \$17.95 paper.

*Gwen Brown*

When the Mel Gibson/Helen Hunt film *What Women Want* came out several years ago, a colleague who teaches "Gendered Communication" told me that she was surprised to discover that many of her students—both males and females—thought the film not only was a humorous portrayal of men and women, but also accurately captured their natural and very different motivations and desires. My colleague was shocked and dismayed. Didn't they understand, she fretted, that this film plays into and fosters the most negative stereotypes of men always thinking of sex and of women always focusing on how appealing they are to men? She was disappointed that her students didn't understand that this film illustrated perfectly what she'd been teaching them about gender as a social construct.

For my colleague and for many in my own as well as other academic disciplines, it is an article of faith that sex is innate, something that you are born with (one is either male or female), while gender (masculinity or femininity) is created socially, is learned, and then reproduces itself in the form of expectations, e.g., that women are expected to be interpersonally sensitive and nurturing and focus on cooperation, whereas men are expected to be aggressive and focus on status and independence. And, in my colleague's opinion, this film relied on and perpetuated these expecta-

tions—to the great benefit of men and to the great detriment of women.

I asked my colleague what she would think if her students were correct. That is, what if men and women truly were different in their preferences and predilections and what if it were the case that the differences between them were a result of their sex, their nature as male and female, and not a result of learned behavior? Her response was at once a question and an exclamation: "Are you serious?!" How could I even ask such a question? After all, she argued, there is no conclusive body of evidence to indicate that this is the case. Oh, yes, she averred, there are a few physiological and hormonal differences and perhaps some structural differences in the way the brain has developed, but behaviors, desires, values, emotions, and interests are all learned. And as communication professors, didn't we both know the significant role played by the communication process and specifically by language in creating and recreating the reality in which we live, including our conceptions of what was appropriate and desirable for each gender? Of course gender differences are socially constructed; how foolish I was even to entertain the contrary.

My colleague may not have thought my question serious, but Steven Rhoads, professor of public policy at the University of Virginia, does take the question seriously, as the name of his recent book indicates. His two-part thesis illustrates his seriousness. First, he marshals a wide-ranging body of evidence from social science, cultural studies, evolutionary psychology, and brain research and shows that sex differences are real, are a

significant part of our nature, and are deeply engrained. Secondly, on the basis of that evidence he argues that sex differences should not be denied or dismissed, but should be acknowledged and understood and should play an important role in our culture and in our policy deliberations. Rhoads's argument on this score is a powerful one that I wish I'd been able to make to my colleague.

Rhoads calls attention in his Introduction to the linguistic sleight of hand used by those—like my colleague—who separate the terms *sex* and *gender* and treat sex as a constant and gender as a dependent variable, a malleable perception that results from whichever cultural stereotype currently holds sway. And since gender is a social construct that is learned, it can be unlearned; since gender is a cultural artifice, its meaning can be challenged and changed, as can the behavior, the thinking, and the attitudes that result from it. For those who hold these views, many of the differences between the sexes can be treated as artificial distinctions and an ideal world of androgyny is possible in which men and women are equals and possess the same interests, instincts, values, and attitudes. For Rhoads, this is wishful thinking, not sound social science.

Part One of the book, "Nature Matters," begins to build Rhoads's argument, first by providing an illustration of how dismissing or denying sex differences can cause unanticipated results and can create rather than alleviate problems. His example is the policy adopted by some universities that, in the spirit of equality, offers parental leave to both male and female faculty. Rhoads surveyed junior faculty at institutions

where such a policy is in place—a population fairly likely to reject stereotypical gender definitions, to espouse egalitarian principles, and to embrace the goal of androgyny. He discovered that, despite agreement by both male and female faculty that parental and domestic duties should be shared, female faculty members tended to take parental leave more frequently than male faculty, tended to take much more responsibility for child care, and even admitted to enjoying child care and domestic duties more than men. In some cases, men who opted for parental leave used the time to conduct research and advance their careers. Traditional role behavior dominated despite a policy driven by the premise that men and women would respond in similar fashion. Moreover, instead of aiding women, as the policy intended, it may well have harmed women by providing an opportunity for male career advancement.

Next Rhoads catalogues the differences between the sexes. He particularly takes note of the work of social scientists who commenced by being skeptical regarding major differences between men and women but ended by concluding that significant differences did indeed exist and that their causes may well be biological and not the result of socialization. Others who do not accept a biological explanation for sex differences at least concede that the differences exist and that there are durable facts behind "gender stereotypes." But Rhoads neatly demonstrates the logical fallacy implicit in a refusal to entertain anything but a socialization thesis: "If explanations based on socialization were correct—that is, if changes in sex roles

lead to changes in the characteristics of the two sexes—then sex differences should be decreasing at a rapid rate because of the dramatic changes in sex roles in recent decades” (18). And, as he demonstrates in a summary of additional studies, this is not the case.

The one thing that might seem to derail Rhoads’s argument about sex differences’ accounting for differing tastes, differing behaviors, etc., is the inarguable point that not all women think of themselves in traditional ways, behave in traditional patterns, or see themselves assuming traditional roles. Many are career-oriented and would express bewilderment at the preference of some women to limit their goals to husband, home, and children. Rhoads suggests that varying testosterone levels partially account for the differences between these two kinds of women. But he concludes that however much women may vary in their preferences, “even the relatively androgynous, career-oriented women seem less single-mindedly focused on career than their male counterparts are” (35).

With the differences between men and women established as real and not simply the result of socialization, Rhoads moves in Part Two, “Men Don’t Get Headaches,” to issues of sexuality and its consequences: men’s and women’s differing degrees of interest in sex; men’s preference for beauty and women’s preference for resources and status; the problems of fatherless families, including the heightened risk that boys face when the father is absent; the significance of the role played by the biological father as opposed to a stepfather, and the role that fathers play for their daugh-

ters; and the results of the sexual revolution, including increases in the risks of pregnancy, in sexually transmitted diseases, and in the failure of men to commit to relationships. The breadth of Rhoads’s review of the research in these areas is impressive, and steadily builds the argument that sex differences exist and matter.

Parts Three and Four of the book (“Men Want Their Way” and “Women Want Their Way, Too”) turn to specific characteristics of men and women and demonstrate the public policy implications of ignoring those characteristics. Rhoads observes, for example, that Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 demands that men and women be treated equally with respect to collegiate sports participation, and ignores men’s more aggressive, dominant, and competitive nature and the fact that they are more attracted to sports than women. In similar fashion, he considers public policy on day care in light of the fact that women are more likely to take on the role of nurturer.

Rhoads concludes the book by focusing on the subject most implicated by the research he has reviewed and most at the center of things culturally and politically: marriage. Put simply, women for the most part want a committed relationship, marriage, a family. Men, however, tend to resist marriage and often are more interested in the advantages that accrue to them from casual sex than they are in settling down with one woman. In fact, Rhoads would probably argue that Mel Gibson’s portrayal in *What Women Want* of a competitive Chicago ad agency executive, whose goal is to bed every attractive woman he meets,

is only a slight exaggeration of the natural inclination of many men, an inclination that is tempered by societal norms and finally subdued by marriage. Marriage is good for men and women, and children fare better in a home with both a mother and a biological father. And marriage would be better yet, Rhoads concludes, if in the process of negotiating the roles and the rules of marriage, husbands and wives would take sex differences seriously.

Not everyone will be perfectly pleased with Rhoads's arguments. I am not persuaded by one kind of research that Rhoads includes in his review: the argument from evolutionary psychology to explain contemporary behavior. The logic of much of that research often seems questionable. As David Berlinski has recently written: "If male standards of beauty are rooted in the late Paleolithic era, men worldwide should now be looking for stout muscular women with broad backs, sturdy legs, a high threshold to pain, and a welcome eagerness to resume foraging directly after parturition. It has not been widely documented that they do."<sup>1</sup> But Rhoads, from the beginning, anticipates the reader who will discount this or that part of his evidence: "I will not consider my argument disproved if some of my evidence is questioned. There is so much of it that what remains will be enough to challenge the dominant ideology of the last thirty years that sees men and women as having fundamentally equivalent natures and goals. Such an ideology, I believe, cannot withstand scrutiny. We

need a new view of gender for a new century" (6). Considering the voluminous evidence he has assembled, Rhoads speaks with justifiable confidence.

*Taking Sex Differences Seriously* should make its way onto lists of required reading by academics from a variety of disciplines. Because it has so many policy implications, the book will be of interest quite naturally to those who teach political science, government, and public administration; because of the cultural implications, to those who teach sociology, psychology, social work, and culture-related coursework in a variety of other fields. And let us not forget those, like my colleague, who teach "Gendered Communication." Above all, teachers and researchers in the Women's Studies area should make Rhoads's book required reading for themselves and their students. Rhoads has given us a veritable arsenal of arguments supporting what everyone once believed without benefit of social science; if there is an effective response to be made—and I doubt it—let's hear what it is. Meanwhile, Steven Rhoads has moved us quite a way toward that "new view of gender for a new century," which turns out to be an old view persuasively restored.

#### Note

1. David Berlinski, "On the Origins of the Mind," *Commentary*, 118:4 (November 2004): 33.

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