Book Review


David Geary teaches psychology at the University of Missouri in Columbia. His book offers a strong set of arguments for concluding that many sex differences in human behavior have evolved by natural selection. Geary coincidentally refutes the idea that most of the average differences that exist between men and women can be attributed to socialization and cultural conventions. His conclusions are partly based on evidence of the universality, or near universality, of many sex differences in behavior. Other grounds for dismissing mere cultural causes for sex differences come from evidence of hormonal and neurological underpinnings for the differences, either in humans or in other species where similar behavioral sex differences are found.

Geary’s heavily referenced book is divided into nine chapters. The first four chapters describe how evolutionary factors have almost certainly influenced sex differences in behavior in various nonhuman species. Darwin’s concept of sexual selection is emphasized by Geary in order to draw attention to the role played by competition between and within the sexes in producing sex differences in behavior. One learns much from reading these initial four chapters about how males and females choose sex partners based on innumerable anatomical and behavior traits.

A featured theme running throughout the first four chapters of Males, Females has to do with sex differences in parental investment. Specifically, because females in nearly all species must invest more heavily in each offspring they bear than males must in each one they sire, females have been favored for being more finicky in mate selection than males. For example, in nearly all species, females appear to choose mates more on the basis of their mates’ abilities and inclinations to procure and share resources than males do. Fascinating examples of this female fastidiousness are presented, including the preferences that female bowerbirds have for males who build and adorn tent-like structures out of grass and branches.

Males, on the other hand, seem to primarily seek sex partners not on the basis of the resources they accumulate, but on the basis of fecundity. Since female fecundity is closely linked to age, males often end up physically competing with one another for access to females who are near the beginning of their relatively short reproductive careers. Because of this emphasis, males are more prone to overtly compete with one another than are females, and any competition between the sexes is usually focused on the issue of sexual access, with females being the restricting sex. Examples of male-male and male-female competition over priority of...
sexual access are drawn from species ranging from elephant seals, various ungulates, and some primate species.

The focus of Geary’s last five chapters is on humans. These chapters draw the reader through a diverse literature on such topics as sex differences in brain functioning, intelligence, interests, and occupational choices. A theme running throughout these latter chapters is that evolutionary forces have almost certainly had a heavy hand to play in driving the average male and female apart in terms of abilities, interests, and actual behavior.

Geary hypothesizes that humans as well as other animals have evolved numerous mental “domain-specific modules” for dealing with unusually complex and subtle social and cultural circumstances. By such modules, Geary and other evolutionary psychologists mean specific aspects of brain structure and/or functioning that deal with important reoccurring aspects of the environment encountered by one’s ancestors (p. 176). According to Geary, many of these domain-specific modules will have evolved substantial average sex differences in response to eons of natural (including sexual) selection.

Beyond this brief sketch of the book’s major themes, it would be difficult to present a summary, since the book is itself a summary of a large number of other reviews of research on numerous sex differences in behavior. At times, I was overwhelmed by the book’s breadth, and found myself wishing that Geary could have found some way of better consolidating his evidence, but I remain at a loss to offer him advice on how this could have been done in a 400 page book.

Overall, *Male, Female* is a well written and fact-filled book that should attract a wide social science audience. No other book that I know of does a better job of reflecting where the social sciences are at the present time in understanding sex differences in behavior. Hopefully, *Male, Female* will help social scientists get beyond naively attributing virtually all sex differences in behavior to sex role training and gender stereotypes.

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