



IDEAS

## Learning to love the gender gap

**LAURA PENNY**

March 8, 2008

### THE SEXUAL PARADOX

Extreme Men, Gifted Women, and the Real Gender Gap

By Susan Pinker

Random House Canada,

346 pages, \$34.95

#### Print Edition - Section Front



Last weekend, the Washington Post ran a column headlined "We Scream, We Swoon. How Dumb Can We Get?" by Charlotte Allen, which argued that women are the stupid sex. Obamamania, Oprahphilia and Hillary's campaign gaffes were proof that dames are dizzy. The paper was promptly castigated in furious letters and scads of angry blog posts. The hullabaloo got so loud that an editor even offered a lame defence, saying the piece was "tongue-in-cheek." Can't you twitterpated gals take a joke?

Allen, like Ann Coulter, is one of those anti-feminist types who love kicking against the chicks, and cashing in on easy controversy. Susan Pinker is not. *The Sexual Paradox*, her first book, may cover controversial material, but it does so in a reasonable and respectful manner. Pinker concedes that gender differences can be a minefield and treads gingerly. The spectre of Lawrence Summers, the former Harvard president who got

lambasted for speculating about the dearth of women in math and science, haunts this book.

Pinker is careful to note that averages are just that, and that there are indeed Margaret Thatchers and engineers who defy the norms she describes. Pinker insists that she firmly believes in equal opportunities for women, but she also argues that this will never lead to equal outcomes, as men and women have different preferences and proficiencies.

Pinker draws on her experience as a psychologist and a columnist for this newspaper. She racks up one fat stack of studies: The bibliography is 60 pages long. We meet plenty of your usual experimental suspects: rats, our fellow primates and cash-strapped college students. Pinker also interviews men and women who exemplify her titular types.

Pinker refers to her brother, Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker, a few times, and her main argument is similar to his 2002 work, *The Blank Slate*. Both contend that humans have honed their hard-wired biological and psychological characteristics over many millennia of feeding, fighting and fornicating. We can hardly expect a few measly decades of progressive social policy to completely alter millions of years of natural selection.

Pinker's primary target is what she calls the vanilla gender ideal, the assumption that men and women are the same, and will make the same choices given a level playing field. The drive to recruit

more women in traditionally male fields like science, engineering and law has not produced gender parity. The women Pinker profiles were quite successful in these fields, but tired of climbing the greasy pole and switched to other, less obsessive career tracks which they ultimately found much more satisfying.

Both sexes have their particular excellences and vulnerabilities, Pinker argues. Men are more likely to suffer from disorders like Asperger's, autism and ADHD, which Pinker sees as forms of extreme maleness, insofar as they represent exaggerated versions of a masculine affinity for systems, things and risk-taking.

These traits help explain why the majority of Pinker's patients were boys. But when she checked in with some of those fragile fellows years later, she found them flourishing as chefs or computer programmers. The qualities that made them bad students also made them top-notch geeks and workaholics.

Women, conversely, do much better in school and at university. But the traits that help them excel in school also mean they are much more likely to become anxious and depressed, and to suffer from imposter syndrome, the sense that their successes are flukes and they are fakes. Women make less dough - they staff the majority of non-profits, for example - but they also claim to be much happier with their work.

Pinker's account does square with some things I have noticed in the classroom. Women do tend to be more diligent readers and better writers, though they frequently "maybe" and "perhaps" away some of their best ideas. Men tend to make bolder assertions, but they usually do so in sloppier prose.

I do have a few quibbles with the book. Pinker's vanilla gender ideal sometimes comes across as a sort of seventies straw feminism; later waves have tended to embrace and celebrate female differences. Pinker's contention that men are less verbal, less empathetic and more aggressive certainly would have been welcome at the Womyn's Centres of my youth, where women's superior verbal skills and empathy were bragging points, and the naive claim that lady leaders wouldn't fire so many nasty phallic missiles got as much play as our Ani DiFranco CDs.

Pinker dismisses Simone de Beauvoir in the first few pages, when she reminisces about her own naive teenage belief in the vanilla gender ideal. But then Pinker uses the term "existential" to describe the reasons why women opt for work that is meaningful rather than lucrative. This is infelicitous, given de Beauvoir's adamant opposition to the way Pinker links biology and destiny.

My other quibble has to do with the genre, rather than the book. This is a very thorough pop science book, and as the old Lincoln chestnut goes, those who like this sort of thing will find it is just the sort of thing they like. I'm genuinely torn about the popularity of evolutionary psychology. Part of me thinks that Darwin needs all the help he can get, what with the spread of oxymoronic - and just plain moronic - creation science. Part of me worries that scientism has become fatalism, that all our complex and diverse human behaviours are being boiled down to genes and hormones and brain wiring. This emphasis on our electric meat can get kind of reductive, like phrenology with better machines and prettier pictures. Biology gives us the need to eat and excrete. But culture gives us indoor plumbing and chocolate cake. Biology may give us gendered traits, but culture influences the traits we lionize and reward.

Pinker acknowledges this. Why don't we try to get more boys into girl work like teaching or nursing? Because if you want to be successful, you must play like the big boys, in the serious world of numbers and machines, not the silly world of words and helping people. In her conclusion, she argues that the vanilla gender ideal actually helps justify poor pay for women's work. Pinker writes, "a society truly committed to redressing pay gaps between the sexes would value and pay as much for skillful teaching and nursing as it does for great plumbing and condo repairs." Amen, sister!

Laura Penny lives in Halifax. Her most recent book is *Your Call is Important To Us: The Truth About Bullshit*.

---