

Book Review

Things Are Not What They Seem

A Review of Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox*. Scriber: New York, 2008, 352 pp., US\$17.00, ISBN 978-0-7432-8471-4 (paperback).

Rebecca L. Burch, Department of Psychology, State University of New York at Oswego, Oswego, NY. Email: Rebecca.burch@oswego.edu

Susan Pinker's *The Sexual Paradox* begins with, of all things, the dilemma of female characters on *Sesame Street*. Indeed, unlike male characters it has been difficult to create female puppets that are recognized as individuals, not female archetypes. To the reader though, especially an evolutionary psychologist, this may raise some red flags: children's programming, female role models, gender roles, socialization, etc. Oh no! The standard social science model (SSSM)! Here we go... another treatise on how society *never* gives girls a chance to succeed. While this may be true in other cultures and in some facets of our own, in the present day US there are plenty of programs, incentives, and encouragement for girls to find themselves and find their niche. There is even a retail and entertainment industry based on "girl power" that rakes in billions a year. Whether this is encouragement or exploitation is also a matter of debate, but the message of "a girl's freedom to do anything" is clear. These are the conclusions a reader may jump to within the first few pages, but worry not. Thankfully, Pinker has other plans.

By page four, Pinker throws out the question of why women may or may not be allowed to be equal to men and posits a different one: why on earth do men get to be the standard? Why should females have the goal of meeting the male standard? This in itself denigrates females. So many books discuss how females are discouraged, disenfranchised, and disenchanting, citing numbers of women leaving traditionally "male" careers. Pinker dares to posit the idea that women don't have the same preferences as men and therefore, might actually *choose* different paths, not be forced into them by the patriarchy. Now we're talking! Let's throw out the seemingly societal mandates and all that socialization and delve into actual differences, not perceptions or relative status, but the biology of the matter. Pinker "...began to wonder what would happen if all the 'shoulds'—the policy and political agendas—were shifted to the side for a moment to examine the science" (p. 5).

And that she does, spending little time on history and the patriarchy, Pinker explains the neurological and endocrinological processes that result in different talents and predispositions (with plenty of overlap) as well as different preferences. Thankfully, she goes beyond just differences in performance, assessment, or feelings regarding these differences. In particular,

she examines the role testosterone plays in male risk taking (including those amusing Darwin Awards) and the role oxytocin and empathy play in female career choices. It is important to note that this is not the shallow glossing over seen in other books. Pinker is thorough enough to leave this biopsychologist satisfied, but also understandable enough for nonacademics. My brother, who didn't go to college and shows little interest in biology, lazily picked up the book in my car last week. He read a line about gender differences out loud, and immediately launched into the SSSM explanation; "because that's what girls are *told* to do." Then he read farther. He became quiet. Then he asked to borrow the book when I was done with my "book report."

Pinker does more than dryly discuss the biology; she provides example after example of women who have succeeded in this "man's world" and found it wanting. As Pinker explains, let's move on past the idea that a woman can't do the same work as a man, and discuss why she *may not want to*. Any woman who has wondered if her preferences run counter to the feminist cause should pay close attention here; believing that a woman should have every right to pursue the same goals as men is different from believing that every woman should want to. Time and again, Pinker points out how women have sought those goals, attained them, and then shifted their eyes to a different prize. These "opt out" women can be found, as Pinker states, "in every major university, law, engineering, and accounting firm in North America and Europe" (p. 64). Women are 2.8 times more likely than men to leave science and engineering careers for other occupations and 13 times more likely to exit the labor force entirely. This is not because they are overwhelmed with childcare, either. They leave their careers at every age and every stage of life, whether or not they have families. Pinker concludes with what seems to be an obvious yet ignored truth, that women are autonomous beings who know their own desires. As one woman put it, "...work is not the only thing I do. I have a life" (p. 90).

Pinker goes on to distinguish herself from the rest of the field by not just focusing on the female side of the gender coin. Pinker makes it a point to show how males are genetically at a disadvantage; prone to disease, accidents, ADHD, autism, Asperger's, dyslexia, and others. Many males experience an overlap, getting hit with two or three of these disorders throughout their development. Without political or social posturing she lays out case after case of genetic vulnerability and learning, behavioral, and social differences. All of which creates a wide range of male ability with huge numbers of both extremely low and high achievers. Boys are three times more likely to be placed in special education classes, twice as likely to repeat a grade, and a third more likely to drop out of high school. However, males also dominate the highest percentiles of achievement, from math competitions to scrabble tournaments. This topic Pinker readily admits has gotten much less press compared to the outrageous idea that women may not want what men have or be as willing to trade off other goals to get it. However, it is just as important and just as outrageous an idea in today's society that men are at a biological disadvantage, or for that matter, that males can top the charts in achievement for a reason other than an oppressive patriarchy.

Speaking of outrageous ideas, another common belief that is torpedoed is the concept of female solidarity or sisterhood. Pinker "blows the lid off female aggression" (p. 220). Girls are often taught that females bond together while males are cutthroat. Indeed, the opposite is often true. Girls are also taught that females are beaten down by that oppressive patriarchy, but in actuality, women are more competitive with each other than with men. Once again Pinker gives example after example of women who have undermined, sabotaged, and exploited each other.

One little known topic that has resonated strongly with female readers is the concept of being a "fraud." Pinker interviews several women who have succeeded in their fields; in many

cases, traditionally male fields. Two themes emerge. First, these women have been encouraged strongly and consistently to rise through the ranks and obtain positions of power. Second, each of these women believes that at any point someone will realize that she is a fraud, an imposter, a sham: that she doesn't really know what she is doing. To be clear, these women obtained these positions precisely because they do know what they are doing. They fully deserve the promotions they have received, and yet, the lack of confidence not only exists, it is pervasive. Scores of female CEOs, actresses, academics and others admit to feeling that at any point they will be "found out," "exposed," or "unmasked." In the epilogue Pinker describes the massive influx of letters and emails from successful women who feel the same way. While this lack of self confidence is very poorly related to actual ability, the question of where this gender difference originates remains. Pinker hypothesizes that it is linked to gender differences in depression, but admits that no study on this link has been published. This gender difference in the "imposter syndrome" needs to be investigated more fully, especially as more women succeed in their fields.

While many other books show a promising first half, only to repeat their basic premise ad nauseam through the second, Pinker continues to examine different facets of gender differences throughout. She doesn't even mention the adaptive value of these sex differences until 200 pages into the book. While she may not spend long on the evolutionary bases (and for most of us it is pretty standard fare), Pinker integrates the information very nicely, reviewing Darwin, Daly and Wilson, Buss, Townsend, Kanazawa and others. The highlight, however, is her mention of Robert Trivers; his theories, his findings, and his brushes with the law. Now there is a biography, or better yet, an autobiography that needs to be written!

After systematically breaking down each of these misconceptions about gender, gender differences, and the power of society, Pinker sums things up this way, "...forty years of discounting biology have led us to a strange and discomfiting place, one where women are afraid to own up to their desires and men—despite their foibles—are seen as standard issue" (p. 254). This belief of men as standard issue, and the assumption that women want this, only makes the situation harder for women. This may not be what they want, even if they are highly intelligent, capable, and encouraged. And most importantly, they are entitled to their preferences. This "vanilla male" model is also of no use to those disadvantaged males (those with Asperger's, for example), whose ability examine concepts differently have usually come at a social price. They, also, are entitled to their preferences and should be given the opportunity to explore their skills. Once again, the belief in the SSSM has set us back. This active disregard of biology and evolution has not improved gender equality. It has done just the just the opposite and even hindered a subset of males in the process.