

Biology at work: Rethinking sexual equality

Kinsley R. Browne, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2002, Hardback £18.50 (ISBN 0813530539).

The aim of this book is to use evolutionary biology to help explain gender differences in the workplace, such as the gender gap in pay and the glass ceiling. The author's central argument is that men and women have different outcomes at work because they have different preferences, and that these preferences have been shaped by natural selection. To someone who uses evolutionary biology to interpret human behaviour, this appears to be a promising new line of enquiry into gender differences in the workplace. Work in this area may well benefit from a consideration of biological differences between men and women, rather than an exclusive emphasis on the social construction of gender. Unfortunately, though Browne does a competent job of describing the scientific theories which inform his argument, the book is marred by a section on the social policy implications of these theories. This section is so inept it weakens Browne's central thesis, and the result is a book which is unlikely to find much favour with the social science audience at which it is presumably aimed.

The book is divided into five sections. Two sections describe the scientific basis of his argument. Section I (How the sexes differ) describes evidence supporting the view that, instead of gender differences being entirely socially constructed, there are biological differences between the genders in temperament and cognitive abilities. In Section III (The proximate and ultimate origins of sex differences) he spends some time on the evolutionary origins of these differences, setting out the case that these psychological differences are adaptations which evolved because they were beneficial in past environments. These sections are the strengths of the book, and are generally well written and well argued. The issues Browne is discussing here are controversial, but while discussing the science behind his thesis he maintains a balanced tone.

Section II (Women in the workplace), explaining how these gender differences in psychology could lead to gender inequalities in the workplace, is rather more problematic. His argument here is that because women have evolved preferences to be more family-focused than men, they actively

choose to work fewer hours, work in low-paid jobs, and the like, so that they can combine work with family responsibilities. Gender inequalities in the workplace are thus due to the choices women make, rather than any discrimination against them at work. In the final chapter, Browne reinforces this point by concluding that women are rational decision makers who choose how to integrate their work and family lives on the basis of their own preferences, rather than being forced to make suboptimal choices by men or society (p. 217). It doesn't appear to have occurred to him that rational decisions and suboptimal choices are not necessarily mutually exclusive; a suboptimal choice may still be a rational decision, based not only on a woman's preferences but also the constraints that she faces. Women may choose lower-paid, part-time work because any other kind of work is simply incompatible with family responsibilities. The fact that women are more prepared to down-shift their careers for the sake of their families than are men may well reflect biological differences between the sexes (though there are alternative hypotheses), but it doesn't mean that women aren't forced into making difficult choices that in an ideal world they would not have to make.

Where he really loses his way, however, is Section IV (Public policy and sex differences in workplace outcomes). Here, he discusses the implications of such biological gender differences for public policy. In this section, his sense of balance and reasonable tone quite desert him. His policy conclusions are simply not backed up by any of the scientific evidence he has presented in previous chapters. His policy implications centre on the male breadwinner–female homemaker (which Browne describes as the single earner) model, so that policy which encourages women to stay home while their husbands work meets with his favour. He claims that “maintaining the possibility of the single earner traditional household” will be good for the individuals concerned as it will “allow the preferences of a greater number of people to be realized”, and will also be good for society since “we should frankly acknowledge that many of the single-earners will make substantial contributions to society” (p. 174). Sadly, I can see no scientific basis whatsoever for this vociferous support for the single earner model.

As Browne appears to see it, women's evolved psychology predisposes them to be nurturers, since throughout our evolutionary history women have been responsible for childcare. Men have evolved preferences to be providers, since their role has historically centred on provisioning children rather than caring for them directly. Again, he suffers a lapse in imagination; he appears not to have considered the possibility that women may be able to multi-task. While women undoubtedly do the bulk of childcare in most societies (though there is considerable cross-cultural variation in the amount of childcare men provide; Hewlett, 2000), they are also involved in productive work in most societies. In a recent review of hunter-gatherers, the number of societies in which men contributed the majority of a family's food supply was found to be rather small, and was equalled by the number of societies in which women contributed the great majority of the family diet (suggesting men are by no means always providers for their children). The most common pattern was for husbands and wives to contribute approximately equal shares of a family's food

supply (Hewlett, 2000). This pattern is not confined to hunter-gatherer societies: in the African agricultural communities that I have worked in, women do a substantial proportion of agricultural work necessary to feed themselves and their children. Consequently the single earner model is a rather unusual system for the division of labour within families when all human societies are considered (though middle-class Western society is one of the exceptions). Since it is so rare amongst hunter-gatherers it seems likely that throughout the great majority of human history the female homemaker model was not the norm, which makes it unlikely that men and women have evolved psychological preferences suited to this family structure. If women have an evolved psychology, it may well be one which values both childcare and work (since women's work is, in any case, usually just another form of childcare; women work to feed their children).

What is different about Western society is not that women work, but that women's work is now incompatible with childcare. A hunter-gatherer or African farmer can take her nursing infant to work with her, and leave her weaned toddler in the care of its older siblings while she works. Western women are not permitted to bring babies to work with them, nor leave them in the care of other children. This separation of work and family is likely to cause great conflict to women, who throughout the great majority of human history have been able to combine the two. I would suggest the solution to this conflict might be to *increase* the number of policies which enable women (and men, for that matter) to more easily combine work and family, rather than encouraging women to stay home as Browne suggests. The extremely low and declining fertility rates across much of the industrialized world suggest that when women do find it too difficult to successfully combine motherhood with a life outside the home, they are increasingly opting to cut back on their fertility intentions rather than their working lives.

While reading Section IV, I also began to have doubts about the reliability of the information the author was using, and how he was presenting his arguments. Looking up references involves a rather cumbersome process of having to look up first an endnote giving only the citation name and date, and then the full reference in the bibliography. But in Chapter 12, I did look up the references to a number of the statements he made, since I felt some were somewhat surprising or inflammatory. Two of the citations I did check referred to articles published in the *Los Angeles Times*, not, as far as I'm aware, a periodical which has yet achieved peer-reviewed status. One of these statements I found rather misleading: Browne reports that "a majority of babies born in Sweden today are born to single mothers" (p. 186). Recent data suggest that the majority of babies in Sweden are born to cohabiting couples, who may not be formally married but do form the traditional nuclear family unit that Browne appears so fond of (Kiernan, 2004). Some of the evidence he presents in this section also appears to be rather selective. He claims that women do not think the unequal allocation of housework between husbands and wives is unfair, and that couples rarely conflict over housework (p. 170). A little surprised by this statement (based on the entirely unscientific evidence that this conflicts quite strongly with the views of the

women I know), I did a quick literature search on the subject to see if his conclusion appeared valid. The first two papers I came across suggested quite the opposite: conflict over housework not only does exist, but it adversely affects marital happiness (of women) and may even be positively correlated with probability of divorce (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Gjerdingen & Center, 2005).

A final problem of this section is that Browne comes dangerously close to making the naturalistic fallacy (extrapolating from “what is” to “what ought to be”). Even if there were any evidence to show that women have been designed by natural selection to be homemakers rather than engage in productive work, it does not necessarily follow that policies should be formulated to encourage women to confine themselves to this role. Policies which enable individuals to fulfil their own preferences are not necessarily those which allow society to run smoothly. A recent book which explored the possibility that rape is a biological adaptation certainly did not recommend policy which encourages rape (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). This raises the question of exactly how biological ideas can be used to inform social policy. While Browne is right to argue that a consideration of evolutionary biology will lead to a better understanding of human behaviour, it cannot be used to easily provide policy prescriptions which will harmonize with the preferences of all. One thing which evolutionary biology does make clear is that the family, whatever form it takes, is not necessarily harmonious. Women, men, and children (and employers, for that matter) may all prefer to have policies directed towards fulfilling their own particular needs and preferences, but such policies may well conflict with one another. Additionally, though Browne does pay lip service to the idea that not all women (or men) are the same, policies which support one type of division of labour within the family tend to make it difficult for individuals to maintain an alternative division of labour (as Browne himself points out when criticizing policies aimed at allowing women to combine work and motherhood). Yet another lesson of evolutionary biology is that a particular characteristic (or phenotype) depends, not just on an individual’s genetic endowment, but also the environment. Individuals within a society may therefore prefer to adopt very different strategies according to the particular economic and social environment they find themselves in: while the single earner model may suit some women, it may not suit all (and the dramatic increase in the proportion of women in the workplace over the last few decades suggests it suits relatively few).

The book concludes with a short section on sexual harassment (Sex and the workplace: Sexuality and sexual harassment). This section provides some interesting and provocative ideas about how a better understanding of biology can inform views on sexual harassment at work. These ideas are likely to be wasted, however, as I suspect many of Browne’s readers will not get this far.

To summarize, while the author’s central argument is plausible and deserves a hearing, I would not recommend this book to either biological or social scientists. Bringing biological theories to bear on social policy issues appears a laudable endeavour, if a consideration of biology improves our understanding of why people do the things they do. Disappointingly, Browne does a disservice to both biologists and social scientists with an

extremely poor attempt to inform social policy with evolutionary theories. Ironically for someone whose aim is to debunk the social construction bias of the social sciences, his social policy recommendations appear to have far more to do with maintaining the ideal of the family unit as constructed by the Western middle-class, than to have any basis in evolutionary biology.

Rebecca Sear
London School of Economics, UK

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Wendy Sigle-Rushton for helpful comments.

References

- Frisco, M. L., & Williams, K. (2003). Perceived housework equity, marital happiness, and divorce in dual-earner households. *Journal of Family Issues, 24*, 51–73.
- Gjerdingen, D. K., & Center, B. A. (2005). First-time parents' postpartum changes in employment, childcare, and housework responsibilities. *Social Science Research, 34*, 103–116.
- Hewlett, B. S. (2000). Culture, history and sex: Anthropological contributions to conceptualizing father involvement. *Marriage and Family Review, 29*, 59–73.
- Kiernan, K. (2004). Cohabitation and divorce among nations and generations. In P. L. Chase-Lansdale, K. Kiernan & R. J. Friedman (Eds.), *Human development across lives and generations: The potential for change* (pp. 139–170). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornhill, R., & Palmer, C. T. (2000). *A natural history of rape: Biological bases of sexual coercion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.