the girdle would rank right up there with the electric razor as a major contribution to human welfare.) But modern women who are forcing their bodies into exaggeratedly slim shapes, or, increasingly, into exaggeratedly voluptuous shapes, are no less subject to social pressures and the standards of fashion. These alternating standards, which reflect the perception that the woman’s body is never right as it is and always needs to be fixed, will continue as long as women model themselves after the impossible male norm: to be opposite from the male body, or to be like the male body, but never satisfied with the woman’s body they have.

### Psyche: The problem of women

It all goes back, of course, to Adam and Eve—a story which shows, among other things, that if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble. In the life cycle, as in the Garden of Eden, the woman has been the deviant.19

—Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*

Women not only fail to measure up to having the right body; they also fail to measure up to having the right life. I remember how annoyed I felt, as a college student, when I first read Erik Erikson’s theory of the “Eight Stages of Man.” Every few years throughout their lives, Erikson said, people have a psychological crisis to resolve and overcome. Children, for example, must resolve the crisis of “competence” versus “inferiority.” Teenagers must resolve the familiar identity crisis of adolescence, or they will wallow around in “role diffusion” and aimlessness. Once you have your identity, you must learn to share it; if you don’t master your “intimacy” crisis, you become lonely and isolated. Middle-aged adults face the problems of “stagnation” versus “generativity,” and, in old age, “ego integrity” versus “despair.”

It turned out, of course, that Erikson meant the ages of “man” literally, but none of us knew that then. The fact that female readers were grumbling that their stages didn’t seem to fit the pattern was just further evidence of how peculiar and irritating women were.

Erikson’s theory was assumed to be a brilliant expansion of Freud’s stage theory, which stopped at puberty. If women didn’t fit, it was their own fault.

It was worrying. I wasn’t having any of my crises in the right order. My sense of competence was plummeting, a result of being a lowly student, and I was supposed to have resolved *that* one at around age seven. My identity was shaky, although I was no longer a teenager, and I hadn’t married when I was supposed to, which was putting my intimacy and generativity crises on hold.

Uncertain about my career prospects and having missed the college-age marriage boat, I applied to graduate school. Many graduate schools were reluctant to accept women in the late 1960s, and the reason, they said, was that women were so unpredictable, idiosyncratic, and unreliable—so, in a word, unmasculine. Women were forever dropping out to support their husbands, or have children, or take jobs that allowed them to eat. I remember how relieved I felt to read the research of the time, which provided reassuring evidence to administrators that yes, women would finish their training if you gave them the chance, and yes, they would eventually do as well as men.

In those days, theorists writing on adult development assumed that adults were male. Healthy “adults” follow a single line from childhood to old age, a steady path of school, career, marriage, advancement, a child or two, retirement, and wisdom—in that order. Everyone was supposed to grow “up,” not sideways, down, or, God forbid, in circles. In the 1970s and 1980s, popular stage theories offered road maps that plotted a way through the thicket of adult adventures. Psychiatrist George Vaillant wrote *Adaptation to Life*, based on a longitudinal study of privileged Harvard (male) students, and concluded that men go through orderly stages even if the circumstances of their lives differ. Psychiatrist Daniel Levinson and his associates followed with *Seasons of a Man’s Life*, which argued that the phases of (a man’s) life unfold in a natural sequence, like the four seasons of the year. This book had nothing to say about women’s seasons, possibly because women were continuing to irritate academics by doing things unseasonably.

Moreover, almost everyone assumed that healthy adult development meant progress toward autonomy, independence, and separa-
tion. It was bad and unhealthy to remain too attached to your parents. Indeed, to many psychologists, the continuing attachment that many women have with their families is a sign of immaturity and their "weak sense of self." Proponents of the "turmoil theory" of adolescent development explained that teenagers must go through a few years of ranting, railing, disobedience, and craziness or they wouldn't become calm, sane, mature adults—the kind who had separated from their parents.

But once a critical mass of women entered psychology, they began asking different questions. Why, they wondered, is it so desirable for an academic career to be uninterrupted by experience, family life, and outside work? So what if women's life paths were less linear than men's? Wasn't this way of structuring one's life as logical as, and more humanly beneficial than, the straight-up-the-ladder model? Shouldn't administrators be worrying about the deficient education of male students, so woefully unweathered by real life? And why, as psychologist Carol Gilligan argued to great acclaim, do we focus so much on the importance of separation from parents, instead of on the continuing affectionate bond that is the norm almost everywhere in the world, the bond that females promote?20

These questions, and the new research they generated, have transformed our understanding of human development. We now know that women and men do not resolve crises of competence, identity, nurturance, stagnation, autonomy, and connection once and for all; these issues bubble up throughout life. There is no right time or only time to go to school, change careers, have a baby, retire, or marry. The continuing connection between parent and child throughout life is healthy, a sign of strength rather than immaturity.

Even turmoil theories of adolescence are on the way out. Large-scale studies of normal adolescent males and females show that turmoil is only one way, and not the most common way at that, for getting through the teenage years. Most teenagers of both sexes remain close to and admiring of their parents, and experience a minimum of conflict and rebellion.21 (This doesn't mean they aren't driving their parents crazy, and vice versa; just that these conflicts are ultimately trivial, to both sides, in the larger scheme of things.)

"We need a new model of adolescent development, one which makes sense of the continued love between child and parent," argues psychologist Terri Apter.22 Apter, who began her research with mothers and daughters on the (male) assumption that the task of adolescence is to separate from the parent, expected that daughters would talk frequently of their needs for separation, to be their "own person," to have more freedom. Instead, the daughters talked much more about their connection to their mothers. Their conversations were dotted with "her view is," "she thinks I'm," "the way she sees things." Mid-adolescence is generally thought to be the time of greatest conflict between parent and child. Apter found, yet most of the teenaged girls she interviewed said "the person they felt closest to, the person they felt most loved by, the person who offered them the greatest support, was their mother."23

All of these challenges to traditional theories proved to be good news for men and women, but particularly for the women who for so long had compared themselves to the male life pattern and come away feeling guilty for not matching it. "What's the right way to do it?" women often ask the "experts." "When should I have a baby—before, after, or during a career?" Or "When should I go to school—before, after, or during the baby?" The questioners assume that there is a right answer, and a right answer in turn assumes a single linear standard that will fit everybody—or rather, every man. But, as psychologists Grace Baruch and Rosalind Barnett have found, "there is no one lifeprint that ensures all women a perpetual sense of well-being—nor one that guarantees misery, for that matter. Adult American women today are finding satisfying lives in any number of different role patterns. Most involve tradeoffs at different points in the life cycle."24 The fact that it is women who tend to be making the tradeoffs and not men is another matter.

In the last decade, new interpretations of many other old theories in psychology have flourished like mushrooms after rainfall. No area of investigation has been immune from scrutiny for male bias. For example, the left side of the list below represents the traditional way of looking at sex differences; the list on the right, another way of interpreting the same findings:
What's wrong with women | What's wrong with men
---|---
Low self-esteem | Inflated self-esteem
Undervalues her work | Overvalues his work
Gullible | Rigid
Too modest | Too overconfident
No sense of humor | Offensive sense of humor
Selflessness | Selfishness
Works too hard | Doesn't work hard enough
Career line irregular | Career path too narrow
Adult development too erratic | Adult development too conformist
Dependent | Aloof
Too connected, fused with others; weak ego boundary | Too autonomous, isolated, narcissistic
Penis envy | Penis insecurity
Suggestible | Inflexible
Conformist | Unyielding
Too emotional | Too remote, unfeeling
Weak leadership style | Authoritarian leadership style
Unwilling to dominate | Unwilling to negotiate
Stunted moral reasoning | Narrow moral reasoning
Not competitive enough | Not cooperative enough

Most people will see at once that the negative terms in the right-hand column are biased and derogatory, but that is the point. Why has it been so difficult to notice the same degree of bias and denigration in the lefthand list? The answer is that we are used to seeing women as the problem, to thinking of women as being different from men, and to regarding women's differences from men as deficiencies and weaknesses.

So it is understandable that many women have responded to the transformation of the list on the left into the list on the right with considerable mirth and relief. It was enormously liberating to believe that women weren't the problem; men were. By smoking the universal male out of his lair, we saw in daylight that he and his ways were not the center of all things. Most women have greeted each attempt to reevaluate him—finding after finding, popular book after popular book—with "At last! That's us!"

My personal favorite is the reanalysis of the perennial male la-

ment, "Why can't women take a joke?" Studies have consistently shown that men and women don't differ in their capacity for humor, but they often disagree about what's funny. In general, what's funny has to do with the target of the joke. On the average, men think it is funnier when a male disparages someone else than when he disparages himself, but women generally prefer self-deprecating humor. One psychologist asked men and women to think of funny endings to stories that involved themselves or others. Most of the men took longer to think of endings to jokes in which the humor was directed at themselves than when it was directed at someone else, while for women the opposite was true. Studies like these transform the problem from "Why can't women take a joke?" into "Why don't men know what's funny?"

As a woman, I like to play the reversal game too. But replacing the "woman as problem" bias with a "woman as solution" bias doesn't take us very far in solving the problem of the universal male. For one thing, it tends to confuse differences in what women and men do in their lives with differences in their basic psychological capacities. It is a small jump from saying "Women's lives are less linear than men's, and that is fine" to saying "Women think in a less linear way than men do, and that is fine too." As soon as we are in the realm of psychological qualities rather than in the activities of life, replacing "woman as problem" with "man as problem" obscures the reality of their human similarities. When the public hears news that men and women differ psychologically in some way, they immediately imagine two nonoverlapping groups that look like this:
Sometimes two such nonoverlapping groups occur. As scientist Robert M. Sapolsky has observed, if you take two groups of anthrax victims, only one group of which has been treated with antibiotics, there will be no overlap in survival rates at all: The untreated victims will die within forty-eight hours. Period. This is an example of what Sapolsky calls a "powerful fact": By knowing which group an anthrax victim is in—treated or untreated—you will be able to predict with absolute certainty whether he or she will die of the disease.26

But when we get into the realm of abilities and qualities—such as doing well in math, the likelihood of roaring at the children, having a sense of humor, needing friends and family, being able to love, or being able to pack a suitcase—the overlap between men and women is always far greater than the difference, if any. Sapolsky plotted the actual results of a famous study that claimed to find clear evidence of a male superiority in math among junior high school students, and the result looked like this:

![Graph showing distribution of math scores for male and female students](image)

"Anyone who can look at the graph," Sapolsky says, "and claim that it provides any predictiveness about how an individual boy or girl will do in math either has an ideological axe to grind or his own ability to reason mathematically is severely impaired." Moreover, if the small percentage of males who are math prodigies is removed from this sample, the distribution of scores for males and females is identical.

Thus, male "superiority" in math is an example of a "fact" that is not powerful at all, because it does not help us predict how an individual boy or girl, man or woman, will do. "Yet how many people ever see the data this way?" Sapolsky asks. "In most branches of science, reporting a difference with this little predictiveness would get you laughed out of the business. . . Of the teachers, administrators, parents, and guidance counselors who believe that science has shown that boys are better at math than girls, how many know the predictiveness of this fact?"27

Suppose, therefore, that we move away from the narrow and limited question of "Do men and women differ, and if so, who’s better?" and ask instead: Why is everyone so interested in differences? Why are differences regarded as deficiencies? What functions does the belief in differences serve? The answers begin to emerge in the following story from the halls of science, where we can see how even "pure" biological research is besmirched by the dusty fingerprints of those who conduct it.

**Brain: Dissecting the differences**

It must be stated boldly that conceptual thought is exclusive to the masculine intellect . . . [but] it is no depreciation of a woman to state that she is more sensitive in her emotions and less ruled by her intellect. We are merely stating a difference, a difference which equips her for the special part for which she was cast . . . Her skull is also smaller than man’s; and so, of course, is her brain.28

—T. Lang, *The Difference Between a Man and a Woman*

In recent years the sexiest body part, far and away, has become the brain. Magazines with cover stories on the brain fly off the newstands, and countless seminars, tapes, books, and classes teach people how to use "all" of their brains. New technologies, such as PET scans, produce gorgeous photographs of the brain at work and play. Weekly we hear new discoveries about this miraculous organ, and it seems that scientists will soon be able to pinpoint the very neuron, the very neurotransmitter, responsible for joy, sadness, rage, and suffering. At last we will know the reasons for all the differences between women and men that fascinate and infuriate, such as why men won’t stop to ask directions and why women won’t stop asking men what they are feeling.