

The Mismeasure of Women

If men and women are more alike than different, why do adolescent girls often suffer crises in self-esteem? Why do adult women buy so many self-help books that promise to improve their sex lives, their relationships with their lovers and their mothers, their moods, their bodies, their confidence? Part of answer, according to Carol Tavris in her book, *The Mismeasure of Women*, has to do with the “universal man”.

In virtually every realm, men are considered the norm, and women are seen as “abnormal”, deficient, the sex that needs to be explained. Male behavior, male heroes, male psychology and even male physiology continue to be the standards of normalcy against which women are measured and found wanting. In politics, we distinguish between the “big issues” (war, economics, crime, drugs) and “women’s issues” (day care, birth control, peace). In economic theories, “women’s work” (caring for the home and family) is simply not counted. In our schools the study of western civilization focuses almost exclusively on what “great (white) men” did and said; the study of western literature concentrates on (white) male writers. “Women’s studies” and “women’s literature” are considered specialties (as are courses on nonwhite societies and arts).

Even in medicine, males are the norm. Medical students first learn anatomy and physiology by studying a male model. Only later do medical students study female anatomy, physiology and health problems. Likewise, most medical research is based on a male standard of normalcy. Studies of drug effects, diseases and treatments regularly exclude women; studies of men are frequently generalized as applying to all patients; studies that include both sexes often fail to look for gender differences; and far more research is devoted to men’s primary health problems (such as heart disease) than to women’s (such as breast cancer).

Tavris shows how the “universal male” is so ingrained in our thinking that we often fail to notice him. She cites a researcher who gave men and women a test of creativity (C.B. Olson, 1988). The researcher was not interested in which sex was more creative, but in how men and women explained their success or failure during a mock job interview. She found that women were more likely to attribute their success to luck and they were less confident of their own ability than were men. Why do women give “less self-serving” explanations? she asked. She concluded, “The feminine goal of appearing modest inhibits women from making self-promoting attributions”. Hidden in this conclusion is the assumption that men are the norm, and the problem is to explain why women don’t behave like men. To see this assumption more clearly, turn the question around so that women are the norm. Now the question would be “Why do men more self-serving explanations than women do?” And the conclusion: “The masculine goal of appearing self-confident inhibits them from making modest explanations of their abilities or acknowledging the help of others and the role of chance”.

Tavris holds that one reason for the mismeasure of women is that we tend to assume that “equal” means “the same”. Whether we view women as the better sex, the inferior sex, or the opposite sex, we fall into the same trap of using males as the standard. Until we develop human standards, and recognize that women can be different and equal, gender bias and discrimination are likely to persist.