

## Re: Statistics, Selection, Society, Individuals, Gender, Gossip, Conflict, and Careers

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In article <d0maqf\$10la\$1@fiasco.xenopsyche.net>, [tessel@tum.bot](mailto:tessel@tum.bot) writes:

> > *the question of why humans take such pleasure in, and feel such  
> > compulsion to indulge in gossip.*  
> >  
> > *I think it is clear from evolutionary biology that gossip was essential  
> > for our survival back in the caveman days, thus it is still interesting  
> > to many people today, even if it is not as strongly needed as back then.*  
>  
> *I think you are suggesting that this might have been adaptive 10,000 years  
> ago, but is now selectively neutral, or even a waste of valuable energy.*

Right.

> *That could well be, but I don't think one can assume this is true without  
> a lot more evidence.*

Evolutionary biology is similar to astrophysics and cosmology in that, in contrast to most sciences, one can't do experiments, but has to explain the observations in a plausible way. Probably as a result of this, books play a much larger role in the active scientific discourse of evolutionary biology than in, say, particle physics. The ONLY evidence, presumably, is plausibility in a case like this, and I think that Pinker makes a pretty good case that interest in gossip was an adaptive trait which has held on.

> > *AVERAGE is the key term. There can be a woman who is taller than the  
> > average man, or even taller than all men, without changing the fact that  
> > most men are taller than most women. Second, the standard deviation  
> > tends to be larger in men. Thus, even if the average is the same, there  
> > will be more male overachievers, but also more underachievers. Most  
> > geniuses are male, but so are most idiots.*  
>  
> *Isn't that what I said?!*

Probably. I just want to point out, since almost anyone stating

something like this is misunderstood, that an observed difference in averages implies just that, and does not necessarily imply all the other things I mentioned.

- > > *Fourth, whatever the average behaviour is, there is no justification in*
- > > *using this as a basis for discrimination.*
- >
- > *Surely it was clear that I wasn't saying otherwise? (I am not sure if you*
- > *thought I –was–.)*

No, I'm not accusing you, though this needs to be pointed out for fear of being misunderstood.

- > *Just to be clear, I too can think of certain –particular– women in our*
- > *fields who in my own estimate do better research\* than most of their male*
- > *or gender–indeterminate colleagues, and I would expect (hope?) that if*
- > *career advancement were determined by some rational optimization*
- > *procedure, these individuals would not be held back.*

Even if that is the case, though, don't make the hidden assumption that, for a particular individual, a successful career in research is the main goal. In other words, someone might leave research not because of lack of talent, but because other things are considered more important. As a consequence, their disappearance does not NECESSARILY mean that they were "held back".

- > *So the question is: should society attempt to correct for this alleged*
- > *effect, and if so how? I was trying to suggest that maybe society should*
- > *–not– attempt to correct for such "second order" effects. But from*
- > *reading press coverage and editorials, I have the strong impression that*
- > *some commentators would not agree.*

The solution is quite simple: make equal OPPORTUNITY the primary goal of society. (Actually, one might even define "civilization" in terms of how well it achieves this goal.) Whether or not this leads to, say, an equal number of male and female physicists remains to be seen but, as long as equal opportunity is present, it doesn't matter, except to people who ASSUME that a lack of equality in terms of numbers of each sex in a particular job can be caused ONLY by lack of equal opportunity. I don't hear feminists shouting that the fact that there are fewer garbagemen than garbagewomen is a result of a lack of equal opportunity.

There are many more women in astrophysics in Italy than in, say, Denmark. Does this mean that there is less discrimination in Italy (where macho ideals are more prevalent than further north)? Probably not. The best explanation that I could find is that such jobs have an even lower salary in Italy than in Germany with the result that many men who would otherwise have a career in astrophysics decide against it, since they can't support a wife and children from the salary (which is more necessary the higher the probability that the wife herself doesn't work), which opens up the positions to women who are married to men who

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have a well-paid job. So, ironically, a society in which women IN GENERAL tend not to have a career can, coupled with the relatively low pay of a research position, lead to MORE women in a niche profession such as astrophysics.