

IS THERE ANYTHING GOOD ABOUT MEN?

HOW CULTURES FLOURISH BY
EXPLOITING MEN

ROY F. BAUMEISTER

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How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men

Roy F. Baumeister
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Recommendation

Sociologist Roy F. Baumeister just might convince ardent feminists with his fascinating, well-researched and deftly written book about the bum rap men receive simply for doing what their culture wants and needs them to do. Baumeister relies on research and his own theories to describe how men created the culture that sustains and advances society. He makes an intriguing argument, filled with examples that support his hypothesis, which might make it go down a little easier for women, particularly when they learn that men are expendable. Still, many women – and maybe some men – likely will bristle at his thesis that females have contributed little to creating culture through the ages. Baumeister boldly states his opinion without taking himself, and feminists, too seriously. *BooksInShort* suggests this book to managers interested in understanding gender inequities and differences. Just be prepared for some fallout around the office if you start using this as your guidebook.

Take-Aways

- Many people link historical male dominance with a concerted intent to repress women.
- As a result, today's politically correct society often construes any criticism of women as prejudicial and any praise of men as unwarranted.
- "Tradeoffs" lend a new perspective through which to explain gender inequities.
- Men and women possess different but complementary abilities; one gender's strengths in one aspect counterbalance its weaknesses in another.
- For instance, males' instinctive aggression made them good at waging wars, but less capable of nurturing children.
- While men and women share roughly equal natural abilities, their motivations differ.
- For example, numerical aptitudes vary little between most men and most women, but their desires to pursue math- or science-related careers diverge greatly.
- Women cultivate deeper one-on-one relationships, while men excel in large groups by developing broader but shallower bonds.
- This propensity led men to drive the creation of culture, which advanced societies.
- Because men invented culture, they've always dominated it.

Summary

"Is There Anything Good About Men?"

Simply posing this leading question raises eyebrows, with its hint that men might outperform women in any way. Despite the commonly held notion that women outdo men in various different areas, society doesn't allow for much discussion of the opposite idea. The explanation of gender inequity generally takes one of two forms: either the age-old belief that men dominate because they are better at most things than women, or the newer conceit that men and women are equal but that men have conspired to keep women down.

“Political correctness permits us to say that women are better than men...But it’s mostly taboo even to suggest men are better at anything more important than opening jars and killing bugs.”

Yet another explanation is based on diverse abilities and “tradeoffs” between the genders: Men and women excel in different domains for good reasons, some biological and some cultural. A man’s ability in one area offsets his weakness in another, and the same applies to women, too.

Men and women fill unique roles within cultures, and they should value each other’s contributions rather than try for one-upmanship. For instance, some feminists cite salary differences between the sexes as a proxy for society’s prejudice against women. In fact, social science finds several reasons for the gender pay gap that don’t include bias: Men work longer hours, take bigger risks, sacrifice more and don’t take years off to raise children, all of which add up to higher wages for men. But successful cultures make use of such gender differences in order to thrive. In fact, it turns out that culture propels many of men’s bank account-boosting decisions.

Who’s Better?

Media, advertising and society today promote women as superior to men. Scientific surveys show most men and women concur, rating women as better people. And even though men outperform women in some capacities, they rarely get credit for that anymore.

“Patriarchy – the idea that culture is a conspiracy by men to oppress women – is the preferred explanation whenever women don’t perform as well as men.”

Historically, people thought men did everything better than women. The feminist movement, beginning in the 1970s, popularized the opposite premise, and men since have tumbled from their exalted position. In fact, neither sex outranks the other in all aspects, but their valuable differences serve the culture and ultimately lead to gender equality. If both men and women fought battles and raised babies equally well, for example, some cultures would send women to war and put men in nurseries. Instead, flourishing cultures determine which sex excels in which role and assign people accordingly. Gender differences endure because a character trait such as a quiet, nurturing temperament soothes babies but thwarts battlefield victory. The opposite trait – a boisterous, threatening nature – helps in combat but won’t put the baby to sleep. Such gender differences connect skills and deficiencies to form a basis for gender equality.

The True Gender Difference: Drive

Performance in any field generally depends on two factors: ability and effort. Your ability doesn’t always align with your effort, or motivation, when you try to learn a new task. Data show that men and women’s ability differences are small, but their motivational differences can be huge. The presence of just a small number of women in top science jobs, for example, might not rest upon women’s abilities to do those jobs. Generally, men and women are equally adept in math and science, but fewer women want to work in those fields.

“In an important sense, men really are better and worse than women.”

Motivation also helps explain the gender salary gap. Most men aren’t smarter or more skilled at work than women. But if they work harder and longer hours because they are more motivated to reach the top of their fields, they probably also earn more money. In a study of entry-level and executive employees, researcher Agneta Fischer of the University of Amsterdam found entry-level men to be more motivated than their female counterparts, but she found no differences among higher-ups, whether men or women. Thus, women can break through “the glass ceiling” but may choose not to do so.

“Cultures exploit men and women differently. And they do this for a practical reason. Men and women are different and hence are useful to culture in different ways.”

Research shows that other factors compound the gender pay gap: More men than women choose professions based on money, and men negotiate more often for higher pay. They also take on more dangerous jobs than women do, presumably for the higher pay. Some men consider this swap worth the money; most women don’t.

Men Are Genetically Programmed to Strive

Understanding the differences between men and women also requires looking at nature. For example, consider wild horses: About the same number of male and female horses are born each year. As adults, however, only the females will pass on their genes repeatedly because typically just one male – the “alpha male,” who earns his position with strength, speed and power – breeds with the females each mating season. With the majority of other males left out in the cold, reproductively speaking, most of the foals in a single season will be related to one male and to a variety of females.

“Women who have the ability to do well in math typically prefer non-science fields.”

Similar trends are at work in people. DNA studies show that the ancestors of those living today are about two-thirds female and one-third male, indicating that most women who ever lived have had children, but most men have not. Today’s men and women descend from those males and females who were successful at reproducing. For women, with their high odds of having babies, reproducing entailed relatively little risk taking or deviation from the norm. They simply needed to attract good partners. But men, who had lower chances of reproducing, needed to compete with other men if they wanted to pass on their genes. This fact provides a crucial – and often overlooked – foundation for explaining motivational differences between the genders: Humanity today comes from men who took risks and women who didn’t.

Who’s More Social?

Research indicates that people who spend 10 minutes talking to a woman “end up happier that day” than those who don’t. Chatting with men doesn’t reveal any similar effect. Many people explain that difference by saying women, with greater abilities to communicate, connect and understand people, are more social than men, but

that's not wholly true. Women excel in one-on-one relationships, but men socially outshine women in large groups. Male connections in these groups aren't as close as women's bonds, but they are more numerous. Tradeoffs play a role here: A woman's social style builds strong marriages and families, while a man's social style organizes strong groups. These distinctions explain that women and men develop personality differences – in expressing feelings, understanding morality, tending toward competition or cooperation – because they feed different types of relationships: close, intimate social relationships or weaker, broader social networks.

“Empathy is better for intimacy, and so women's intimate relationships will be better than men's. But culture is a system, and so the system-oriented male brains will be more congenial to culture.”

Some related ideas, such as the notion that women aren't aggressive because that would endanger their relationships, don't hold up on close inspection. Studies show women are more apt to assault intimate partners than men are; however, women are less likely to attack strangers.

Creating Culture: A Man's Job

Culture is the large, organized system that groups of human beings use to advance societies, live peacefully and align their many disparate actions for the good of the community – whether inventing a light bulb or perfecting the assembly line. The bigger a culture, the better it typically works. Because men excel in big groups, culture originates from men.

“Cultures place somewhat more value on men's than on women's activities, while nature allows more women than men to survive and reproduce.”

In the days of hunting and gathering, men and women worked separately but cooperatively – men helping to provide for the women and children, and women caring for the men and children. Women gave love, intimacy and physical care in one-on-one relationships. Men contributed food or protection by working together with other men in large groups to achieve results that they couldn't get working alone or in small groups. In these arrangements, men shared information and competed, essentially creating culture. Women provided key benefits to the group by nurturing the men and children, but their smaller collectives amassed knowledge much more slowly than the men's larger factions. Big assemblages provided cultures with more options for allocating work, creating specializations and testing strategies for problem solving. Failed ideas got tossed out while winning strategies improved the culture.

“Probably the single biggest thing that would be missing, or mostly missing, in a world without men is progress.”

Women's relationships didn't create losers; instead, they generated more pleasant but less progressive units. Because men created the culture's systems for wealth and power, they naturally rose to the top of these systems and achieved higher status than women in society. Over the years, men established art, religion, government, economics, business, technology and various other cultural entities – nearly all of which derived from big groups with broad but shallow social connections.

“Women may be just as creative as men. But men far exceed women in their desire to make a mark in a large social system.”

Without women's contributions, society would have failed. But because men created culture, they dictated what culture valued: men's own work. However, just because women haven't banded together to spearhead cultural advances doesn't mean they aren't capable of doing so, and it doesn't make women second-rate. Instead, it helps clarify why women, particularly modern feminists, find society so unwelcoming – because men invented culture for men.

Expendable Men Must Earn Manhood

Within a male-created culture, winners get big rewards, but losers pay a high price, including death. For the most part, men's lives aren't as valuable as women's. Society needs its women to sustain the population, whereas just a few men can do that job. So men, and not women, are the ones who risk their lives in work and in war for the good of preserving the culture, and that's one way in which the culture “exploits” men.

“Most women don't resonate to the fundamental importance of proving who's better at doing things...that are pretty useless from a practical or biological standpoint, like pole vaulting or throwing a curve ball.”

Men also must work hard to earn respect. Society bases their value on their achievements, which they constantly must prove. Society still judges women, however, by how they look, something that is largely out of their control. Neither men's “achieved status” nor women's “ascribed status” is superior to the other, but they produce different pressures and results.

“Marriage is for transferring money from men to women, and it is useful for the culture to ensure that this continues even after divorce.”

A culture expects a man to produce “more than he consumes,” as sociologist Steven L. Nock concluded. To claim manhood, men must go beyond sustaining themselves to generating excess wealth in order to support a family, build a company or contribute to the good of the culture. Society rewards men who strive and achieve, but also reserves its dirtiest, most dangerous jobs for them.

A Boy's Life

Would a world without men be free of violence and war? Perhaps, but it also would lack other male inventions, ranging from medicine and hospitals to computers, toilets and electricity. Statistics show that men registered for more than 90% of US patents for new products from 1977 to 1996, but they also accounted for “more than 90% of all the people killed on the job.” Men make more jokes and more music than women. Men are vitally important to society's survival; one of their primary jobs is creating wealth and transferring it to women, whether through marriage or other methods, to care for future generations. That function probably won't change, but as gender politics affect government policies, the roles of men and women do change.

“Manhood must be earned. Every adult female human being is a woman, but not every adult male is a man.”

Modern women in Western societies enjoy career freedom; they can mix marriage and jobs in nearly any combination they wish. Men don't have the same options –

culture demands they prove their value through work, even though research shows many men would prefer a more balanced lifestyle.

What does all this mean to a baby boy born today in the US? His culture will use him, perhaps sending him to war; his society will conspire against him, with school and business policies favoring women; and he will hear often that women are superior to men. Society makes men feel guilty for what they create: wealth. This may make for a confusing reality, one that a man must negotiate for the survival of the culture.

About the Author

Roy F. Baumeister, a professor of psychology at Florida State University, has written extensively on identity, gender and culture.
