

The beauty of the difference

Why men and women are different *and* the same

Martine F. Delfos, PhD



Original title

De schoonheid van het verschil. Waarom mannen en vrouwen verschillend én hetzelfde zijn

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For Simon

Far from hurting me, you complete me when you differ from me.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *Si tu diffères de moi, mon frère, loin de me léser, tu m'enrichis.*
In: *Lettre à un otage* (1943).

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Preface

Some time has passed since the plan was conceived to write *The beauty of the difference*, which I did in Dutch first. The plan emerged after the publication of my book about autism in 2001, when Jos Geurtsen told me that reading the book was like reading two books in one: the first book: *What is the blueprint of humans?* and the second: *How does that work out for autism?* He suggested writing the chapter on the differences and similarities between men and women as a separate book. In the framework of my project of writing about human sexuality, it seemed a sensible plan to first describe general differences and similarities between men and women in one book, and sexuality in a second one.

But for me writing a book is not to repeat a chapter, but reconsider the subject all over again. And I did. It has been useful that it took some time, because in the meantime the book matured. I had a tour of four weeks of lectures and courses about communication with children and child psychology in 2003 in some countries in South America and that has contributed to a deepening of the experience of the universality of the facts about men and women. The Dutch book was published in 2004 with a fifth edition and now it is time to publish an English edition.

This book is written in the scientific ‘we’ even if I have written it by myself, with some co-workers searching for literature as and when required. Everyone builds further on the knowledge and ways of thinking that were there before. The ‘we’ is a tribute to those who preceded me, and have influenced me, often even without me personally being aware of that. Isaac Newton phrases it so beautifully: “*If I could see further it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants.*” This is one of the reasons that many scholars are cited, because all have a piece of the puzzle and it is only by building from the many pieces that the encompassing image can unfold itself. So, if I cite Jung, it is not because I am a Jung adept, which I am not, but because he possesses a piece of the puzzle.

When I started writing, seeing the first sentence appear made clear to me that the book had begun: *From the perspective of a lion, we all look exactly alike. For us the differences seem immense and full of meaning.* Writing the epilogue I suddenly wanted to write the last sentence, I touched the ‘Enter’ button several times to advance on the page and then with astonishment I read what I had typed; definitely the last sentence of the book: *We do not need to understand everything, if only we understand that we do not understand, then we treat the other in a natural way with respect.* Within the boundaries of those two sentences it was a feast to deploy the differences *and* similarities between men and women as an exploration of science and human experience.

I hope my book can help people understand each other better. Perhaps it is asking too much, but every step that can contribute in the long road where we are capable of

inventing computers, but hardly know how we can live together as husband and wife or husbands and wives, is useful I think to make any contribution, however small it is.

My book also proved an attempt to give a new impetus to true emancipation by connecting more with how men and women really are. It is more a scientific and logical analysis and not a fight of the sexes.

Each theory, model and scientific book requires an integration of existing research, and placing new insights in a broader context. Each research contributes as a piece of the truth in itself, sometimes a picture gets blurred when it is surrounded by bad interpretations or prejudices and mistakes, but in its core each piece of research is always a contribution. The truth is plural, and should not have to be discovered only by debate but by combining all core pieces together in order to enable a more comprehensive and encompassing knowledge and a bigger step toward the truth than before.

I thank my husband Simon for his patience; I have dedicated this book to him with all my love.

Quite some time after the Dutch edition, this English edition sees the light, which of course I am very happy about. For this I am deeply grateful to my publisher, Paul Roosenstein, whom I have learned to consider a real friend.

And... as my dear (French) grandmother always said citing the great storyteller LaFontaine: *Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre* [All is in time for the one who knows how to wait].

Martine F. Delfos, Utrecht, 2018



1 Introduction: open Sesame!

From the perspective of a lion, we humans all look exactly alike. For us, the differences are immense and full of meaning. Standing on a balcony overlooking a marketplace, we can recognize someone we know in the middle of an activity just by how he or she moves. We recognize someone's voice, scent or facial expression and are seldom mistaken if it is someone we have seen regularly. Years later, we are able to recognize someone we know superficially, without necessarily being able to place how we knew him or her. Although we might notice the smallest of details, the most important difference and the one that usually first stands out is the one between men and women.

People are different. The fact that people differ has many consequences, one of which is that it makes it harder to understand each other. This also means it is not easy to predict someone else's behavior. We become insecure and as a result we would often like to do away with the differences. That we are different and often find it hard to understand each other makes it often difficult to show consideration for each other.

With regard to human differences, those between men and women are the most prominent, which does not mean that as a group, all men – or all women – are the same. On the contrary, human individuality is impressive.

The research on men and women has brought us even closer than before to the insight that the differences exist together with the similarities. To take the point of view that men and women are totally different or the view that they are totally similar is a kind of outrage to the ingenious diversity that mankind displays. We will see that in reality both are true; the similarities as well as the differences. We have to broaden our perspective and no longer feel forced to adopt only one perspective. Research, certainly when it seems contradictory, helps us to take a broader view. The research of Joel and colleagues (Joel et al., 2015) for instance claims that, setting apart the sexual-genital differences and the size of the different elements of the brain, the brain of men does not show a totally male brain morphology (appearance of elements of the brain) nor does the brain of women show a totally female morphology. The review research showed that of the 1400 human brains studied, only 4% of the male and female brains were completely male or completely female. Ergo: *men and women are the same, considered from the perspective of the morphology in the brain*. Ingahalikar and colleagues (Ingahalikar et al., 2014) show that from the perspective of the organization of the brain, white matter, men and women are totally different, and follow the 'prejudices' we have. Also in gray matter the differences between men and women reveal themselves (Gur, 1999; Núñez, 2017) Ergo: *men and women are different from the perspective of the organization of the brain*. Differences are also clear on the level of the immune system, making women

more 'immunocompetent' (Nunn et al., 2008). Quite interesting in this context is the research on autism, which is considered an *atypical development* (Delfos, 2017a) in which there is an extreme male brain development by several theoreticians and researchers (Asperger, 1944; Delfos, 2001/2018; 2017a; Baron-Cohen, 2003). In this context the research of Beacher and colleagues (Beacher et al., 2012) is of interest, because they discovered that the sex differences between men and women with *autism* are less than in men and women without autism.

There is enough research to demonstrate the differences, and there is enough research to demonstrate the similarities. It is how we interpret this, which is the question. Many scholars preceded us, and this means that there are many pieces of the puzzle which can lead us to a deeper insight. To adhere to only one element, one scholar or one research result and disregard wisdom that already preceded us, will not improve our insight. There is a vast body of knowledge that has already been built. We only have to dissect the prejudices...

Let us turn to Leonardo da Vinci, the brilliant mind, the *uomo universale* to learn what he says about knowledge and science.

◊ Knowledge which is the issue of experience is termed mechanical; that which is born and ends in the mind is termed scientific; that which issues from science and ends in manual work is termed semi-mechanical. But I consider vain and full of error that science which is not the offspring of experience, mother of all certitude, and which does not result in established experience, that is to say, whose origin, middle and end do not pass through any of the five senses. And if we doubt of everything we perceive by the senses, should we not doubt much more of what is contrary to the senses, such as the existence of God and of the soul, and similar matters constantly under dispute and contention?

And it is truly the case that where reason is lacking it is supplemented by noise, which never happens in matters of certainty. On account of this we will say that where there is noise there is no true science, because truth has one end only, which, when it is made known, eternally silences controversy, and should controversy come to life again, it is lying and confused knowledge which is reborn, and not certainty.

But true science is that which has penetrated into the senses through experience and silenced the tongue of the disputers, and which does not feed those who investigate with dreams, but proceeds from the basis of primary truths and established principles successively and by true sequence to the end;... Collected works of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci; 9 True science based on the Testimony of the Senses, P.10-14, Pergamon Media. ◊

Leonardo da Vinci was a true scientist who pursued the truth by repeating procedures on dissecting human bodies, even in times where we could not preserve dead bodies as we can now, so, under abdominal circumstances he tried to find the truth.

When we try to get hold of the insight in men and women, we should not investigate dreams, but take all the evidence from science and from experience to build *from the basis of primary truths and established principles successively and by true sequence to the end*. This is quite a challenge, but we will try in this book to proceed as seriously and honestly as we can.

We have the tendency to base our acceptance of research results on whether they can be applied to ourselves, and we should, but not only on that, because the differences among both men and women as groups and as individuals are enormous. If we base our comparisons only on one aspect, we can always think of a man with a 'feminine' characteristic, or a woman with a 'masculine' one. But we should not focus on one single aspect; it should be about the pattern of characteristics as a whole.

We can try cancelling the differences in spatial ability between men and women by naming women we know with mathematical abilities, and then explain away the statistical overabundance of men in this area by a lack of women's emancipation. However, when we see a number of interrelated characteristics brought together in a single person, we can usually see that the 'mathematical' woman also has strong tendency to develop guilt feelings and tends to take care of others. In other words, the characteristics taken as a whole give a more feminine picture. The same is true for men: a man can be very sensitive and because of this can sense what is going on inside another, but express his sexuality in a clearly masculine way. Within a person as a whole, a 'feminine' or 'masculine' image usually emerges.

Moreover, these characteristics can change throughout life and, often starting in midlife, can shift towards the opposite sex. Carl Jung (1978) spoke of *anima* (the feminine part of the man) and *animus* (the masculine part of the woman) in humans, and said that starting with the *midlife crisis*, the part of the person that represents the opposite sex becomes significant. We also see this in the human hormonal makeup: with age, the 'male' hormone testosterone decreases in men and increases in women (Hill, 1997; Dabbs, 1990; Dabbs & Hargrove, 1997). Kelsey and colleagues (Kelsey et al., 2014) assert that it is more that the variance of testosterone level is broader after 40 years.

The body, male or female, is a whole, functions as a whole, is born as a whole, gets older as a whole and dies as a whole. Within himself the person is always a whole, never only one characteristic or a collection of characteristics, and all parts interact together all the time in order to form that whole, just like one gigantic orchestra. We cannot really interpret one characteristic if we do not see its role in interaction with the rest.

It is not only the differences between men and women that are obvious: the similarities between them are also impressive and meaningful. We will see that there are explanations (including evolutionary ones) for the differences as well as for the similarities.

The urge to understand

We are always trying to understand what the small differences between people are. As humans, we need to do this in order to know where we stand. Other people's behavior provides us with information about ourselves in relation to others. When we greet someone, we pay attention to what the other person expects from us so that we do not make embarrassing mistakes. There are rules for making contact that make daily human contact easier, but these cannot – and can never – organize the entire range of human behavior. Just cross the border of a country and we are immediately out of our depth. In The Netherlands, it is three alternating kisses on the cheek to greet someone you know well, in France two, in Argentina one and in Paraguay two again. In Europe this is often a sign of intimacy, but in South America it is used much more generally as a greeting. And which cheek do you start with again? Right-handed people are said to have the tendency to start on the right cheek and left-handed people on the left cheek. One, two or three kisses – it seems like a minor difference, but it can cause a lot of social anxiety and irritation. People often run aground on these kinds of subtle details, even during initial contacts.

When a person has serious problems assessing social interaction – for example, in the case of autism – taking part in social interactions can be compared with walking on an emotional minefield. It is precisely when assessing subtle social details that people with autism quite unexpectedly can exhibit very unusual behavior. The following example of Martin (in his forties, autism) shows the problem he has with the Dutch custom of kissing as a way of greeting.

◇◇ *Martin learned you kiss people you know well three times, alternating on each cheek. He carries this out as if it were a very precise task. He gave a clearly aimed kiss on the cheek and repeated this two more times, very precisely, on alternating cheeks. Because it felt like a very precisely performed task it was unpleasant, no matter how well intended. It was explained to Martin that the idea of the greeting was not so much to distribute kisses as to make contact and share the feeling that it was nice to see each other again. No one had ever explained this to him and he was very surprised to find there was a completely different meaning behind the ritual of greeting than what he had thought. He had, as it were, taken the non-verbal activity too literally. Because he was too much of a perfectionist to do this superficially, for him it made more sense not to kiss, but instead to look at the other and in this way show it was nice to see each other.* ◇◇

So, a simple greeting – set as it is in all kind of customs and rituals and which takes place according to the rules of etiquette – can already cause a great deal of confusion. One can understand then, how complicated contact can be if the subject is more complex and there are no social rules for behavior or if these rules are implicit. Contact