

[Letter published in *The Psychologist*, December 2010.]

"It is not enough to prove something," noted Friedrich Nietzsche, "one has also to seduce or elevate people to it."

In his review of my book in *The Psychologist*, Simon Baron-Cohen – whose work I do not treat gently – describes *Delusions of Gender* as "scholarly" and "bold". These are welcome and gracious compliments from a distinguished researcher who has shown no lack of courage expressing his views about sex differences. However, he remains unseduced by my intellectual charms.

Before turning to Baron-Cohen's specific objections, it's worth noting that throughout his review the picture he sketches of me takes the form of an unalluring and instantly recognisable stereotype. I am the "strident" ideologue who, in relentless pursuit of my "barely veiled agenda" to discredit any whiff of evidence that does not "fit [my] biology-free theory of human sex differences", falls prey to the "mistaken blurring of science with politics."

Of course the problem with viewing people through the lens of a stereotype is the distortion that takes place. The thesis of my book (no veils required) is that while social effects on sex differences are well-established, spurious results, poor methodologies and untested assumptions mean we don't yet know whether, on average, males and females are born differently predisposed to systemizing versus empathising. I therefore argue that to slam the door in the face of those who aspire to sex equality is premature. That Baron-Cohen describes my position as "extreme" and "ludicrous" suggests that his preferred policy is to shut the door first, and attempt to fill in the scientific gaps later.

Baron-Cohen also makes three specific objections. First, he dismisses the many studies I cite showing that sex differences are reduced or erased when gender stereotypes are pushed into the psychological background. Since Baron-Cohen's 'essential difference' account depends rather critically on these differences, one can't but help admire his insouciance about these "commonsense demonstrations" that confidence and expectations affect performance. But Baron-Cohen is not unsettled by this research because he thinks these manipulations introduce a bias into the tests. In other words, he asks us to suppose that brief statements like "no gender differences are found in this test" affect people in ways that significantly influence performance and interest, but that the gender beliefs and expectations thoroughly embedded in our culture leave no mark.

Baron-Cohen's next objection concerns criticisms of a study conducted in his laboratory that compared the visual interest of male and female newborns in a mobile versus a face. This study departed from the best standards of methodology for this kind of work in a number of ways. One concern was that, since attention is very fluid in the first days of life, it is usual to present the two stimuli simultaneously. Baron-Cohen dismisses this on the grounds that stimulus order was counter-

balanced. However, the published report refers only to stimulus order being “randomized”. There was a drop-out rate of about a third, and no information is provided to reassure that stimulus order was not a confounding variable.

Baron-Cohen also rejects the main criticism that has been made of this study, which is that inadequate measures were made to blind the experimenter (who was also the first author) to the babies’ sex, so as to avoid experimenter-expectancy effects. (For example, the mobile might have been unintentionally moved more for boys.) Baron-Cohen dismisses this concern on the grounds that an independent panel of judges, blind to sex, coded the babies’ gaze. But clearly, if the behaviour of the experimenter-cum-stimulus has already inadvertently influenced the babies’ eye gaze behaviour, the introduction of sex-blind judges is to close the stable door after the horse has bolted.

It is interesting that Baron-Cohen presents my criticisms of the newborn study as a politically motivated “last-ditch attempt to make sex differences go away.” Some might regard his response as a last-ditch attempt to save them.

Third, Baron-Cohen thinks my position forces me to attribute sex differences in the prevalence of neurodevelopmental disorders to socialization effects. I disagree that I am required to take such a view. But the assumption that sex differences in atypical development must reflect sex differences in typical development creates no less awkwardness for Baron-Cohen than it does for me. Autism affects many more males than females, but in the general population sex differences in the ability to infer the mental states of others (a core impairment of autism) are so elusive as to be basically absent in the most stringent test of this ability.

I am not so optimistic that I expected to seduce Simon Baron-Cohen with my book. But I still hope that discussion of this topic might be elevated enough that criticisms of this field, rather than being summarily dismissed as political, are instead taken account of in future research. Not because to do so would be good politics, but because it would be good science.

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